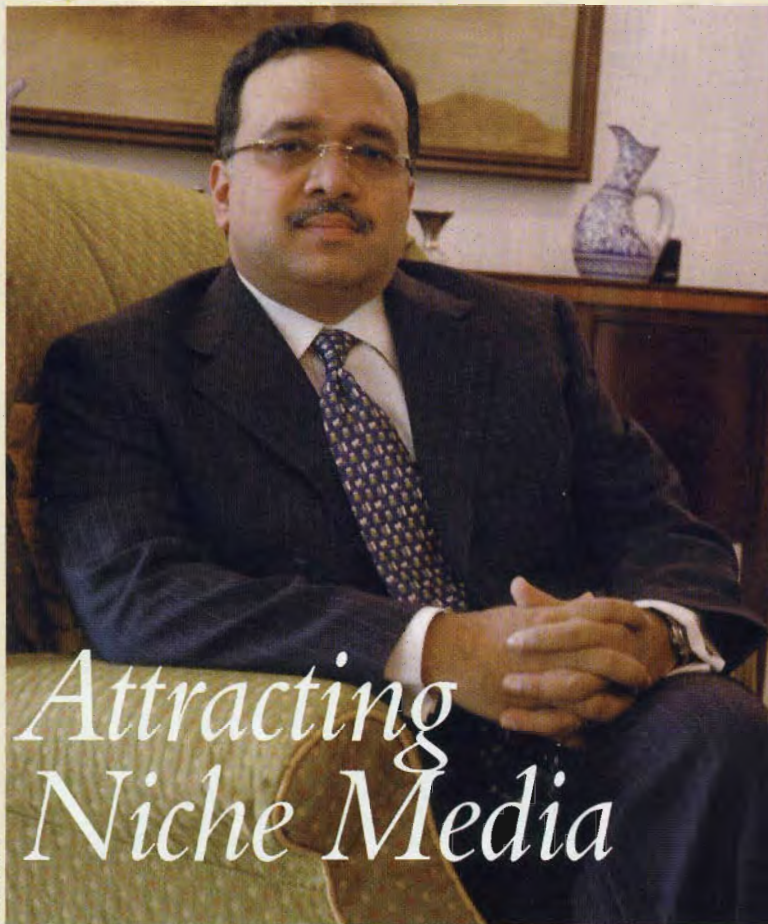


PROFILE | PRAMATH RAJ SINHA | CEO | 9.9 MEDIAWORX

SUSHIL KUMAR

Attracting Niche Media

The key is to find good people who can execute against the opportunities available to us. I would say that it is easier to figure out the 'what' and 'how' but more difficult to work out the 'who'."

That was what he said in an interview with **The Brand Reporter** in 2006 after taking over as CEO and managing director of the Kolkata-based ABP Group. Back then, he was an 'outsider' in the media industry.

Two years down the line, he launched 9.9 (called 9dot9) Mediaworx, a diversified media venture. As he sits in his new office texting on his Blackberry - which he apologetically says shouldn't be taken as rudeness - the ex-McKinsey partner prefers to talk more about 9.9 than anything else.

The 9.9 team consists of people who are 'passionate about the media industry'. The verticals include, digital, print, studio and insights. What's 9.9 all about? "Most people on a start-up will focus on one aspect of media such as TV or magazine or website. Mine is a diversified start-up not a focused start up. Because I believe, media by definition is a very risky business and to scale up and to sustain the business you have to be in multiple fields," says Sinha almost in a single breath.

niche sometime back? Sinha smiles and says, "The whole youth thing is a little over-blown. I think simple marketing capabilities are lacking in most media companies. Who's the target? The programming may be youth-oriented but the advertising is not. It leads to becoming all things for all people. To be really niche you have to be courageous. You have to stick to it. It is easy to lose that courage. Suddenly you see the other guy doing something and you fall prey to the same thing. It is all right for a *Times of India* or a STAR and ZEE to be all things to all people but I can't be."

A case in point for Sinha is Jasubhai Digital Media (JDM), which he took over within days of setting up 9.9. With a claimed circulation of over a lakh for *DIGIT*, he is quite sure he is on the right track. "There are exceptions which prove the rule. We have also got a magazine called *Skoar*, a gaming magazine from JDM, with a small circulation of 10,000-odd. But the issue is not that. The issue is the gamers who come to our expose are an extremely powerful advertising target. We are doing an event in Mumbai in January, and we are expecting a lakh of youngsters to come. Now, monetising a lakh of youngsters is

a positive challenge."

What would he classify as 'learnings' from his long career? "I saw some of these gaps when I was in ABP. Are people doing enough to do something for advertisers?" He feels that nobody is thinking about marketing to advertisers. And though they are dependent on the advertiser, they will focus more on the reader. "When 80 per cent of the revenues are coming from the advertiser, what are you doing for them?" he asks. The other thing he has observed is that the media industry has not attracted the best talent.

A proud Bihari, Sinha grew up in Patna. "I come from a lineage of Hindi authors - my father, grandfather, great grandfather wrote several novels. I feel like a black sheep after the creative talents of my ancestors. My only claim to fame is the fact that I edited my school magazine and published 12 papers in technical journals on my doctoral subject of robotics." A PhD from the University of Pennsylvania, Sinha has worked in McKinsey & Co as a partner and has helped set up the Indian School of Business. His family still

"The media industry has not attracted the best talent."

owns and runs a Hindi literary magazine that his father founded called *Nayi Dhara*, published for the last 58

Is he looking at growth by trying things untried? Is he looking to dislodge existing players? “I personally believe that media brands are difficult to dislodge. Look at the newspapers’ experience. The *Telegraph* Kolkata was the only paper in India that has actually dislodged an incumbent. I feel that there are enough opportunities. As advertisers, readers, viewers, consumers and markets become more sophisticated, people are going to demand things in a more personalised manner. Therefore, niche and targeting will become that much more possible.”

Something like the ‘youth’ segment, which was a

years from Patna. That might explain why this metallurgical engineer has taken the plunge for building a ‘professional media business’.

Sinha has a strong desire to do something for Bihar and create opportunities for people there. On being at the board of ISB he says, “I learnt first-hand what it takes to build a world-class institution from scratch. I doubt if there is a better high of success and achievement I will encounter in this life-time.” Sinha and his wife Gauri like to travel and try out new cuisines. He also likes cooking but lacks time to explore the field. ■

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