



Completely Tuned In

MTV began its operations in India when the economy got liberalised in 1993. **Bhakti Chuganee** reports on how it has emerged ahead of the competition with an India-specific strategy.

Think MTV. And the channel conjures up images of sexy video clips and the latest that music has to offer. In India since 1993, MTV's Indian operation, MTV India, has grown to be one of the leading music channels in the country. It took a bit of tweaking its international programming strategy to fit the Indian television audience to get here.

MTV's global strategy has been to reinvent itself in each and every market that it is present in. So, in Italy, the channel airs what the Italians like, and in India its programming caters to what the Indian audience likes, hence making the channel relevant in each country.

"Our DNA is not so much a definition of what we are, but it is the non-definition," says Alex Kuruvilla, managing director, MTV Networks India. "The standard for an

anti-brand is defined by an audience. Our brand personality is that of a 19-year old. A 19-year old is the same everywhere, whether in Japan, Russia, Germany or India. They have the same desires, wants and needs. So, we are a decentralised brand." Kuruvilla, who earlier was with the advertising firm J Walter Thompson, has been with MTV India since its inception just over a decade.

MTV Asia came to India as part of the Hong Kong-based Richard Li-run STAR group with a licensing arrangement for all of Asia. It was being telecast on the STAR transponder. However, after Rupert Murdoch's Newscorp bought over STAR in 1993, MTV moved over to the state-run television channel, Doordarshan, as a branded night slot.

As the national broadcaster, Doordarshan has a leg up on the competition by being telecast on cable via satellite and its own terrestrial networks. MTV's decision to hitch a ride on Doordarshan immediately gave the channel visibility in 27 million homes across the country.

The Doordarshan footprint runs through the entire country with a predominant viewership in the rural areas. But MTV



correctly realised that with its globalised fare, its core audience would be in the more Westernised urban areas. So, the first step was to build MTV as a brand in the cities.

MTV soon discovered that even with this sharply focussed market, there were marketing limitations due to language and ethno-centric considerations. What had been overlooked was that India had a vibrant heritage of music. Besides, its films — which constitute the largest cinema industry in the world — are all song-and-dance musicals and this collection of rhythmic music blares out in all cafes and restaurants virtually non-stop. It is this film music which is the essential soul of the nation.

MTV's early programming in India largely ignored this fact. It comprised of the channel's international programming. Most of the shows were what the channel was showing in its Western markets. Though they may have strong niche audiences in their home regions, they were not necessarily a draw in India.

A programme like the *Headbangers Ball*, essentially a heavy metal show, didn't have much of an audience in India, even in the cities. But, rather than persevere with what they felt the market ought to be seeing, MTV quickly adapted itself to the feedback. That ability — to deliver what the market wants — is the kernel for MTV's success in India.

The first move to bring MTV closer to the Indian audience was initiated in January 1996 when it began using feed

from MTV Asia. Ten months later, in October, MTV launched a separate Indian feed and it soon restricted its international offering to 30 per cent and let homespun Indian programming take over the balance 70 per cent. That ratio continues to this day.

In fact, according to Kuruvilla, "We are net exporters of Indian culture today through syndication of our programmes to the Middle East, Australia and Europe. Our promos and creative expressions are also used a lot in Germany. I call it reverse programming," he says.

MTV's strategy to Indianise its menu has connected with the Indian audience. According to the TAM Peopletre System, which monitors television audiences between the five music channels in the country currently — B4U, Channel V, ETC, ETC Punjabi and MTV — MTV holds a 26 per cent market share with a TV Rating score of 0.07. Channel V, STAR TV's music channel and a close competitor of MTV in the same genre of music programming, holds a 20 per cent market share with a TVR of 0.06.

What has also helped MTV in India is the fact that the MTV India team is of homegrown talent which has the pulse of what the youth need. Its programming is what Kuruvilla calls scientific, and not by design. It is constantly connecting with its viewers through research, which throws up insights regarding programming. Its decision to re-format its programming was the result stemming from such research.



MTV ROADIES: A cult show for the early 20s age group
(Left) **DELIVERING WHAT THE MARKET WANTS:** MTV India CEO, Alex Kuruvilla

MTV India has certainly not shied away from taking decisions based on its research, even if it is not in consonance with the company's ambit elsewhere. One such path-breaking idea was to launch a new show — MTV STYLE — as research revealed that the channel's audience was keen to learn what apparel to wear by watching MTV — if they were not already influenced by it!

So, besides starting MTV STYLE, the channel in April 2000 also launched its own range of branded clothing. This was also branded MTV STYLE and was a joint venture with Jaygee Clothing. Such a product extension into apparel has not been done anywhere else by MTV.

There have been other bold diversifica-

number one cable show in the country at 8 pm with a TVR of 0.49. Why a daily soap? "There's a need to have a balance in programming," says Kuruville.

Co-branding is an activity that the channel has been involved in other parts of the world as well. In countries like Singapore, Australia, Philippines and Indonesia, MTV has co-branded magazines and even mobile phones. The co-branding that MTV India has done with Citibank in India is a first for Citibank in tying up with a music channel. "We realise it's a more developed licensing market here," says Kuruville. "There's a need to be relevant and a need to build it on consumer insights as uniquely expressed in China or India," he adds.

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A FIRST IN SOAP: MTV India's *Kitni Mast Hai Zindagi*

tions unique to the Indian experience. The channel has ventured into other areas, such as a daily Hindi soap on prime time television, and it even has a co-branded card with Citibank. Hence, the channel's revenue stream is diversified. However, subscriptions — the channel became a pay channel in May 2004 — and advertising still bring in a major chunk of revenues.

These other revenue streams are proving to be quite successful. The daily soap, *Kitni Mast hai Zindagi* (It's a beautiful life) is the first time that MTV has ventured into a daily soap anywhere in the world. In the few months since its launch, the show is already being ranked as the

That MTV as a brand has been successful in India is evidenced by the phrase 'MTV generation', which has crept into parlance to describe the current generation. And endorsing its success is Jagdeep Kapoor, CMD of Mumbai-based Samsika Marketing Consultants. According to him, MTV has done three things right in the Indian market. "One, as a brand, MTV has an earnest desire to appeal to the Indian audience. Second, their entire packaging, look and feel connects with the Indian consumer. Indians are, by nature, bilingual, and so is the channel with a mix of English and Hindi languages. Even their shows, such as *Fully Faltoo* (Totally Useless) and *MTV Bakra* (MTV Fool) are names that an

Indian audience can connect with. And they have made it an aspirational channel. It is the trendy, young aspirational people who watch it," says Kapoor.

MTV India's success has been in Indianising its global content and, according to Kuruville, the myth of the past — that there is no point of convergence between the West and India in entertainment — has now been shattered. TV shows, such as the popular US show *The Millionaire*, the Colombian TV show *Ya Soy Betty La Sea* (The story of Betty the ugly one), and the US show, *American Idol*, have been successfully adapted to the Indian audience. "This shows that the international format travels well in India," says Kuruville.

MTV too has taken that route of adaptation. Its international show 'Road Rules', has been adapted to the local Indian market as 'MTV Roadies'. The show has a TVR of 0.28 and has turned out to be a cult show for the early 20s age group.

MTV's annual music awards, such as the Video Music Awards in the US, has been adapted and called the IMMIES, Indian Music Excellence Awards.

The Indian urban market itself is a divide. The Hindi speaking north is a very different market from that of southern India. After focussing on the northern markets, Kuruville has his next challenge cut out: the urban markets of the south. "In Europe, there are many channels catering to ethnic groups. So we'll look at it," he says.

Can we expect an MTV South India then? Kuruville is not telling....