

Rezani Aziz

Radha 00:02

Hi Rezani Welcome to Mrigishira it's great to have you on this protest.

Rezani Aziz 00:09

Hi, Radha, thanks for having me on this.

Radha 00:12

Let me start by asking you about your own you know, career journey, how it all started, and how did you reach the place where you have reached now.

Rezani Aziz 00:43

Okay, a long time ago. So I started off actually as a broadcast journalist. I started off at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, which at that time was the only radio channel in Sri Lanka, and we had very popular reach even across India and the through the all Asian channels. From there, I moved to Sri Lanka's first FM radio station, and I was programs manager in charge of news in charge of DD, topical programs, and as well as music, playlists and programs and basically ran that channel. From there actually, I moved to baits strategic alliance, which was part of the which is part of the South Asian baits network in Sri Lanka. And interestingly, I started off heading there media. The media unit, so it was, it was media buying, media planning, strategic media planning and so on. But given my background in broadcast journalism, I just felt that getting into that whole public relations space was more into my liking. And so and so there was an opening there and I joined the PR arm and was there for 18 plus years. Basically, I grew that whole PR arm and later on, it became affiliated to Bm and we were part of the South Asian network of Burson Marsteller. When India actually launched that the South Asian network, it was only a GBM and then they only changed names, but by then, so I was there for a very long time. Yeah, briefly, I did a stint as head of corporate affairs at Standard Chartered Bank, I mean, and then back again, to be it. Were later on at factors was looking for somewhere to start to found, basically, as a founding CEO of the consultancy here in Sri Lanka. And yeah, and so I joined as the founding CEO, whichever since this was in 2014, okay, we are on our eighth year now. Yeah.

Radha 03:43

PR spectrum itself in Sri Lanka, how you have seen it evolve? So what is your two unique characteristics? And what are some of the key learnings that you've had?

Rezani Aziz 04:03

So, I have to start off by saying that when we started at factors PR Lanka, at the time in 2014, and we still remain the only standalone independent public relations, multinational consultancy all the PR consultancies, agencies are part of the larger ad group, like I was heading the BA BM affiliate out of Bates. Yes. When so add factors remains the only like I said standalone PR consultancy, and when we started off I was keen that they there would be a differentiator and thought at the time that the legacy of

ad factors because at the time they were very strong in No, they're BFSI practice. They had 75 Plus clients in the banking and financial space out of India. And I thought that legacy would be interesting to replicate here in Sri Lanka. But we found out very soon that Sri Lanka is not a strong capital market, and other learnings that came in I would say that some of the some of the learnings and the evolution of public relations here is, you know, moving from print to digital and embracing that whole the whole digital sphere as it were, plus Public Affairs, so, we are here our strength is in public affairs. And again, the learning from India was in how we select how we recruit people, professionals into our consultancy here into the agency here, we veered away from this from, you know, those have been in public relations, but took in more X journalists, which has proved to be, you know, has proved proven to be a differentiator for us, because the expertise they bring in has, has been profound. So, so, yeah, they've been, there's been a lot of learning, but I would say, most of it has been in in how we convert thought leadership into the digital medium.

Radha 06:52

Prior to what the crisis that's there in the country today, just how has the digital marketing has evolved? How has online medium evolved in Sri Lanka?

Rezani Aziz 07:17

Or tremendously? I mean, it was the digital medium that actually facilitated in bringing down ruling president. That's right so in terms of how it has evolved, Twitter, the social media handles actually the social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, has evolved exponentially to the point that people are consuming news through those channels, WhatsApp messages, and they're not looking to see, to check the credibility, as it were. I mean, there are platforms that, that people discard when as and when they feel that the content is not, by and large, anything that's snackable, and anything that's relevant that that, that that's relevant to the current situation, or that aligns with what's what the current narrative is being consumed in huge amounts. So we also try to align stories of clients, what's being said, I'm not saying should be aligned to a revolution or things like that, towards the economic situation here in Sri Lanka, towards what's relevant towards the social aspects in people trying to deal with inflation, etc, you know, keeping in mind all of that, and, and a lot of it, like I said, before, is consumed digitally via digital media. So social media plus digital news media, hybrid platforms and so on. And all that's been a huge learning for us.

Radha 09:09

How do you see the current situation in the country? Because that must be posing its own challenges and opportunities?

Rezani Aziz 09:17

Again, this is my opinion. So about the current situation depends on whom you ask, since you're asking me. I would say we are right now, on the correct path. I have confidence in the current administration and the current president and prime minister. I think right now. They have the knowledge to bring us out of this whole crisis that we've been fallen into. It's going to be a hard one to two years. But again, In, confident that we will bounce back, you know, the country, the people are resilient in terms of. And here again, I'm bringing these numbers up because of our interaction with various government agencies. The board of investment, Sri Lanka said that in the first six months of this year, Jan to June of 2022, our

investments have been 30%, higher than that of last year. So that augurs for the confidence that that foreigners are having in the country. So they also, again, we've given our work with public affairs work with the apparel industry with the tea industry, we find that the foreigners, particularly foreign investors feel that this, this phase will pass. And so we continue to plod on and be hopeful.

Radha 11:05

That's interesting to hear, particularly in terms of the investments that you spoke about for the first six months. But a situation like this also means that, you know, there's a lot of flux amongst employees, there's a lot of stress levels that one goes to as an individual. So, uh, how do you keep the team dynamics in place?

Rezani Aziz 11:39

We've had our share of downs. We had several of our staff members, our colleagues leave us to go overseas, it was just a sudden exodus of and they fled with any opportunity they thought they were, they didn't even have secure employment overseas, they took the chance. So we'll have everything here and left, which put us in a very difficult situation. We had some clients, particularly in the real estate development, decide that they were not going to, they were not going to maintain their retainer with us. And they requested a pause for at least a year. So we've had our share of downs as well, keeping my colleagues motivated again, so we're doing whatever we can we instituted cost of living adjustment. And that's in terms of, you know, financial kind of security affair, some that that could get them over transport and food, which had severe inflation. Other than that, we are continuing to work with the mindset of business as usual. There have been there have been transport issues due to lack of fuel, all of that we work from home at the time, those who could come came I can't pinpoint it to one or two things but just being conscious of the difficulty and, and, and being sensitive to it, allowing them work from home, instituting this adjustment in cost of living in addition to the salaries, all that I think played a role in keeping them motivated because at the end of the day, work and the remuneration is the only thing that that can help anybody out of this or live through this situation.

Radha 13:59

What are some of the key sectors or areas that you think would emerge, from now on once you know, things start looking out for the better.

Rezani Aziz 14:25

Okay, so like I said, we bank our clients, we work with the key players in the apparel industry, including the apex body, the association, similarly, those in the tea industry, including the association club plus the pharmaceutical industry. So we, as I mentioned before, we've established strength in public affairs and that really has been that that's helped us grow. I mean, I hate to sound, chest thumping, but you know, in all all this adversity we've actually grown, because it's the kind of work we do. So advisories to foreign investors has become critical in keeping then to foreign investors and buyers, plus their stakeholders and brands overseas is something that we've started doing. And we've taken in a new Carder of young professionals who can do that, from, you know, totally different backgrounds, like think tanks and so on. So we see potential in, some amount of Government Relations and in government relations. You know, putting together reports putting together white papers, communication pieces, content pieces, that gives the current situation that explains how things are panning out in Sri Lanka, which is somewhat different.

And I'm not saying and we are reporting whatever is true, but it veers away from the sensationalization, that media tends to play out. So whatever we send out, has become an important piece of information.

Radha 17:22

It clearly gives you a competitive edge or, you know, whoever, who are the other players out there in the market? Yeah,

Rezani Aziz 17:41

I think so. And I'm hoping it will be so it's just okay. FYI, we have several foreign media here right now. And I've heard that the numbers here are just slightly less than those in Ukraine. So you can imagine the interest for a media having in in our country. So having said that, the kind of reporting that goes out, may not be, you know, may always be slightly exaggerated. So again, us putting down facts from sources like Central Bank, and this is where data plays a huge role. So putting together hard facts and data and supporting our advisories with real data is proving to be very useful.

Radha 19:05

I were to ask you in one sentence or in one word, how do you see the future, PR and communication in Sri Lanka, how would you sum it up?

Rezani Aziz 19:29

Okay, so PR right now in three lakh and I would say right now still is at a very nascent stage but not as evolved as India that's for sure. I see huge potential, I still see an opportunity where clients would feel the need for and this is I know it sounds cliched, but for earned media rather than paid for media. There is there's they're still there. still a huge number of MNCs and potential clients that would rather go for advertising then for public relations. So, again, the like I said, and I'm repeating this, there is a huge potential untapped potential for this. But it's just, again, PR can also be so much more different. Rather than just press release development and having it appear in so many publications. There's so much more that can be imparted. And so it's a question of knowledge sharing and getting them interested. Another thing that we've honed on is, is crisis management. And we find here that, again, there is huge potential for issues and crisis management, again, an untapped market because communications there is still not fully understood.

Radha 21:09

It was pleasure talking to you, and thanks once again for making this time and talking to us on Mrigashira

Rezani Aziz 21:29

Thanks, Radha. It was great to meet you at praxis and hope our paths cross again soon.