Based in Hong Kong, **Pushkar Sane, Chief Digital Officer, North & South Asia, Starcom MediaVest Group** , helps marketers navigate through the digitized world and create ideas that help them to connect (meaningfully) with human beings and ultimately build brand value. He is passionate about digitizing his clients and thereby helping them overcome the fear of the unknown. He has a unique distinction of observing and working in three-billion-plus markets – China, India and the Internet. In his current role, Sane leads digital teams across North & South Asia as well as a global practice focused on social marketing at Starcom MediaVest Group (SMG). He is responsible for driving business, client relationships, talent development and building capabilities that help in keeping SMG ahead of the digital curve. Previously, Sane worked for FCB (now Draftfcb) in India & Hong Kong, and Euro RSCG Worldwide in Hong Kong.

Digital is no longer a distant dream and it has become much more than a medium. In fact, digital now serves as a backbone for many traditional media vehicles. Digitization of out-of-home medium has just started and I feel the possibilities are limitless. These possibilities go beyond just using digital display panels on the out-of-home sites.

Technology is constantly reshaping digital and it is changing as we speak. People often confuse different components of the digital ecosystem and compare two dramatically different things just because they are digital. Digital can be broadly divided into content types (brand content, third-party content, user-generated content), platforms (search, entertainment, social), form factors (video, audio, text), and access screens (computer, TV, mobile, music player, gaming device, billboard). So an out-of-home display is just one of the many cccess screens that people use to consume content. So let us look at how different digital components will change the face of the OOH industry.

The first step towards digitization will be installation of digital screens on OOH sites. Digitized screens can be connected to a centralized ad-serving and tracking system thereby transforming the OOH industry which currently depends largely on ‘My boss can see it and hence it is effective’ ways of measuring. We can then control the OOH inventory centrally, rotate creative executions based on time, demographics, geography and so on. Additionally, it will help in bringing down the cost of production.

Digitization of OOH will also help offer prime locations to multiple advertisers depending upon ad spend and day-part relevance to a brand. For example, mutual fund/financial products may occupy prime digitized properties during morning slot, whereas the same spot can be used effectively by television channels during evening.

For digitized OOH to succeed the industry needs to change its mindset. People visit different screens for content and not necessarily for advertising. In the past OOH was used just to display advertising rather than providing content that is relevant to people. Digital enables us to stream content on OOH screens and engage with people rather than just showing them advertising.

Some may argue that OOH screens are not suitable for streaming content, mainly because the advertising industry looks at content from a ‘long form’ view rather than ‘short form’. In order to stream content on OOH screens we need to change perspectives and embrace ‘snack content’ – short form for fast food – with a daily special menu. It will be much more labour-intensive but I feel it will be well worth it. Digitized short-form content can actually help engage consumer with relevant factoids such as NAV of mutual fund schemes, stock indices, weather info which are all live feed.

The next logical step is to integrate OOH screens with different social platforms. For example, a travel & tourism brand can leverage (with user permission and tagging) photographs, reviews and videos and stream them in real time on OOH screens. Or a brand of flat screen TV can leverage user ratings on third party sites like CNET and demonstrate its superiority over the competition. In my opinion, the possibilities are limitless and imagination will be the key to success.

We already have examples of integration with mobile devices. It will further enhance and become much more interactive rather than just a one-way push of Bluetooth messages. Imagine a day when you can influence content on the OOH screen through your mobile device. And, technologically speaking, that day is already here!

But while all this is fine, the million-dollar-question is who should make this happen? I think the real change will happen when advertisers push their agencies and OOH vendors to move towards digitization. A fundamental shift needs to take place in the minds of advertisers. Advertisers need to accept that OOH is not about one-upmanship; it is more about contextual relevance which digitization can help drive. No amount of technology can help unless the advertisers get serious about it. And once the advertisers are serious the industry will move at a lightning speed towards digitization as they will have no choice but to upgrade or be obsolete in the eyes of big-budget OOH advertisers.

I hope that the Indian advertising industry moves quickly towards digitization of out-of-home media.

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