

Brands advertising and circulations speaking

By DUVINDI ILLANKOON

For a newspaper, reach is everything. For its message to reach everyone, it's important that it gets across to the largest spectrum of readers. In an ever-changing industry where information is the key currency, every newspaper must work that much harder to stay afloat. When the Sunday Times started out 25 years ago, at least the publication was confident in its niche market, where a newspaper was one of the few means of access to information.

However, within these two and a half decades has arrived the internet. In the age of web news corporations and e-papers, a newspaper's image has become paramount to its success, its ad space is treated with reverence, and circulation must be constantly growing if both the previous are to matter. Here we speak to the men behind the Sunday Times' branding, advertising and circulation; as they explain to us what it takes to make the readers tick.



In charge of Brands: Sujith Pathirannehe



Ad wiz: Samantha Weeraratne



Circulation chief: Rohan Fonseka

Sujith Pathirannehe is the genial smiling face of the Sunday Times. As the Head of Brands for Wijeya Newspapers Ltd, he is tasked with one of the island's best-known brands. It is a responsibility he relishes. "I've been here for about 16 years, and not once has the Sunday Times had any mud slung at it," he says. "We've always been an upmarket publication, and have been fortunate when it came to our management."

Branding for the Times came into existence about eight years ago, and Sujith has been involved since. The Sunday Times brands mainly through event sponsorships; through strategic tie-ins with prestigious events like the Galle Literary Festival, Colombo Fashion Week and partnering with Bata for Schoolboy Cricketer of the Year. We have built up an image of being current and in-the-know, says Sujith.

Sujith remembers the time they collected a large amount of donations to build houses for tsunami affected families, and provide sustainable scholarships for their children. "It's not enough that we just sponsor events and call it a day. We have to engage with our readers, and make a difference as well."

Samantha Weeraratne is the mastermind behind the publication's groundbreaking supplement HitAd. Samantha spearheaded an advertising move that spawned look-alikes in the country's newspaper industry, and as the Assistant General Manager of Advertising for Wijeya Newspapers Ltd, he couldn't be prouder of the leaps and bounds the Times adver-

tising spaces have achieved over the past 25 years.

"It used to be a mighty struggle when it came to classifieds those days," he is first to admit. "There was one English publication that dominated the arena and other newspapers, including ours, found it a struggle to compete. Then in 2005 we came up with the concept for Hit Ad."

And the rest they say is history. Samantha worked day and night to get it off the ground, using contacts of his own to procure advertisements, "even went and took pictures of the vehicles!" he smiles, adding that HitAd was the first classifieds supplement to run pictures of what they advertised. He recalls gratefully the total freedom he was given by WNL's chairman saying that Hit Ad would not have existed without his support. And of course, his

advertisers!

"With the Sunday Times, anybody can advertise," he explains. "Our pricing strategy for these advertisements affords access to everyone. We used to be a newspaper that catered to only a certain

segment, but now we have a wider readership because of our advertising opportunities. There are those who've copied us, but I always say that the Sunday Times will lead, and the others will follow."

Rohan Fonseka is the clearheaded man who heads circulation for the Sunday Times. He is responsible for the copy that reaches you and thousands of other readers every Sunday morning. Rohan is tasked with distributing and selling tens of thousands

of copies of the Sunday Times across the nation, and he knows the enormity of his task. "The distribution route is planned from A-Z," he explains. "We have to ensure that our readers have their copy of the Sunday Times on Sunday morning."

When he started out at the Times, circulation figures were relatively small, he says. They've been steadily climbing since. "A newspaper's readers are loyal to it, and once you've won them over, it's a matter of being reliable."

He remembers challenges they faced with the 2004 tsunami. Unable to locate some distributors, it was difficult to get copies of the paper out to Southern readers, especially at a time when information was crucial. But the Circulation Department rallied, with Rohan personally travelling to the disaster-struck areas and encouraging their distributors to pick up from where they left off.

"People depend on us," Rohan assures. "And we deliver, no matter what gets in our way."



Colombo Fashion Week, a high-profile brand tie-in: The Sunday Times was one of the sponsors



Operation Sunday Times: Lorries carrying the newspaper set to go in all directions in their delivery rounds in the wee hours of Sunday. Pic by Nilan Maligaspe