

Being happy, by design

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How does an outfit in the creative business not remain just another ad agency?



(Below, left) Preeti Vyas Gianetti; (Left) Praveen Das and Kartik Iyer; (Right) Sharad Haksar; (Below) Shom Mazumdar and Upendra Thakur

When Preeti Vyas Gianetti set up shop in 1997, the intent was not to create a 'little studio', but to be a partner to the client business. With her NID training, exposure to multiple facets of design, understanding of creative and strategy under Mohammed Khan and Ravi Gupta at Enterprise, and the firm belief that there was space to create the first, holistic creative independent, Vyas Giannetti Creative was born. The founder's design orientation has, over time, married into the opportunity for design specialists in the Indian market. VGC is today a 'Design and Communications Specialist'.

"I have always believed that there is scope for design across media in every facet of communication. In the last three or four years, we have become far more design-centric than we were when we started off," reflects Giannetti.

The 30-member team across the Mumbai and Bangalore offices today handles work for varied clientele, from Aditya Birla Group whose corporate identity programme lies at the top of VGC's portfolio, to Foster's, whose iconography was also its handiwork. From beer lounges to visual merchandising to events, the design was Giannetti's team's mandate. For Morrison feeding bottles, another category that cannot be advertised, VGC handled the packaging, incorporating icons that can travel across (media) vehicles. Other clients in the portfolio include real estate players Nitesh and Raheja, and

Kirloskar Health.

From designing mastheads and logos to creating ad films and corporate films, VGC has done it all, albeit with a special focus on design. Not being 'another advertising agency' suits Giannetti just fine, and she's quick to point out that on a lot of counts - including the headcount - an ad agency and VGC cannot be compared.

"The way the business of advertising is structured, you need a lot of hands on board because you are dealing with management of day-to-day client needs. As a design consulting specialist, we don't need that many people," she says.

But she does admit that the problem of (lack of) talent is one that plagues the entire industry, especially smaller and newer companies - as was VGC's experience in its early years.

Curating and presenting television show 'Designomics' is a small indicator of the lady entrepreneur's passion. Even as she talks design with the likes of Anand Mahindra and Kishore Biyani on TV, she's more than bullish on the opportunities in designing for business. VGC's positioning in the communication universe is a case of evolution, by design.

Being Happy

After spending over a decade in advertising, at agencies such as Goldwire Advertising in Chennai, Young & Rubicam in Dubai, and Ogilvy in Bangalore, Kartik Iyer set up shop in partnership with a colleague in art at Ogilvy, Praveen Das. The copy-art duo, which hadn't worked as a team at the agency, spent the next 30 days meeting every day, strategising what the working philosophy of creative shop 'Happy Creative' should be. They arrived at the reasons for its existence. The shop was born in 2007. And when it started, there were no 'anchor' clients.

Two projects for Lee came Happy's way, on the back of a one-off 'End of Season Sale' for the same client. That kept the shop occupied for the first three months, recalls Iyer. Lee continues to be a client today, alongside Flipkart.com, Myntra.com, Papa John's Pizza, Hasbro (Basics), and some of Wipro's international marketing business. The agency was also mandated to launch

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fashion brand Diesel in India. There are 27 people on board today.

One factor that prompted the duo to take the leap of faith was the confidence born of handling accounts at Ogilvy. Also, with a lot of seniors on board, it looked like the climb up the ranks would take long.

The direction Happy took, as decided by Iyer and Das, was towards being an idea shop that would not become 'another advertising agency with 80 people'. The focus is clearly on creative, and execution tasks such as art work variations are avoided - as much as possible. Categories that 'work' for the shop have also been identified. Fashion is a strong favourite, and there are some which are not. Iyer refuses to name them, not wishing to let go of any future opportunity.

In an industry that is rife with HR challenges, how difficult is it for creative shops to pull in the right people? It was admittedly tough in the early days.

"It's a challenge for the entire industry, not just for us. In our case, when people saw the work we were producing, they started coming to us," he notes.

On the remuneration when compared to large agencies, he says, "The client is paying for the piece of creative work. And our work is nothing lesser than what anyone else does — which is why clients come to us in the first place."

Digital is acknowledged as the future, and the agency is somewhere between deciding on a specialist resource and a strategic partnership. The ideation, across media including digital, is already being delivered. Looking back on the last four years, and gazing at the road ahead, Iyer is happy.

Small is Beautiful

Photographer Sharad Haksar had been shooting for advertising since 1990. In 2003, apparel brand Perri Alley asked him to shoot for an ad campaign. They didn't have an agency on board. So Haksar handled the creative himself. More assignments started coming his way, which he began handling using a network of freelancers. While early days saw this 'network' meeting once a week after 6 p.m., it gradually moved up to meeting every day. A creative shop, with a stated intent to remain small and beautiful, was christened 1pointsize. The Chennai-based shop has 18 full-timers on board today.

Ask him if scale of operations puts him at a disadvantageous position when competing with the large agencies, and his response is this: "Even in a large agency, of say 200 people, it's only one or two people who crack the idea for a brand. We want to generate the idea for the client, create the work and give it to them. They can then outsource the churning out of multiple art works and the mechanical execution end of it to someone else."

He reiterates that 1pointsize will not lose the essence of being a small agency, touching upon the fact that there are no set rules, allowing 1pointsize to adapt to client needs.

Haksar asks, "If you have five clients, you can allocate all your time to their briefs, and get the best minds in the agency to focus on the solutions. If you have 30 clients, whose need is 3,000 art work requirements and packaging variations, do you really need the best minds?"

The agency's portfolio of brands now includes Kamasutra, Akshaya Homes, Perri Alley, the Vikatan group and Sting jeans. Five years down the line, Haksar sees digital billing overtaking the billing from traditional advertising. Surely, that will mean investments?

The shop has been approached by larger agencies and some global companies in the past, but Haksar notes that it is important to 'connect', even as he acknowledges the need to constantly evolve and be alive to opportunities.

"We are not closed to the idea. But the thought process of the two parties needs to be the same. If we need to restructure the entire way we think, it'll mean starting all over again," notes Haksar.

Meanwhile, the lensman has got his other eye focused on his photography Web site, oneeyeland.com.

Origin Beanstalk Wants to Grow

Origin Beanstalk was born when Origin Studios, a creative agency, and Beanstalk Design, a creative and design agency, joined hands. Through them, two friends, whose outfits earlier pitched against each other in the same Mumbai market - Upendra Thakur and Shom Mazumdar - got into business together, around nine years ago.

Thakur admits to having been a serial entrepreneur since the age of 21, when he launched a creative shop, Tandav. After dabbling in everything from events to PR to media, he says, 'Better sense prevailed and I started focusing on my strengths.' After identifying his forte, he identified his partner who came with experience in advertising prior to setting up shop.

“We realised that if we had to make a mark, we had to work together. It helped that we had a complementary working style,” notes Thakur.

The partnership seems to have worked. Origin Beanstalk boasts of being the creative agency on record for BASF, Mad Over Donuts, Edelweiss, VH1, MidDay, Radio City, Nick, NRB Bearing and Gufic Pharma. The agency, which was started in 2003, employs over 60 people today.

And, like other independents, it has been a subject of interest for investors. “Not the large networks, but there have been people running agencies who have approached us, and some pure financial investors. We’re not looking at a huge influx, and would be open to a partnership that can take us to the next level,” says the partner.

The investment that Origin Beanstalk is open to is one that can help it attract the ‘right talent’. In Thakur’s view, the cycle is simple – hire ‘big talent’ from the big agencies who can in turn attract more big clients, and create good work for them.

The agency also sees huge potential in other markets, in States such as Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. According to Thakur, there are a lot of small and medium-sized clients in those markets, whose expectations are a little different from those of metro clients: ‘An agency that has the delivery and the glamour, but can speak to them in their language’. Origin Beanstalk is keen to master that language and get a move on.

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