



'Collaborate before you compete'

Shaswati Saradar, director-general, MRUC has rich and diverse experience of over 15 years in marketing, media and advertising domains. She has worked with reputed and prestigious organisations such as ZEE network, Maruti Suzuki, Ogilvy & Mather and McCann Erickson India. In an interview with **network2media**, she shares her thoughts on the OOH industry. Edited excerpts:

What prompted your decision to move from being a brand owner to an industry body like MRUC?

Having spent many years as a media planner (Ogilvy) and then a media user for even longer (Maruti Suzuki) and finally as media itself (Zee TV), I had a first-hand exposure from all three perspectives to the strengths and development possibilities for Indian media. This was then the most logical move.

How do you see your experience helping in adding value to MRUC objectives and initiatives?

MRUC exists to ensure that the marketing fraternity – be it media owners (publishers, broadcasters etc) and consumers (advertisers and agencies) get the best media research at the most affordable cost. Indian media continues to be among the more under-leveraged assets compared to global media. India remains a complex, fragmented market with a unique set of challenges and continuously understanding the Indian who sees TV, reads newspapers and magazines, listens to radio, surfs the net is the only way is to sharpen focus. My early years in mapping consumer insights helps me even today. And I work with a diverse set of people who represent many different interests while I stay focussed on the bigger picture.

What has been your views on outdoor advertising in your stints as a brand owner?

Outdoor remains a medium that everyone wants to use, but is unsure of what the return on investments are to them. Very few brands have leveraged outdoor as well as other media and one of our goals is to make the medium more measurable.

What is your own assessment of IOS I and what are the key learnings that you would want to carry forward to the next round of survey?

The study was accomplished through the standard and globally accepted methodology by the media industry and MRUC had successfully launched the product in 2 major cities - Mumbai and Pune. The Indian Outdoor Survey (IOS) is the first syndicated study on the outdoor medium in the country that had helped unlock the potential of this robust medium. Through IOS, MRUC aimed to build a common currency for the Indian outdoor media industry which would help all the media stakeholders to obtain the audience reach and frequency along with their profile.

In terms of key learnings, there are many. The study is entirely different from other media researches. It is not a typical 'paper and pencil' methodology, but quite complex as it involves various modules. Help of technology is integral to the research and huge investments were made. IOS Phase I gave us the opportunity to explore different technologies which could be

used in the next phase. The Indian outdoor industry does not necessarily carry standard rules and procedures and even the sizes of hoardings is not standardised unlike some other countries. Hence, substantial time was spent on standardisation of the hoardings and employing best suitable methodology, as we could not apply the standard methodology followed in other countries to the Indian outdoor market.

What steps have you taken to obtain industry feedback and suggestions in taking the IOS forward to its next level?

Extensive discussions have been held with all critical stakeholders who were available. While many person-hours have been spent, we could do with more collaboration. We received some extremely useful suggestions. MRUC is also active on Twitter and Facebook and all suggestions/feedback are welcome.

An initiative of this nature (IOS II) will require significant financial support. Who would be providing the principal funding for this?

The entire Indian Outdoor industry including the IOAA is supportive of this study.

The second round of the Indian Outdoor Survey (IOS) is to be extended to Delhi, Bangalore, and Hyderabad, Kolkata, Ahmedabad and Chennai outdoor markets. What are your broad plans for this initiative? Are there any major changes from the initial plan?

This is a bit early and too sensitive to discuss at this stage.

What is the timeframe in which IOS II is expected to be completed? Kindly also share the plans beyond this phase?

Will keep updating as soon as we crystallise the plans. Only thing that I can say at this point is that now outdoor also would be measurable and planned just like TV or Print.

Are there any plans to extend the study to Digital OOH/Transit Media/Airport Advertising sub domains? Of course yes, but all in good time.

Do you think that the outdoor industry bodies such as IOAA and DOAA have been successful in streamlining the business processes in the fragmented OOH advertising domain?

To some extent definitely they have succeeded, but more of streamlining would be good for the domain. Print and TV have shown how competing brands can collaborate for the larger cause of the industry and I am confident that MRUC's efforts will help bring all major outdoor players on a common platform.

What are your views both as a brand owner as well as an industry body member regarding the existing lacunae in the Indian outdoor advertising arena?

The problem with outdoor is that it is 'Outdoor'. By that I mean, things often go beyond the control of the outdoor agency: you can decide the creative approach, the site selection, but not the fact that trees may be growing in front of it or ambient street-lighting may be poor or storms may damage the flex/vinyl etc. Advertisers also tend to see outdoor as a relatively cheap, reminder medium, whereas globally, there have been investments of the Decaux kind that makes ordinary bus stops look world class. We are seeing these kind of investments in India as well, but we need more of it and faster.

What advice would you give to outdoor advertising professionals in order to further the growth momentum for this domain?

"Collaborate before you compete", is the simple mantra that I would humbly suggest.

[You can contact Shaswati Saradar here](#)