

“Family is a stress-buster”

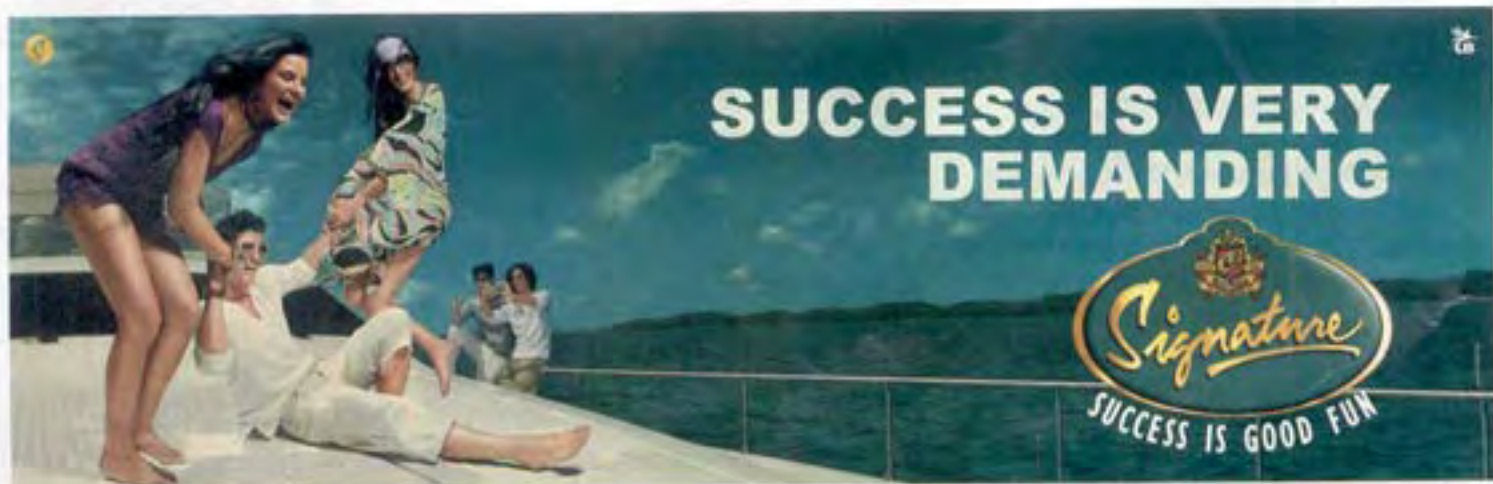
For Sam Balsara, a 30-year veteran of the advertising industry, the biggest source of inspiration comes not from the likes of David Ogilvy, but from his two daughters—Tanya and Lara. While Lara works with him (she's a business development and diversification executive in the agency), the elder one Tanya is blind and runs a computer institute for the less privileged children. “Tanya is an inspiration for me. Despite her handicap, she takes life head on,” says a visibly-moved Balsara. Born in Balsar in Gujarat (that's where the surname comes from), Sam moved to Bangalore and studied at St Joseph College. After failing to get admission to IIM Bangalore, he moved to Mumbai and did his MBA from Jamnalal Bajaj Management Institute in 1970. Having spent the first eight years of his career with the Sarabhais and Cadbury's as a marketing executive, he moved to advertising and worked with the then premier agency Hindustan Thompson Associates (now J Walter Thompson). A four-year stint at Mudra's Ahmedabad headquarters armed him with the necessary experience for what later turned out to be the work of his life. In 1986, he launched his advertising agency Madison. Today, Madison Communications is a Rs 1,100-crore group with seven specialised units. In a free-wheeling chat, Sam shared with Pummy Kaul and Anurag Prasad his insights on the advertising world and life at large.

You have been in the industry for over three decades now. How have things changed during this period?

The advertisement industry has changed beyond recognition. It is no more the old boys club that it used to be. It has become a dog-eat-dog business. Things have changed in terms of the nature of work too: from being a show-and-tell business, it has become an entertain-and-engage business. Today, the agency business is faced with lots of issues and problems. There has been a dramatic change in the self-perception. In the old days, those running the agencies saw themselves as professionals (creative people or otherwise) first. Today, they see themselves as running a business. Believing as it does in certain principles and a value system, Madison is still old-fashioned in outlook. I believe that you realise the importance of values, only when it hurts. Madison had to suffer business losses due to its principles, but I think it will do us good in the long run.

After many years as an advertising professional, what inspired you to take the entrepreneurial plunge?

Mudra had ambitions of becoming the largest agency in India. I did not see myself as taking Mudra to that position. I thought then that a good agency is a small agency with a few large clients. I have changed my mind somewhat over



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A NEW VISION: Sam Balsara with wife Homai and daughters Tanya (sitting) and Lara

the last 20 years, but even now, growth in billings or profits do not turn me on as much as seeing a job done well, uniquely, cost efficiently and innovatively.

How was the journey to success in business—could you share some of your experiences?

In the transitional phase, I consciously made some sacrifices—reduced my personal and household expenditure and reduced further my already limited leisure time. I must thank my family for putting up with everything. I must confess that I did not have some master plan in mind when I started out. So, I have nothing to compare current performance with.

At a personal level, were you hurt after the DMB&B split? How did you cope with the break-up?

No, not hurt. But I was extra alert, strategised a bit more than usual and took solace in a comment I heard on a TV programme that said 'real success can come only after real failure'. In hindsight, that's the way it worked for me.

Your younger daughter Lara tells us you are a tough taskmaster. How true is that?

I don't think I am a tough taskmaster. I like people who go that extra mile to achieve something. I believe in pushing the envelope all the time... and going to extreme lengths to ensure a project's success. If someone

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construes that as being a hard taskmaster, so be it. It's an approach that has worked for me very well. I'd say: nothing ventured, nothing gained. Then again (in a lighter vein), every daughter finds her father tough.

Is Lara being groomed to take over from you as the head of the agency?

My elder daughter Tanya is visually handicapped and now runs a small computer institute and also teaches a few others similarly visually impaired. The younger one, Lara, after completing her masters in marketing from Bristol, has been working for Madison. She brings tremendous value to decision-making on policy matters, being able to see things more objectively and without the luggage of history. As of now, she is grooming me, and teaching me not to get so hung up on so many of my long-held beliefs. She concentrates on organisation building and some new areas like retail and a few other segments that we will shortly enter. As for her succeeding me, the future is not ours to tell. I'll say this, though: Madison is a professional organisation where only merit matters. Ownership and management are two different things and may or may not overlap.

How are you involved with the causes your daughter Tanya currently espouses?

I made it possible for her to start the institute. So, I guess you can say that I am deeply involved. She does not let her handicap come in the way of enjoying life or contributing to society. Sometimes, when I feel a little down, I only have to think of her and my problem looks minor. By the time I reach my office in the morning, I have from her an inspirational SMS that she picks up from the internet.

What is your idea of a relaxing time?

Honestly, the thought of relaxing hasn't yet caught up with

me. If the work is exciting and you love your job, the thought of relaxing takes a backseat. My life is varied enough, though. I have been very active in the industry and love to be busy. I don't believe in long holidays. I love to spend time with my daughters and find family is a great stress-buster. I try not to work on Sundays as far as possible. I even avoid social engagements in town on Sundays.

Is your passion for cars in any way connected to the recently-bagged General Motors account?

(Laughs) I love to use my client's products, but there is no relation between the GM account and my going in for a bigger car (Toyota Camry). I have always been fond of big cars and would definitely like to upgrade with a bigger GM car in the future.

"If the work is exciting or you love your job, the thought of relaxing takes a backseat"

You are getting on in years. What do you do to keep yourself fit?

I have been doing yoga for the last couple of years on Sunday mornings in a class. Doing it by yourself or with just a teacher doesn't work for me. In a class, the group dynamics help you to push further. I try not to miss the Sunday class, but my yoga instructor, Guruji Kobad Variava, believes I am the worst student in the class. One

of my Sunday challenges is to prove him wrong!

Your take on life so far...?

I have taken life as it came to me. I believe real success comes only after a taste of failure. I have never expected everything to be always smooth. But I have the energy to overcome the roadblocks.

What do you plan to do once you retire from your active advertising profession?

I haven't thought about it. It's scary! I don't even play golf! I heard Rahul Bajaj say on CNBC: "Only idiots retire." He may be right. □