

Pulp Strategy CEO, Ambika Sharma: Result Orientation Key To A Successful Marketing Campaign

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Ambika Sharma, Managing Director and CEO, Pulp Strategy was one of the earliest to have stormed in on the Marketing Activation space and has since then, established herself as an opinion leader. She has been on the PMAA & the MAA Globes Jury panel since the year 2008. She was recognized as Young Achiever and Marketing Professional of the Year 2011 at the CMO Asia Awards for Excellence in Branding and Marketing. A biking enthusiast, her expertise lies in strategic planning and communication, new/alternate media, and creative communication. In an exclusive chat with Brijj.com, Ms. Sharma talks about her journey, her most challenging and rewarding assignments and more.

Q. Tell us something about your journey in the marketing activation industry thus far?

A. My first encounter with activation was in 1995 and in that first chaotic week I made up my mind that this is what I want to do. Promotional marketing was a nascent industry then with few players and fewer brands. It has come a long way and the journey has been exciting and fulfilling. It has been kind to those who have taken it seriously and contributed to its growth.

Q. You have been one of the earliest beginners in the activation industry in India. How were the initial days, what were the challenges, especially being a woman?

A. Initial days were full of learning. There were no route maps and hence every new initiative was a fresh perspective. There were pilots for every campaign, not just to gauge impact but to also include learning's. I began my career in operations which even today is the least preferred by women; however I believe that choosing operations has contributed most to my experience and growth in the field. Yes, there were challenges, but none that could not be tackled and none that deserve special mention. Today the industry is in its metamorphosis, it is coming of age and is being increasingly recognized as an important part of the marketing mix.

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Q. What is the most important thing that needs to be kept in mind while creating a brand activation plan for a client?

A. There are a lot of things that go into creating a strong campaign. However the most important to me is result orientation. To decode the primary objective and then build the campaign keeping that "would be" result in mind.

Q. What have been your most brain wrenching and then a very satisfying activation program?

A. My favorite briefs are the ones which are focused. Once a client wanted to reach out to and acquire 0.3 million new to net consumers, the program went on to achieve 0.5 Million and won us our 1st Gold at WOW, or the time when a Brand wished to reach out to 7 million+ consumers with trials. Every time there is such a campaign brief which develops as a unique program it is very satisfying and I feel euphoric. Just then the next big one comes along and the journey goes on. I don't think I have met my most brain wrenching and most satisfying assignment yet.

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Q. Tell us about your venture Pulp Strategy. How did you think of getting into entrepreneurship and why the name is Pulp? Was it inspired from the Hollywood flick Pulp Fiction?

A. "Being an entrepreneur is a state of mind." Brand Activation, and interactive marketing is people's business. It draws its success from the people who nurture it. If you love the business it will love you back. I could have jumped in earlier too as I had the inclination several times but it was now when the time was ripe, to tread the entrepreneur path and the natural step of progression in the field I love. The theory of evolution at work I will say...

Pulp" denotes a mixed shapeless mass of rich bodied material (most widely used) which is then processed to form "PAPER". Paper the single most important revolution in communication. Pulp Molds itself to a multitude of forms, post processing as suited to a need, Pulp Strategy for our clients shapes itself into a multitude of solutions each to suit a different and unique need. Pulp Strategy is every thought and medium in the experiential interactive space; which will enable a unique meaningful experience for the consumers and measurable focused results for the clients. More than being just a name, Pulp Strategy is an attitude, it's an approach. We have worked hard at cultivating this energy and each strategist strongly believes in its essence.

Q. There are various arms of Pulp Strategy for instance, Youth marketing @ i-cafes, Digital media arm etc. Tell us something about their roles in experiential marketing?

A. Pulp Strategy Specializes in youth marketing with a focus on youth consumer in urban and semi-urban India. To strengthen our offerings we have developed Channel tools which enable Pulp Strategy to plan and deliver campaigns that no competitor can. One of our channels is I-cafes. These are 3000 premium internet cafes in 30 cities. Mapped to youth locations and they see 1.9 lac young consumers daily spending an average of 45 mins. This is a very large captive audience and we have harnessed this engagement opportunity successfully for multiple brands ranging from IT, Online and even Automobiles. We have strong relationships across 4000+ campuses and have successfully cultivated this for many youth brands the last semester year. Experiential marketing & Social media are two different worlds of agencies, rarely does one spill over into the other and integration is client led or sporadic as an offering. Our offering is unique is because we are in the consumer engagement space holistically, Social and on ground. The two mediums complement each other and when used in an integrated manner doubles the value for a client. We also have exclusive social media clients and have recently bagged the digital media account for Barista Lavazza India.

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Q. Innovation is the key to breaking a cluttered market space. Tell us about a few of your innovative marketing campaigns that delighted both the consumer and the client?

A. We have had a great year with a host of powerful campaigns with varying consumer sub-sets and objectives. To single out any one will be unfair but the most memorable and delightful campaign was "Delightfully Google at Sunburn". If delighting consumers was a metric then Google's lounge at Sunburn 2011 was all smiles and pretty pictures as festival goers Googled away on free Wi-Fi and chilled out with iced slush on the house.

With the heat burning down on hot sands at 35 degrees, a few hours into the festival, the Hats became a rage and the Slush a hit. The 3 days saw more slush with a smile delivered than CCD may in a month across India! With consumers flocking to the Google Lounge and smiles spreading became a common sight. "Oh the twisty bottles are so cute" became a common phrase" The activation made a splash harnessing the energy of the occasion, timing, relevance and its unusual approach to getting the consumer's engaged.

Q. You have worked with esteemed clients like Google, Microsoft, and Yahoo etc. Tell us how has it been working with such high profile clients? Also, how did it feel with PC, SRK and Farhan Akhtar tweeted after the success of the Don-2 flash mob?

A. I am thankful to the clients for the belief and trust placed on us. Servicing a global super-brand is a constant journey in innovation and learning. The Brands and marketers are evolved

and are specific in their requirements. When a client is open to innovation, you have to deliver the best and nothing less. The cast of Don 2 tweeting about the flash mob was an excellent surprise with the Video having crossed 80K views. It was certainly a special milestone for us.

Q. Tell us something about consumer behavior in this cluttered market. You must have some serious insights about it.

A. Plans are seldom built on intuition alone but on experience and research. Every ones time, money and effort is much too valuable to realize something has gone horribly wrong after the campaign is fully rolled out. "I have always followed the golden rule of When In Doubt – Test". The consumer landscape is built on me-thopia in today's time. If a campaign cannot answer the question "what's in it for me" with vibrancy then its sure to do less than well.

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Q. Given that awards have become a way of life for Pulp, is this really a motivator anymore? What keeps the team going? Does the team have their secret benchmarks they want to touch?

A. Awards always motivate. They speak for your work and set benchmark against competitors. They speak for the team behind the scenes. The team is motivated also by good work, positive work environment, personal development, recognition and a host of other factors. However, I believe the best motivation comes from within, personal space and opportunity. The best team members are those who have clear personal goals set for themselves. Leadership is not in creating goals but recognizing individual goals and building synergy with the team goal.

Q. Your hobbies include biking on the tough machines? Currently you are a proud owner of which one? How did this bug bite you? Please share some anecdotes, good experiences.

A. I currently ride a CBR 1000 RR Fire blade. I got on a bike before my feet touched the ground with my dad's bullet. I shifted to a superbike 5 years back. Fun began from here and it's been a series of shocked, amazed faces and more over some not so happy disapproving guys! The strangest looks and reactions are however the ones I get when I'm on the road. The fellow travelers get shocked when they suddenly see the kajal mascara-lined-eyes behind a helmet on a mean bike. This is my gallery of Kodak moments.

Guys nudge each other, women at times give the thumbs-up sign and kids wave happily. Once while returning from Jaipur, I stopped at a stall to get a cold drink. Within seconds the bike was surrounded by men who were interested in knowing mileage, weight and top speed of the bike. The strange thing was that they were asking each other and not me. There was this one old woman who was interested in knowing how my mother allowed me to ride a motorcycle!

Then there is this neighbor who asked me if I was not competing why else would I be out on a winter Sunday morning at 6 AM? The fellow riders have now got used to my eccentricities but still pull my leg about the big earrings under the Shoe helmet or pink socks under the riding boots. Experiences are in the zone of great to amusing, my bike is my stress buster.

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Q. You are pretty active on networking sites. If we could ask you how much does networking help in building up a business or in one's career? Also is there any information need that is not being currently addressed by present networking sites?

A. Social media is about perception management and connecting with likeminded folks. There is much to be shared and gained if one is listening. Networking builds connections and relationships which is an opportunity one should not bypass. If a site offers more interactivity and content than the current professional networking sites it will definitely find interest.

Q. Finally, what is your advice to budding entrepreneurs and students who are starting up in the activation industry?

A. My advice to budding entrepreneurs is they should think through, plan with depth, and execute with scale, but before all this be ready to burn the midnight oil. Students should know that this industry acknowledges attitude. With a quick pay out make yours the right one.