

The Print Philosopher

Mehul A Desai is a left-handed batsman, who relishes Swedish crime authors. Today MOS is a print antechamber to the world. In a chat with Ramu Ramanathan, he highlights the exhilarating journey of his six-and-half year old press.

Ramu Ramanathan (RR) Your 27,000 sqft brand-new unit is an eye-opener.

Mehul Desai (MD) Thank you.

RR You have addressed the incompatibility issues which exist between database management and printing.

MD We do our offset printing work in advance. For example, if we have a print-run of 50,000, we print the letters, envelopes, reply envelopes and fliers. The whole pack is readied and kept in store. The database is sent, which may be 15,000 names. We pull out the element that needs to be digitally printed. We do variable printing and send it for letter shopping. Then another lot of data comes in. Basically, since the offset inventory is ready, the turnaround time is faster.

RR What impressed me is, the one way traffic for material movement. There is no criss-cross movement.

MD We worked a lot to achieve the desired workflow. We got the architect, Ashok Wadhvani, to visit a few presses before designing the project. Also, he visited the Heidelberg Print Academy in Chennai. That's how we created this plant.

RR You've invested in offset after you built your reputation on a fleet of digital presses. A mystifying decision?

MD It is backward integration. There are two reasons for investing in offset. I service clients who are based in Western Europe and North America. They are part of a niche industry; mainly the direct mail industry, for people who use mail to acquire new customers. They need a service provider who is reliable, because if the mail does not reach the addressee on time, the project can be jeopardised. So they are very cautious about shifting work from their existing vendors.

RR When you ventured into mail order in 2000, you did not have any digital equipment nor infrastructure ...

MD It was a one-man show. I managed the operation. I worked with a lot of names in the print business who supplemented their offset with VDP. I did not get the service nor quality I was seeking. As the volume started to grow, I realised I was losing clients because I could not adhere to the



"MOS achieves 60% reduction in production time and job turnaround improvements of 200%"

timeline. So I sought smaller units in Lower Parel, and we struck a deal.

RR You went along and understood the client's requirement?

MD We kept building processes, which helped me to achieve and compete with machine-finished international products. For example, consider outer covers. Even if customers see a bit of glue jutting out, they reject the envelope. Gradually I recruited people who were production experts. We worked with vendors, introduced systems and processes, which helped us achieve the quality levels. Importantly, our timelines improved. We started to grow so did our partner printers (vendors). Over a period of time, we developed six main vendors. Last year, some of them accrued a business of Rs 14-crore from MOS.

RR You did a market study. What were your findings?

MD Yes, the good thing that emerged was: this expansion will improve MOS' profile in terms of services we offer. Getting the work done in-house will impact my profitability and improve the turnaround time. We re-examined our export model and felt we should look at the domestic market. In this, our offset and post-press expansion will play a role in positioning MOS as a partner for print requirements.

RR Meaning ...

MD We never targeted the traditional run-of-the-mill client who prints stationery or visiting cards. Instead we have targeted clients who give us regular business, every month, month on month. This could be sales collateral, direct mailers. However, the stumbling block was lack of infrastructure, which led to longer turnaround time.

RR Any concern that your new kit will remain idle?

MD Since installation, the presses have been running three shifts. The same is the case with the Kodak platesetter.

RR And investment in people? You've a very young team.

MD Yes, after all there's only so much money you can throw to find a solution. Ultimately it has to be people driven. I am blessed that I have a very supportive family and a good team. My sister Dharti Desai, is a great support to me – and I rely a lot on her. My team is dedicated and hard working. It is because of my team that MOS has grown and continues to grow. As we kept growing we kept adding people, and bolstering the team. All those who joined the company five years ago, are heading different operations.

RR Plus they play cricket. That's handy.

MD Yes, we have a cricket team. We participate in a lot of corporate tournaments. We have reached the quarters and semis. We hope to grab a trophy next year.

RR You've an unusual background for a print owner of a Rs 55-crore company? What with jobs with P&G, Xerox, Real Value Appliances (the maker of cease-fire fire extinguishers) and then Atlaz Digital (a telecom company) in 1997.

MD The setting up of Regency Direct Marketing in 1997 was interesting. Except for my last two stints at Real Value and Atlaz where I headed the marketing team, I have been a salesman. My sister, Dharti who was based in the USA, was a copywriter for a direct marketing firm. She mooted the idea of direct marketing. In the USA, billing statement inserts, is a big thing. In India nobody seemed to be doing it in spite of million users of credit cards and mobiles.



Mehul Desai: "You do not make a cake for the sake of replicating a recipe. You make your own cake, using ideas from others to improve it. I believe, we humans are not photocopiers."

RR Were the banks in India convinced with your concept?

MD I did the rounds of international banks with the belief that they would be more receptive. Unfortunately they were not very keen. After a lot of running around and meetings, one of them considered our proposal. But then we did not have any advertiser who was keen. So we tried to test my sister's program – a leather cheque book wallet. We took up the investment as we felt that the price point was good. We located a vendor who would produce the wallet and got the bank to test the project with a run of 25,000. The response was fabulous. No one – including the bank – could believe it. The tables were turned. We were able to roll out bigger campaigns and the advertisers started coming in.

RR So, you learnt from the repetitions, on the job?

MD I came in contact with direct marketing companies who used mail to acquire new customers and also service existing customers through bulk mailing. In 2001, the stumbling block was, there was lots of work but nobody wanted a mere printer. They wanted the printer to distribute the mailers and provide services like data checks, creative, etc. After a few pilot runs, we started Mail Order Solutions.

RR Today, you've an impressive list of postal tie-ups. Swiss Post, Royal Mail, La Post in France, Deutsche Post in Germany, USPS in USA.

MD We eyed the international postal entities directly. We became a licensed letter shop for Royal Mail and we underwent a rigorous accreditation process. We enrolled and got empanelled. Later, we invested in softwares which is mandatory for working with postal entities. Our relationship with Swiss Post led us to being appointed the exclusive

sales agency for India. Today we sell Swiss Post products in India and this has been a wonderful relationship and it is growing.

RR It seems MOS is not merely about printing a mailer.

MD True. Our investment in software and capability and training the manpower, has given us an edge. If the customer wants to develop a concept or revamp an existing idea, MOS has an in-house creative and design team which can fulfil that requirement. Starting from delivering to the address, all the processes that are involved including printing, variable data printing, post-press and logistics required for the job is done by MOS, in-house. That's our USP.

RR How clean is the data sent by these agencies?

MD International organisations spend a huge amount of money on their data. It is their single largest expense. Once the data is obtained, it's given to the bureau for de-duplication and merge-purge. We receive files in perfect condition.

RR You've a small customer base. Is this adequate?

MD We have fewer clients so that we can provide better servicing, rather than a huge number of clients. We handle the subscription mailing for *The Economist*. We have Direxions, a large-sized agency, as well as Datamatics.

RR MOS has lots of ideas bound together by beliefs ...

MD For us, each and every aspect of our service is critical. You do not make a cake for the sake of replicating a recipe. You make your own cake, using ideas from others to improve it. I believe, we humans are not photocopiers. ■

"MOS closed 2009-10 at Rs 55-cr. For 2010-11, MOS is targeting Rs 64-cr; and for 2011-12, it is Rs 79-cr"