

Giri 'Pickbrain' Balasubramaniam has turned an otherwise dull exercise of quizzing into an exciting business venture.



ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS!

How quizzing led to this company's grand success.

BY RUCHIRA MITTAL.

When young Giri Balasubramaniam decided to quit a promising career to strike out on his own, he had no knowledge of business. Nor did he care much. He was going to be in the business of knowledge.

Balasubramaniam, affectionately called Pickbrain, founded Greycaps India Pvt Limited in Bengaluru in 1999. It is now the country's second largest quiz company. The human brain cannot resist the response to a question, it goes into overdrive, scanning the grey

cells for the answer. If the search is futile, the brain initiates the process of seeking knowledge to fill the gap. Giri says he knows curiosity is the strongest driver in the knowledge quest and that is what he harnesses.

He told India Now: "Greycaps began as the translation of a passion. When we were quizzing in our college days in the late eighties and early nineties we found that quizzing needed the infusion of fresh blood and ideas. For the audience, quizzing was also very difficult. There were two kinds of attendees—those who had read up, and those who did not

even understand the questions, leave alone know the answers. People found quizzes for the brainy, not for entertainment. Perhaps because in that era quizzing was largely confined to statistical data—remembering dates and numbers, per capita income, growth, production data etc.” Therefore, he set out to make quizzing entertaining, easier and more widely sought and enjoyed. “This was the principal, fundamental question we asked: if it becomes entertaining, is it going to attract more people?”

Soon, Giri and some of his classmates began developing such quizzes. These quizzes, said Giri, “were not recall based but more awareness based. They were about what is happening around you.” Giri worked for The Economic Times and Walt Disney before launching Greycaps. Author of several quiz books, he has also devised the Global Awareness Programme, an engaging learning system for school children. More than 25,000 children are part of this programme. Giri and his team have presented more than 1,000 shows in India, Sri Lanka, Oman, Singapore, London and USA.

Greycaps holds the distinction of having held India’s biggest business quiz—for Tata Sons in 2004. Called Tata Crucible—the quiz formed part of the centenary celebrations of the Tatas, and has now become an annual event. The guru of lateral thinking, the legendary physician-author Dr. Edward De Bono witnessed the national final of Tata Crucible. Edward de Bono, 78, originated the term lateral thinking and authored the best selling book Six Thinking Hats.

Greycaps has also held the world’s biggest IT quiz. In association the government of the state of Karnataka and IT giant Tata Consultancy Services, Greycaps created what would soon be recognised by the Guinness Book as the world’s biggest IT quiz. Created for school children, the quiz attracts more than 1.3 million participants each year. Giri says Greycaps empowers close to 2 million people each year with knowledge transfer. These can be through

their hugely popular quizzes, books, CDs, school and college programmes, web-based games and training programmes. It is with an air of satisfaction that Giri says: “It’s been more than a decade since we started this. I quit Walt Disney against the advice of my well wishers, but I followed my heart. Some of my colleagues also quit plum jobs to join me.”

The lineup is not only impressive but inspired, too. S. Nagarajan, director, Greycaps is former quality consultant from the US\$ 68 billion global industrial giant MICO Bosch. Sourish Ghosh quit international management consulting company Accenture to join Greycaps as head of business strategy.

The timing was perfect, said Giri. “India was experiencing huge economic growth and everyone wanted to know what was happening with India in the present. History was important, no doubt, but so were Narayan Muthy, Infosys, Microsoft, Vinod Khosla, Har-gobind Khurana, S Chandrasekhar, Kalpana Chawla and so many more contemporary Indians. People had to know about them and quizzes were a wonderful medium to do that.” Using their

mantra of entertaining education, Giri and his friends created some very engaging platforms. Ever since its inception, the company has consciously functioned as a self sustained business enterprise, having travelled this far without the support of venture capital.

“The core strength of our business lies in the fact that we have generated revenues out of the business to foster growth. We were financially sustainable even when we started,” says Giri. The programmes Greycaps introduces to schools and colleges are subscription based with each student paying an annual fee. Corporations prefer contracts with defined annual growth in revenue. Greycaps also customises its programmes for clients such as Infosys,

which are billed according to reach and man power involved. The young company has annual partnerships and contracts with the some of the top Indian companies, namely the Tatas, Infosys, AV Birla Group, Cognizant, Economic Times, Anand Bazar Patrika.

Greycaps also publishes books and research material, another clear and emerging revenue stream for the company. The surging demand for knowledge in transmedia - from publications to on-stage programmes to television, the Internet and hand held devices, says Giri. Greycaps has launched programmes and publications in many local languages and is also present in smaller towns like Dehradun, Jamshed-pur, Cochin and Baroda, says Giri.

“We have discovered that knowledge has a lot of takers if presented properly. That is the key. We started positioning ourselves as an adjunct to education, adding value to existing methodologies. This got us a foot in the door with very little resistance. We would rather focus on increasing the radius of knowledge than breach the radius and say we can explain the circumference better than you can.” Giri said his is a knowledge

company and research is its backbone. “Researchers pore over information. The technical team prepares the format and presentation aspects of the show. This is a client specific job. Many big corporations like the Tatas or Infosys might not need any glitz but will not compromise on the finesse of the show, focussing only on the core values of the quiz.” On the other hand, schools may

need those very things to add to the fun element. Greycaps hires international consultants for international clients, to add local flavour and build a better connect. “Quizzing has been my passion,” says Giri, “and I have been able to turn it into my business. I think nothing can be more satisfying.”

We agree! ■

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