



Slow and Steady

Sam Balsara has always believed in doing a job well. It might have meant fewer clients, but never a loss of business.

SAM BALSARA

IT ALL BEGAN WITH A DASH OF LIME

In the business of advertising, where agility is the operative word, Sam Balsara identifies more with the tortoise than the hare. "It's better to be a few days late and equip yourself thoroughly for your entrepreneurial journey than be in a haste to do business," says the veteran ad-man. The strategy probably explains why Madison World, founded by Balsara in 1988, took a slower growth path with few blue-chip clients to become what it is today—a highly-diversified communications company with billings worth Rs 2,500 crore. Recently feted by a lifetime achievement award, Balsara feels he still has miles to go.

AS TOLD TO POOJA KOTHARI
PHOTOGRAPH BY MEXY XAVIER

I was born in a one-horse town in Gujarat called Bulsar, now known as Valsad. I get my family name from there. My dad was a forest contractor, but at a late stage in his life, his business got nationalised. There weren't many options, so he started anew. In 1959, when I was still a child, we moved to Bangalore.

It was really a bold move by my dad. He wasn't just moving his family to a new city, he was also setting up a new business; and running a Western-style hotel was not really up his alley. But it turned out to be a great move since it opened up new opportunities for me. It also taught me not to be afraid of change.

I lived in Bangalore till I graduated with a degree in commerce from St Joseph's College. I could not crack the IIMs, so went to study at Jamnalal Bajaj Management Institute in Mumbai in 1970. It was here that I got interested in marketing, thanks to my professor Pran Chaudhary who taught the subject. Later, he offered me my first job at Sarabhai.

I spent 16 years of my life working for someone else. I did four jobs: two in marketing and two with ad agencies. I moved to Contract when it was just founded. The ad world was more like an old boys' club then—an easy, semi-business and semi-formal place. I remember Bobby Kooka saying all you need to succeed in advertising is "the facility of English language and the ability to down three pink gins at lunch".

Mudra was an altogether new experience. The thought of moving from an established Contract to an upstart Mudra, which was practically nonexistent in Bombay, appealed to me. I found its culture taxing and challenging. It had a no-nonsense approach to work. Here, I

learnt: "Nothing is impossible, and everything can be achieved—and on time."

The thought of being an entrepreneur never occurred to me, not even three months before I started Madison, on March 21, 1988. It happened pretty abruptly. Yes, I did think that I was not the right person to take Mudra to its goal of being the largest agency in the country. I was neither equipped with the skills nor had the inclination to do so. Perhaps, in hindsight, the reason I wanted to run a small agency with a few large clients was to continue to remain active as a craftsman in advertising rather than a manager of men and money, which you are bound to become when you run a large agency.

I started out with two clients—Godrej and Nelco. Adi and Parmeshwar Godrej gave me the Cinthol account. The launch of Cinthol Lime in 1989 was one of the most successful launches, and took the market by storm.

The going was good for the initial years. Our billings increased seven-fold in five years. Then, in the early nineties, India opened its doors. There was so much excitement in the air and so many opportunities that I changed my mind about staying small in the future. We expanded our client portfolio and worked on transforming Madison into a specialised agency.

In hindsight, it looks as if we had a grand plan in terms of diversification and meeting client needs through specialised units. But, frankly, there was no such master plan. We discovered client needs by either hiring specialist talent, or through partnerships.

In 1998, I was hit by a double whammy. Madison lost 70% of its business because we parted with our partner, DMB&B, over a professional disagreement. I lost the Cinthol account around the same time. It was clearly the biggest low in my life.

During those troubled days, I drew inspiration from my elder daughter. Her eyes cannot see and yet a smile never leaves her face. My conversations with her would

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To sweet success Balsara cuts a cake with daughter Lara (on his right) and his team, celebrating a dream run in 2004.

make me wonder what I was feeling so depressed about. My problems felt petty. Even today, she sends inspirational text messages to my cell phone on most days.

I also remember watching this late-night CNBC program where a Chinese said, real success can come only after real failure. I took those words to heart. Till that time, I had not faced failure. Madison got started without any major struggle—either financial or with clients. This was life's first major setback. People wrote us off and yet we rebuilt ourselves to double our strength.

While building Madison, I knew I had to build an organisation where I would be proud of working as an employee—not just as an owner. The focus has always been on doing a job well. For instance, in the first four years of Madison, we did not look beyond our few clients. Most people thought that was a stupid thing to do. I thought I shouldn't bite more than I could chew. Even today, I tell people that the company they start must have a reputation and position in the business world that is capable of attracting them as an employee.

We have been guided by the philosophy that everything is open to change, except our value system. It was written 10-12 years ago, and we have never changed it.

Sometimes, I am amazed at being the oldest person in advertising. To have been around for 37 years, I find that I'm the only practising advertising person who has a tale to tell about Shubhash Ghoshal or Bobby Kooka, or early British companies. Today's generation has no idea about what marketing and advertising was in those days.

Despite my years, I have miles to go. Everyday there is a new upset in life, a new opportunity. That is the nature of the beast called advertising. I have become so used to those adrenaline highs that they are almost necessary for survival. I cannot enjoy a longish holiday anymore. A week is perfect: 10 days, maybe. Beyond that, I would miss work tremendously. My wife and I have been fortunate to visit many cities but these visits have never been longer than a day or so. That suits my nature. I think the world's also becoming like that. You want to move on. **Q**