

USING MEDIA & MARKETING TO BUILD THE **ZORO COMMUNITY**

Good afternoon Zoroastrians and greetings from India. It feels wonderful to be amongst so many Zoroastrians and that too, so far away from Mumbai, the demographic capital of Zoroastrians or Parsis as we refer to ourselves back home. The subject I have been given, which I have taken the liberty to modify a bit is **Using Media and Marketing to build the Zoroastrian community.**

Now many of you in this room may well ask: we are a small but respectable community with pedigreed lineage and heritage. Then, why do we need to build the community. After all we are not a carton of Kellogg's or an air-conditioner or a mobile phone or a television set that needs to be sold and therefore needs a positive image.

Let me submit to you, that in today's highly fragmented, confused, complex, challenging and rapidly

moving and changing society, everything, everyone, every Company, every brand, every service, every community, every nation, every individual, needs to be marketed; needs to have a positive image and needs to have a good word said about himself or herself or itself, to survive and thrive.

Every corporation knows that the most valuable property they own is not land and buildings and desks and computers and cars and trucks or factories, even the secret recipes and formulas they own, but the brand name. The Coca-Cola Company valued at 115 billion US, but of this valuation 102 billion is attributed to the name! And because Companies know that brands are valuable they invest time and resources and a lot of money in protecting the brand, nurturing it, making it stronger and further building the brand equity. Even attempts are now being made to measure and protect and nurture a nation's brand equity. India and China have moved up on the Nation Brand Equity Ranking ladder in the last decade. So why shouldn't we look upon the Zoroastrian Community as a brand that is no

doubt valuable and protect our brand value, nurture it, further it and more importantly make sure, that at least no Zoroastrian does anything to erode it, if he or she cannot contribute to strengthening it further.

It is not just Companies with Products and Services to sell that spend billions of dollars on marketing and advertising, but even countries do. That is why some countries like US, UK, Switzerland, Australia, Sri Lanka are top of mind, are some of the most frequented places and holiday destinations that hog the majority of tourist traffic that add billions of dollars to their economy and contribute to GDP growth.

But you may well ask: How can a positive image help a community or members of a community? Well, it makes them more acceptable to society. It makes school and college admissions easier. It makes renting homes easier. It makes buying and selling homes easier. It makes getting loans easier. It makes business transactions, easier. It makes getting a job, easier. It makes making friends easier. It helps getting pardoned,

easier when you make a mistake. It helps make you upwardly mobile. It helps build your status in society. It makes you more respectable. It makes you more trustworthy and I could go on. I hope you got the general gist of what I am trying to say.

Now, how does one go about building a brand, whether it is for a product, service or community. As a first step, we need to determine:

- Who are we?
- What we are known for? and finally
- Where we want to be?

WHO ARE WE? We are a band of people who came away from Iran 1300 years ago to save our religion, got shelter in India, lived and did well for ourselves at the same time contributing to Indian Society. We grew in numbers to about a hundred thousand. In a small way, some of us moved out of India to find greener pastures and whilst the global community is slowly increasing, the numbers at home are steadily declining and now

stand at just 59,000, down from 1,00,000 a few decades ago. In the early part of the 20th century, we did well for ourselves, educated ourselves, progressed, prospered, largely under British patronage and importantly contributed to society.

Lord Karan Billimoria, speaking at the World Zoroastrian Congress in Mumbai in December 2013 recalled Narayan Murthy a much celebrated CEO of a much celebrated Software and IT company – Infosys said "*I have never met a bad Parsee*". Everyone in this room today if not all Zoroastrians must take a pledge to consciously and demonstrably act with honesty and integrity, only then Narayan Murthy's successors would be able to convincingly say the same to your and my grandchildren.

And no less than Mahatma Gandhi is supposed to have said about us, "*numbers beneath contempt, but contribution beyond compare*".

WHAT ARE WE KNOWN FOR? We have been known atleast in India for Honesty, Integrity, Entrepreneurship, Intelligence and Hardwork. We love the good life, are jovial, make an Honest Living, are Charitable, Religious, with a unique set of behaviour pattern that we call “Parsipanu”. However , over the last decade our strength on many of the above attributes have weakened, specially honesty, integrity, hard work, charity and this is a cause of serious concern.

For a speech at the World Zoroastrian Congress in Dubai, I did a study online to asses the perception of Zoroastrian Community as a Brand amongst 886 Zoroastrian respondents, almost equally divided between India and rest of the world -- A pretty large and representative sample.

4 key parameters were identified as being key constituents that have in the past contributed to the strong Brand Equity of Zoroastrian Community. These were:

1. Honesty, Integrity, Transparency, Fair Play and Trustworthiness
2. Charity and Philanthropy
3. Entrepreneurial Spirit
4. Retaining and Observing Zoroastrian Culture and Tradition

Majority of these 886 respondents felt that we had deteriorated on these parameters and again a majority agreed that we needed to take remedial measures in these areas to retain and strengthen our position on these parameters.

In the case of Honesty, Integrity, Transparency, Fair Play and Trustworthiness, 33% felt that we had deteriorated and 93% felt that efforts were required to cultivate and preserve these values.

In the case of Charity and Philanthropy 44% felt that we had deteriorated and 88% felt that efforts were required to cultivate and preserve these values. In the case of

Entrepreneurial Spirit, 55% felt that we had deteriorated and 90% felt that efforts were required to cultivate and preserve these values.

In the case of Retaining and Observing Zoroastrian Culture and Tradition 41% felt that we had deteriorated and 90% felt that efforts were required to cultivate and preserve these values.

Rohinton Rivetna speaking at the same Congress in Mumbai identified 10 characteristics and in his assessment gave us a 5 on 10, which means in his view we have collectively destroyed half our identity and therefore equity.

Because we landed in India and because of our good behaviour and work in society, especially in Mumbai, Gujarat and some cities of India and some parts of Western India, we are well-known in these parts, but not so well-known in most other parts of India. It would probably be fair to say that in other parts of the world,

where our numbers are so small and where we have made little contribution to the local society, we are little known or noticed in the larger society.

WHERE DO WE WANT TO BE? I would say we need to strengthen our scores on several of the attributes, I spoke about, in Gujarat and Bombay, make ourselves better known through our actions for the rest of India and other parts of the world.

HOW DO WE THIS?

Before we try to improve the image of a product, we need to make sure that the product itself is good, desirable, meets a customer need, offers value for money and what not. Similarly before we try to build an image of our community, we need to make sure that:

1. All is well within the community and
2. That the basic attributes on which a community will be assessed are strong and powerful.

My first suggestion is that some leaders of the community must come together and prepare a master plan or blue print for the community and press it in action. I had presented some of my thoughts at the Dubai Congress, but very briefly the blue print must cover the following areas, specifically:

- 1. Religion:** The basis of our coming together and the unifying common thread that binds us together is after all our Religion. I would be in favour of a codified, hierarchal religious order, if at all that is possible and transition to this system over a decade, through discussion and debate. To my view it would help us bind together and help reduce unnecessary argument, debates, controversies created by people who are not adequately equipped with religious knowledge or its spiritual framework.

- 2. Demography:** The decline in population is a matter of great concern. Our numbers , especially in India , where the current ratio of death to birth is 4:1 are rapidly declining. Jiyo Parsi is a great initiative, undertaken recently with the help and support of government that initially provided financial subsidy for IVF treatment and advocacy, but now has been enlarged to offer multiple benefits to parents and elderly for babysitting, but we need to clearly do much more in this area. I hear some experts say nothing can be done, but let us remain optimistic.
- 3. Supporting and Equipping the Poor:** The Third proposed focus area is Supporting and Equipping the Poor. Perhaps this is a concern area mainly in India and we need to identify causes and take steps to make such members of the community economically strong, over a period of time.

4. Entrepreneurship: The fourth focus area should be Entrepreneurship. Zoroastrians especially in India have been known in the past for their initiative, zeal and passion for trade, commerce and manufacturing. That is why today in India you have the Tata's, Godrejs', the Wadias' and hundreds of other thriving, growing and lesser known groups that meet the needs of society at a small profit for themselves. But I dare say that entrepreneurship has taken a back seat amongst the community in the last 2-3 decades. Necessity, they say is the mother of invention and often lack of opportunity, drives the initiative to be entrepreneurial and explore new area and avenues. But clearly the last few decades have been decades that have thrown up adequate opportunity, which has made us complacent, less ambitious, more risk-averse and selfish to some extent, not to strive and strain but follow the path of least resistance and just do that much to lead a comfortable life.

To start with, we need to re-ignite the spirit of entrepreneurship in the community, identify the low hanging fruit within the community, whose personal skill sets, attitude and equally importantly circumstances make him or her the right candidate for entrepreneurship. Very often a degree from a globally renowned university or institution followed by a plum job in a multinational or a new age organization, actually proves to be a deterrent to entrepreneurship. The initiative taken by the WZCC to which many have donated and we are waiting for many more, under which interest free small value loans will be provided to a carefully chosen set of people is a great start. We need to set a target of supporting 500 new entrepreneurs in the next 5 years, to make some impact.

- 5. Health:** A Fifth Focus area should be Health. Because of the smallness of our numbers there is a unique set of health problems that afflict the

community on one hand and on the other with the growing cost of health care and inadequate or non-existent state support system, especially in countries like India and Pakistan, the less fortunate Zoroastrians are indeed left in a vulnerable position.

6. **Youth:** The future of any community depends on its Youth. The nature and quality of their upbringing, the nature of influence in their early life, the nature of value systems instilled in them by their family initially and later on by the education system and the immediate environment play a key role in what they will become and what they will think when they grow up.
7. **Community Organisations:** Another focus area, the Seventh in my list should be Community Organisations. Whilst it is true that we do have a number of community organizations, sometimes an overdose of such organizations, arising out of

personal disagreements very often muddy the water.

It is unfortunate that many of our community organisations created to strengthen the community have not covered themselves with glory. And adult franchise has not exactly been a boon for the BPP. So its important to put sustainable structures in place that are always led by leaders with vision and who have stature and are highly respected in society. And who always have a strong executive wing under the Trustees layer.

Having initiated work in the above areas, we should simultaneously put in place a plan to project the image of the community amongst itself and amongst society at large.

HOW DO WE DO THIS?

First and foremost understand that it all starts with YOU, yes YOU. You don't have to be a brand building expert to build the image of our community, all of us individually and collectively make up this community and contribute to its image. How you can help in building the image is do good, and be good and if we cant do that , the least we can do is not to spread unnecessary controversial mails and Whatsapp messages on topics and subjects without a full understanding. Off late I have observed many good initiatives by people in the interest of our community are misconstrued and thanks to social media are spread to 1000s of people in the community in no times spreading mistrust. I would urge each and every one of you sitting in this room today to take personal responsibility of not spreading any negative message or thought. And if you want to do so, do so only after ascertaining all the facts from the source.

I have 6 specific points for this global community to consider:

1. **Brand Manager:** I think we should appoint a Brand Manager, with a defined set of tasks and responsibilities in places where the community is substantial. That would mean at least in India, UK, US/Canada, Australia/NewZealand, Iran and UAE.
2. **Brand Ambassador:** We should appoint a Brand Ambassador who is the epitome of what we want a Zoroastrian to be and who has the time and disposition to move around, meet people, be visible to society with talks, lectures on successful living, how to get ahead in life. There should be a Brand Ambassador atleast for each of the areas that is India, UK, US/Canada, Australia/NewZealand and UAE.
3. **Public Relations:** We should appoint a PR Agency or professional for each of the territories that prevents

bad news and any negative image drivers from appearing in media and augment good news, achievements, good deeds and charitable actions of individuals.

I am not proposing any financial outlay for these appointments, however they all need to be “Good Zoroastrians” and technically, intellectually be equipped to perform the task and be inclined to contribute willingly to the community cause.

For example: The Brand Manager could be a Zoroastrian in the age group of 25 -35 years with at least 5 years experience of managing a successful national brand and working with a large Multinational or National company.

Instead of appointing a PR agency, if a largish professional Zoroastrian owned agency does not exist, I am sure we can identify a Zoroastrian PR professional per territory and appoint them on a pro bono basis.

Having identified and appointed such individuals we should plan a meeting of these individuals from around the globe to chalk out an action plan with key deliverables and dates against them.

4. Carrot and Stick Policy: We should create a mechanism within the community to chide those who take action or are seen to be taking action that are not consonant with Zoroastrian values. Whilst this may be difficult to do, we should publicly praise, reward, award, acclaim those who do and give wide publicity to such people and events.

5. Organisation Structure: And finally we need to conceptualise an organisational structure that would best suit our circumstances, be acceptable to the majority and that is run on reasonably democratic lines with frequent and regular changes of office bearers. The 2 corner stones of the organisation have to be transparency and communication to build trust in a diverse global community.

Events in the last decade in Bombay at Bombay Parsi Panchayet have seen that adult franchise, certainly does not seem to be a good idea and these positions need to be filled with men and women of immense stature, wealth, imagination, ideas who can put community work before self pride and ego.

6. Charity: An important attribute of Zoroastrians is Charity. Infact in India it was often said “Parsi Thy name is Charity” although it would seem today it is “Parsi Thy name is Controversy”. We need to inculcate a charitable disposition in children from early times, so that when they grow up this becomes a deeply rooted trait. It may be a good idea for the religious leaders to suggest keeping aside atleast 2% of one’s post tax income for charitable purpose and half of that for Zoroastrian purposes and other half for society at large.

Finally, I do want to say that our children will define the future of our community. We must teach our

children to compete and strive hard to win from an early age and learn to cope with the stress that accompanies modern day living. In my primary school days in Bulsar, one of my favourite songs was “Que – Sera – Sera” and for the benefit of many this afternoon who are from a later generation, the song goes:

“Que – Sera – Sera

Whatever will be, will be

The future is not yours to see”

I cannot but help feel that we Parsees in India at least have taken the words of this song of yester years too seriously and too literally and perhaps this is the cause of some of the issues that face our community.

In today’s fast paced world that is driven by science and technology and where time is measured in nano-seconds one cannot survive, let alone grow by taking the stance that “*Whatever will be, will be*”. Based on an intelligent assessment of the past, we have to attempt to predict or see the future and take steps today to increase

the probability of our continued success tomorrow. This is what most of us do in corporate life in order to ensure success of our individual businesses and I should think for each one of us OR for the community as a whole, it should work no differently.

Today if I could re-write my favourite song, it would read as:

“Que Sera Sera

It’s not how it used to be

The future, you must plan for yourself, you see

And Learn to compete and win

That’s the key, you see

Que Sera Sera”

We all know we had a glorious past. But the past is the past and can’t continue to come to our rescue for all time to come. At best we can and should draw inspiration from it. Each one of us should take personal responsibility to further build on the brand equity of the Zoroastrian Community that we have inherited and whilst we have the privilege of partaking of its benefits, we should not forget that we have a responsibility to maintain it, if not enhance it, so that future generations can also benefit from it.

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