

Masterstroke Interview with Ashwani Singla Founding Managing Partner at Astrum

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Real People, Real Stories SHARED in a Real Way is the future of Public Relations. Understanding the drivers to human emotions & creating a compelling narrative is where science will provide the edge to creativity, opines **Mr. Ashwani Singla, Founding Managing Partner at Astrum.** He has over two decades of rich experience in the communications industry and has founded India's first specialist reputation management advisory that uses science to understand and shape public opinion. In an exclusive interview with Richa Seth, he talks about Astrum, his experiences and his views on the future of PR industry, please read on the interview below.

1. After being in the leadership roles at Penn Schoen, Genesis Burson-Marsteller, what was your motivation to start Astrum?

Over the years, engaging clients across a spectrum of corporations and political parties convinced me that traditional public relations would need to evolve to science based reputation management if it was to truly find its place inside the board room. Traditional approach had its successes but far and few between. We needed a “Blue Ocean” approach where understanding and shaping public opinion through science and persuasive communication is at the heart of everything we do.

However, this approach needs multi-disciplinary talent at the intersection of research, digital, rich media content and communication to shape opinions in a legitimate and an ethical way. New talent pool needed to be blended with the existing ones. A new beginning had to be made to break the mold.

I also felt, that the large network approach to talent development and growth was out of step with today and often missing the big picture. The rules have changed and new generation workforce, wants to co-create their future. We need to adapt to this new reality quickly to attract and retain the best talent.

Another important consideration was that PR didn't find a place in the board room and given the absolute criticality of reputation as a factor in business leadership, clients needed an advisory that could work in the C Suite.

So the best way to give shape to my dreams was as they was "to put your money where your mouth is."

2. What does the name 'Astrum' stand for? How has the journey been so far and what has the response been so far for your services, the team strength, what is the geographic presence of the company currently, the client base as on date?

Astrum in Latin means the brightest star in its constellation and the purpose of each Astrum professional is to help our client be that star. A simple idea of helping our client be the 'first amongst equals'.

I have always believed in building robust institutions that thrive across generations. So Astrum has commenced its journey with the same goal.

We launched in May this year and in the last few months have established a state-of-art full service office in Gurgaon and a growing presence in Mumbai. We hope to inaugurate our Mumbai office soon. We also have a dedicated affiliate presence in over 60 plus cities across the nation. Not stringers.

We have a fully operational cloud-based infrastructure that allows us to work for our clients anywhere-anytime across multiple devices: notebook, tab or a smartphone making our counselors responsive and agile to the needs of our clients. We have built our technology to assure our clients of continuity and consistency in the work we do for them.

We never name our clients due to reasons of client confidentiality, however, I can confirm that clients and prospects have welcomed the approach, as they see a combination of intellectual bandwidth driving strategic thinking with competent professionals delivering high caliber work in-step with their needs today.

With the confidence of our clients with us, the fast growing team of Astrum team combines dynamic young professionals and senior leaders. The proof of the pudding is that our cross functional teams across the disciplines of insights, digital, branding, communications and measurement are working seamlessly in developing and delivering holistic reputation management campaigns. That is the Astrum Way at work already.

We have a refreshing approach to our talent development with accent on learning and growth and an egalitarian and inclusive culture. We are investing in building an empowered

organization where learning fuels results and growth. All benefits apply equally to all and not driven by designations. For e.g. the medical cover for my office assistant and me is of the same value and for the same hospitals. No annual appraisals, self approval for leave, travel and expenses, 360-degree feedback for development and multi-channel learning, online, on-the-job and classroom, amongst the things we are focused on. These are already in-place and in-use. We have achieved much in a very short time because of the caliber of the team that I am blessed to have them. They are passionate about what they do.

3. With the PR industry increasingly becoming specialized, do you see India Inc. willing to pay for such niche consultancy?

Actually on the contrary, Astrum is a specialist and not a “niche” advisory. Reputation is today central to leadership whether corporate or political. Clients are looking for an advisory that can work seamlessly with them co-create a strategy that protects and drives reputation. We help clients answer some very fundamental questions:

Who do we need to “win”?

What drives their consideration?

What do we need to do to lead?

What do we say to stand apart?

What is the best way to engage?

Driven by insights, the campaigns we are developing tend to be holistic and more effective. So, you can see our focus is to offer a comprehensive solution to our clients to be the first amongst equals. Clients will gladly pay when they value and results.

4. Please can you share details of the campaign executed for BJP during the 2014 General Elections or any one of interesting works done by the Astrum team?

The work we do is confidential to our clients and we would never talk about it. The work that I did for the BJP as the campaign strategist for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections was prior to founding Astrum. We are currently engaged with several clients across NCR and Mumbai. For example, we are helping a client recast their corporate brand including re-design of the corporate identity; to another, we are helping establish a corporate thought leadership strategy, all driven by insights and data.

5. Do you have start-ups seeking counselling & advice and moreover are they willing to pay for it?

I have worked with several start-up and also invested in a few besides sitting on their advisory boards. As any solid professional, they are hungry for good advice that fuels their business growth and interest in their idea. Money is a function of value and delivery and with the funding coming in liberally, “money for value” drives the consideration.

6. What are the future plans for Astrum?

We are focused on delivering what we promise. As long as we continue to do so, rest will follow. What is really exciting for me is that we are investing today in developing the quality of talent that will not only allow us to deliver our promise but also form the kernel of the future leadership of Astrum.

We plan to launch T.A.R.A (The Astrum Reputation Academy) in early 2016 with the focus on developing our in-house talent and a nine-month campus apprenticeship programme christened The Astrum Young Leaders Development Programme (AYLDP). Great talent will produce great work. That is my belief.

7. Being a part of the communications industry for over two decades now, how do you see the PR industry shaping up?

Wow. Time has flown and this July I completed two decades in the industry! I am delighted to see it evolve from a nascent to a more mature industry. At Genesis, we led the way in making PR more organized, professional and Strategic. I can say that is true for the industry in general today. The coming of the global firms has brought best practices, international exposure and new thinking to the table, leaving very little choose one from the other.

Having said that, I believe the future will be ideas driven through mobile and digital platforms where medium could also become the message. Real People, Real Stories SHARED in a Real Way is the future of Public Relations. Understanding the drivers to human emotions & creating a compelling narrative is where science will provide the edge to creativity. This year, I saw a glimpse of the future during the judging the Cannes Entries as jury member.

In India, LTE will bring both data and device disruption rapidly and those who (clients and consultancies included) are not prepared for it will be marginalized. Talent development continues to be an area of concern for me, both organizations and professionals need to invest in continuing education to sharpen their skills to stay in the game. We will need to bridge the gap between the talk and the walk.

8.If you were to hire budding communications professionals, what would be the key attributes/qualities that you will be looking for?

Besides the technical skills that we may specifically look for, this is what we generally look for in an Astrum Counsellor

- You are deeply committed to a career in reputation management
- You are able to synthesis complex problems into clear understanding
- You can write great copy in English and you are good public speaker
- You challenge the conventional and are entrepreneurial in getting things done
- You pay great attention to detail
- You are always hungry to learn and forever in pursuit of excellence
- You always put your team ahead of yourself
- You are apolitical and set the bar high in professional conduct and ethics

You are not afraid of working with smarter and sharper colleagues
You are not clock watcher and you can easily multi-task
You work comfortably in a high-tech and a high-touch environment
You are self-assured and do not fear failure
You always speak your mind while respecting the views of others
You are multi-faceted and pursue your passions beyond work
You celebrate diversity in age, gender, faith and culture

9. Anything else that you would like to share with us?

Thank you for the opportunity to invite me to share my views with the readers of Wikipedia. I wish Vikram and the team best of luck. Forum such as this, encourage discussion and debate and add to the body of knowledge in public relations which is the need of the hour.