

How it spoke to the other India

Rural communications agency **Anugrah Madison**, an early bird to specialise in the field, celebrates 25 years of existence this week.

STAVANTHI CHALLAPALLI

To the world of marketing, it's a name that's synonymous with rural communication. Twenty-five years down, the founder of this Chennai-based precursor of the trade, 69-year-old R. V. Rajan, proudly says, "Our strength is continuity - all of us at Anugrah Madison have decades of experience. Attrition at our agency is negligible and our reputation has percolated through the entire profession."

Madison World's rural services organisation was started as Anugrah Marketing in 1986 by Rajan, who worked for over two decades in Clarion and Grant and associated agencies. The firm now handles clients such as Shriram Transport Finance Corporation (STFC), MRF (farm tyres), Sanmar's Trubore Piping Systems, and several others, which at various points of time, have included many categories of marketers including ITC, Philips, Titan and Karur Vysya Bank.

Rajan, who entered advertising despite advice to the contrary, dealt with fast moving consumer goods (FMCG) clients in the initial years. His first exposure to rural communication, in 1972, was when he worked in ACIL, a sister company of Clarion, which handled a nutrition education campaign in rural Uttar Pradesh and Andhra Pradesh for CARE, a US-based NGO. Later at ACIL, he had to pitch for the account of Madras Fertilisers, which it bagged. Circumstances brought Mumbai-bred Rajan to Chennai where there were no FMCG clients to be serviced. Slowly, Shaw Wallace (agro-chemicals business), MRF (farm tyres), EID Parry and Coromandel Indag came on board. So did a clutch of non-agri-input clients - Karur Vysya Bank, P. Orr and Sons and some Coimbatore-based companies. As things were cruising along, Grant lost the Colgate-Palmolive account in a global realignment of agencies, and merged with Contract, a sister agency of JWT. Rajan, who was against this, gave notice and set up Anugrah Marketing and Advertising Services.

His Round Table friends and clients stood by him, recalls Rajan, offering not only moral support but office space and allied paraphernalia, and business. In two years, Rajan had summoned brother R. Seshadri, Group Manager at Ulka, Mumbai, to come and help develop the business. Till about 1997, 60 per cent of the business was from agri-input companies. Meanwhile, Rajan had also been making a name for himself - and for rural communication - by lecturing on the subject at MICA (Ahmedabad) and at advertising conferences.

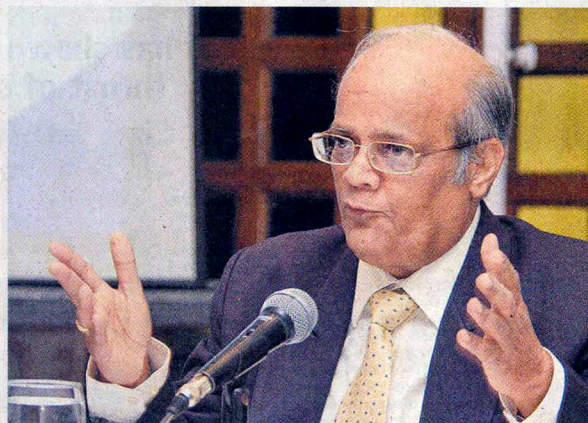
Anugrah also got a big break when Philips engaged it to work on rural marketing in Tamil Nadu for its consumer electronics products. "At a time when the category was doing badly in other States, Philips grew 28-30 per cent in TN," says Rajan.

ENTER MADISON

Anugrah had been looking for associates in



R. V. Rajan, (right) Founder, Anugrah Madison; **R. Seshadri,** Managing Director



other parts of the country and Rajan met Madison's Sam Balsara to discuss a tie-up. Balsara eventually suggested that Anugrah become Madison's rural division, with Madison progressively owning a 74 per cent stake (it now owns 90) but run entirely by Rajan. Lara Balsara, Business Development and Diversification Manager, Madison World, says, "Anugrah was one of the first joint ventures Madison ventured into. It has established a niche for itself as a rural marketing expert. Over the last few years we have also developed a formidable presence across the country."

Initially, Rajan thought the tie-up would open doors to big and new clients eyeing rural markets. "But no one was ready to walk the talk," he says. Seshadri, Managing Director at Anugrah Madison, explains that it was a time when everyone was talking about rural marketing but had no serious intentions

of committing to it. "Presentations" were the norm of the day, and Anugrah had to do an enormous amount of evangelising to convince companies the rural consumer was a totally different animal, not at all like his urban counterpart. "It was a question of money," says Rajan. It wasn't a cheap proposition to develop a campaign and strategy solely for rural areas - all rural areas are different from each other, so they could only be done one region or a few at a time.

The years 1998-2000 were "a disaster," says Rajan - the firm's "rural specialism" image was affecting it. Old clients that weren't particularly interested in rural walked out, and new business was hard to come by. Rajan started the Rural Network with Pradeep Kashyap of MART, Ram Patankar of Sampark and Pradeep Lokhande of Rural Relations, four regional and subject specialists in rural marketing under one roof so that the

combined entity could pitch for big national clients requiring all-India services. However, it did not take off as a business proposition.

Then STFC and ACC walked in. For STFC, the challenge was to communicate with truck drivers, drivers who wanted to be truck owners, and owners themselves. R. Sridhar, Managing Director, STFC, is all praise for the unique and innovative campaigns developed by Anugrah. Its target market, "unbankable" and one that didn't have much access to print and electronic media, took to the idea of the truck *utsavs* and *melas* that the agency came up with. "They immensely benefited STFC and its clients," adds Sridhar. Due to this effort, more banks came forward to disburse capital to STFC to expand its business, he says. For cement company ACC, Anugrah developed an integrated campaign to address everyone

in the cement buying process from a semi-urban and rural perspective in Karnataka. It was later extended to other Southern States.

Says R. Nand Kumar, Head, Corporate Communications, ACC: "The approach of large advertising agencies was invariably conventional and metropolitan. We liked Anugrah's simple style of communication. It suited a basic building material like cement."

In 2005 Rural Network was recast as Rural Marketing Association of India (RMAI), a larger industry body to protect and promote the cause of rural marketing in India, including Ogilvy Rural and Linterland as founder-members. Given his 40 years' experience in the field, a couple of years ago Rajan received the RMAI's lifetime award for his contribution to rural marketing.

BEYOND COMMUNICATION

Says Seshadri, "Most clients looking to go rural are looking for solutions beyond communication, like distribution and sales support. We've been widening our basket of services to include alternative channels of distribution and sales support. We are also helping a client identify niche customers through on-ground data mining."

Though seen as a South-based agency initially, in the last 2-3 years, the agency has expanded - it now has offices in Mumbai and Delhi, and has a few employees working in Lucknow, Patna and Aurangabad. "We are the only agency that can produce campaigns for both the South and the North in all languages in-house," says Rajan. The limitation, though, says Seshadri, is in terms of delivery. It's a problem common to even the biggest agencies, in rural advertising. Associates execute and the agencies supervise.

RURAL ADVERTISING TODAY

"Even today, there are very few national players in the rural space. There aren't many companies that can deliver across the vast expanse that is India. The industry is not mature - there are no ready planning tools, very limited databases," says Seshadri. Education, the mobile phone and infrastructure development has hastened the process of ruralisation in many States. What about the oft-heard assertion that rural consumers now are not so different from urban consumers? "The divide is blurring only in the upper segments," says Rajan, "the rural rich and the upper middle class is where you see the change. Earlier, the opinion leaders were the old/ rich/ educated or the *sarpanch/zamin-dar*. Now with growing literacy, it's the sons and daughters."

Rajan, who has handed over the reins to brother Seshadri, now busies himself with writing, teaching and playing mentor. *Courage My Companion* (Productivity & Quality Publishing, 2009) is a rather candid autobiography detailing high points, trials and tribulations both professional and personal. He is working on a handbook on rural marketing and has more plans up his sleeve to further its growth. For someone who took up advertising when it was not a career of choice, it has been quite a journey!

Learnings and lighter moments

Rural marketing holds many lessons and much humour.

When Anugrah Madison was working on the Philips campaign in rural Tamil Nadu, it found husbands complaining that with the spread of TV, women had become couch potatoes and were no longer helping them in the fields. A certain community took umbrage at the marketing team not visiting them. Some villagers demanded money for being photographed and some wives did not allow their husbands to pose for the camera until they dressed up properly. Rural marketing hasn't been without its share of funny and illuminating moments.

Rajan recounts an incident in Meerut where he, along with an executive from MRF, had gone to survey the market for tractor tyres. An irate farmer

brandishing a torn tyre (not MRF's) came up to them outside a sugarcane factory (to which produce was brought on tractors and bullock carts) and flew fly at the executive - "you claim 10-ply, 12-ply tyres, this has only four layers," he charged. They had then to explain that not all layers were visible but this experience taught Rajan to include in his video presentations a small section on tyres explaining the facts.

Another learning came when Rajan spent some time at an agrochemicals store to observe people buying. A customer came in with a newspaper advertisement for a certain brand. However, the dealer advised him against it and after some debate, the customer ended up buying another brand

- for Rajan, this was an eye-opener into the power of dealers in this sector. Then there was the case of a customer in Gujarat coming in early, taking his time (an entire day) to inspect a tyre, and only at 4.30 p.m., pulling out the money from his *pagri* to buy it, pointing to how thoroughly rural customers need to be convinced about something before buying it.

In other experiences, it was found that not only humans, even buffaloes relish Horlicks. And if you market boot polish, would you sell your brand in the villages saying it could be used to give buffaloes too a shiny black coat, as Rajan's team discovered it was being used in a certain rural region in the North of the country? - S. C.