



DIRECT & PERSONAL

with Billy Sharma

Sachi Mukerji

Global Citizen

The man with the uncanny ability to reinvent himself.



There are two remarkable things that I admire about Sachi Mukerji.

First, he is a person who has no resentment or malice towards anyone. He has witnessed the highs and lows in our business, but when asked about difficult times during his career he replied: "No, I don't think I could ever say there's been a dark period. Every period that one passes through is a transition — from one phase into another and every phase is a learning experience. ... One's career is no different. The true test of character is to believe in yourself, learn from mistakes and keep moving forward."

What a great attitude.

He has truly accomplished a lot and yet is very low-key about his achievements. I had to almost badger him to get him to talk about them. I soon discovered that his resumé reads like a "Who's Who" of the agency business worldwide.

For example, Sachi has worked on four continents - Asia, Europe, Australia and North America — and in almost every capacity from copywriter to agency president for some of the biggest and best direct marketing and advertising agencies in the world.

First job

His advertising career began in Bombay and Calcutta, working with a British-owned agency called SH Benson, which later became Ogilvy & Mather.

"I started as a copywriter back in India,"

broadcast. I could have lived there forever."

Direct marketing

But it was not to be. Shortly thereafter, Sachi moved back to India and then on to England, where he got his first job as a writer with direct marketing agency Wunderman.

During his last four years in London, he became managing director of an agency called Yellowhammer—one of the hottest creative shops in Europe at that time and according to Mukerji, one of the first to be truly integrated. Yellowhammer's success brought him to Canada to pitch for the Wardair airline account against JWT-Toronto. (Wardair had just transitioned from a charter company to a scheduled airline known for its outstanding customer experience.) When Yellowhammer won the European sector of that business, Sachi began visiting Toronto regularly to manage the account and eventually decided to make it his new home. This caused him to change firms once again.

"In 1991, I was brought here by SMW Advertising (later acquired by Publicis) and our flagship account was Lexus, the luxury marquis from Toyota. This was a big challenge — selling a Japanese luxury car when the customer's mindset was firmly entrenched with German or British names, like Mercedes Benz, BMW, Audi and Jaguar. This was 1991 to 1994, and Lexus was a complete newcomer with very little brand caché in its category.

"I think we produced some of the best

Remarkable when you think these things cost over \$65,000."

Having "been there, done that," Sachi now has a different attitude towards our business in general and ad agencies in particular. I asked him what he'd do differently if given the chance.

"Well, for one thing, I am not sure I would be in advertising," he admits. "The business has changed dramatically in the last ten years. That's too complex to explain right now. But there have been profound changes in the agency business and how clients now look at us, or what they expect from agencies. I am not sure there's as much fun in it as there used to be."

Launched own business

Nevertheless, in 2004 Sachi launched his own agency, UpsideDown Communications Ltd., with a group of very talented people. However, this time he emphasized branding the agency, he explains:

"... I had always admired people who created and crafted brands — a critical stage that virtually shapes the future of a product long before advertising agencies came into the marketing picture. [Earlier in my career,] I spent three years learning this process ... Those three years enabled me to re-engineer myself and launch an agency on a completely new business model. You may recall that the early years of this new century saw a trend amongst clients to really question the value and cost of what they were paying to their over-sized ad agencies. As an alternative,

from the people I have worked with ... one of my major accomplishments in this business is the ability to bring talented people and motivated minds together and create an atmosphere where they can produce outstanding strategies and creative work."

Ever modest, Sachi needed some prodding to provide information about his personal life, which was equally fascinating. For example, he grew up in Allahabad in north India.

"Allahabad is an ancient city, steeped in Muslim and Hindu culture. The city has played a significant role through centuries in the country's evolution through the Mughal period, the British Raj and post-Independence India that started in 1947. I come from a Bengali family that's highly educated, liberal, secular, tolerant and privileged in an old-fashioned kind of way.

"I went to an outstanding school, run by Jesuits, and later, to university, where I read English Literature, History, Economics and Political Science. To this day, English remains my first love.

Current day

"I now live in a beautiful home on a ravine in Georgetown, a long way from my original home in India and some would say a long way from Toronto! I live with my wife, Susan, and our Rhodesian Ridgeback, Charles. I was a young father and have grown-up children. We are very close. I have a wonderful life."

"Not many of my friends know this, but I am a huge fan of the Toronto Blue Jays. I love all sports but Cricket comes before anything else. I guess this comes from my life in India, Australia and England. To watch cricket on a Sunday afternoon is one of the great joys of life. We love to travel. Deserts and mountains around Arizona, Southern California and New Mexico happen to be our favorites and one day I want to live there. We go back to Europe as often as we can and India is never too far away either. So all that makes up for a very busy travel schedule."

He confesses, "There's no question that I've enjoyed the creative process in our business. I started out as a writer and remain to this day, a writer. But obviously, one grows into larger roles and responsibilities. So my jobs have taken me from a writer to a creative director, to a managing director, to an agency president and now an entrepreneur and owner of my own agency.

"I really believe that running my own business has been the most satisfying of all the functions that I've done until this day. To find a niche, build a unique business model that's really different from

Sachi Mukerji is a global citizen who has lived on four continents and worked for many of the world's greatest advertising agencies. He has served as everything from a writer, to a creative director, to a managing director, to an agency president. Today, he owns his own agency, UpsideDown Communications Ltd.

the competitive set, and provide clients with a true business advantage — these are things that have made a big difference to my world. And I am humbled by UpsideDown's success.

"In the future, I want to spend more time helping clients develop their key messaging and brand positioning. Nailing those final words that bring clarity to your brand is something I enjoy doing today. If you were to ask a marketer: 'So what goes on that T-shirt?' you'd be surprised to find how many would shrug their shoulders and say, 'Tell me what it should say.'"

"Professionally, I can't think of any one person who's had a major impact on my career. In many ways, my learning has come from the people I have worked with, colleagues like Bill Coristine and Rick McLaughlin. I must also mention Bill Booth, who was a great teacher for me at BBDO and Grey. My mentors have been people in our team. I owe my success to them. And one thing's for sure, I've never been afraid to bring in people who are better than me. In that way, you never stop learning."

Plans

Sachi also revealed that he is about to launch another enterprise in the fall called Monsoon Communications, which will help marketers tap into Canada's fast expanding multicultural market.

"We will bring best practices from mainstream and DM agencies to address the rapidly growing South Asian and Chinese demographics. Right now, these are under-served consumer segments and we hope to change the status quo by addressing cultural nuances and at the same time bringing some unique targeting and relationship building ideas to clients."

As the interview ended, he gave me one last bit of advice: "I think we should all spend time reading and thinking about the teachings of the Dalai Lama. That makes a huge difference, believe me!"

Maybe that explains why there has been no dark period in his career.

Billy Sharma is president and creative director of Designers Inc., Toronto. He can be reached at 416.203.9787

To find a niche, build a unique business model that's really different from the competitive set, and provide clients with a true business advantage—these are things that have made a big difference to my world.

he explains. "Not many of your readers will realize that the quality of advertising that comes out in India is astonishingly high. In a lot of ways, I think the creative in India is a lot smarter than what you see here—especially in print, and now on TV.

"We competed against top international agencies like JWT and Lintas; both of which had a very strong presence in India at that time and still do. The landscape has changed and the big players now run huge agencies out of Bombay."

Next, he joined McCann in India and was transferred to its Sydney office to learn about TV.

"I loved Australia—saw lots of great cricket, developed a strong taste for Fosters lager, went to rock concerts at the SCG and worked really hard to learn

direct marketing in those days and I am proud to say that I have yet to see anything quite so effective, even after a span of 12 to 15 years. It wasn't just the creative work and the targeting we did but the whole business of customer profiling, back-end fulfillment through to dealerships and call centre support that provided hot leads for test drives. We were one of the first direct marketers to use multi-cultural contact programs. The system we set up eliminated a very high percentage of time wasters and "tire-kickers" from the process. The dealers loved us!

"In one particular launch, I remember we sold the entire first shipment of the new SC400 luxury coupe through a direct marketing campaign, even before the cars were unloaded at the docks in Vancouver.

we have created a 'virtual' agency that brings together highly talented individually skilled professionals—all under one roof and we offer the best practices without big agency fees. We can afford to do this because we just do not have the same overheads or worry about shareholders' demands that give sleepless nights to agency presidents and CFOs."

So besides some big successes in the past: Federal Express and Bell at BBDO, Sprint and Liberty Health at Grey Direct - he can now list CWT and Scotiabank International through his own firm, UpsideDown Communications.

"I am proud of what we have accomplished. I have to add, however, that none of it would have been possible without the tremendous contributions