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“In today's world, where we live online 24X7, reputations are more vulnerable. Everything is discoverable and every one is a citizen journalist. It is a world where, geo-politics makes the policy maker look inwards while technology makes the world borderless.”

[Ashwani Singla](#), Founding Managing Partner of Astrum firmly believes that entrepreneurship is about converting your passion into your professional pursuit. Tracing two decades of his experience in the business, he played out roles as a trusted advisor and strategist for both the C-Suite, political leaders and also advised both Indian and multinational corporations across sectors. As an election campaign strategist and pollster for leading national and regional political parties, he was involved in several successful national and state election campaigns for almost a decade.

Prior to founding Astrum, Ashwani was the CEO & Co-Promoter of Genesis Burson-Marsteller and Asia MD of Penn Schoen Berland (PSB). He is also the Founder Executive Director of Impact Research & Measurement, India's leader in media intelligence & measurement and serves on several advisory boards of companies in early stages of their corporate life, mentoring them to build their marketing and branding capabilities.

Here he talks about how entrepreneurship beckoned him, the challenges faced, the 'moment of truth' for companies, his contribution to PR and more...

RT: What motivated you to become an entrepreneur and launch your corporate reputation consultancy – Astrum Management Advisory?

My involvement with Impact Research & Measurement and Genesis Burson-Marsteller (now BCW) as a significant shareholder and Board member established a firm need in my head – for insight and empirical evidence-driven public relations to have a seat on the C Suite table. And, as corporate reputation becomes increasingly vulnerable, we need specialists who focus only on [reputation management](#). What better than 'putting your money, where your mouth is'. Astrum was my answer, "India's first specialist, science-based [reputation management advisory](#)."

RT: What are the challenges you face as an entrepreneur?

Entrepreneurship is about converting your passion into your professional pursuit. So, the most important thing is to not allow your faith to waver while continuing to demonstrate the value of a path less taken. Balance this with the ability to adapt quickly to the changing market dynamics and feedback.

The traditional challenges of Capital and Talent no longer hold true. Good ideas attract both.

RT: What would you consider as your contribution to the world of Public Relations, while you were at Genesis?

At Genesis, we pioneered the professionalisation of the conduct of a public relations programme by making it more strategic, insights driven and introduced measurement through analytics. This was made possible by investment in developing talent who had the capability to deliver this game-changing transformation.

The "Associate Learning Programme (ALP)" that I established created a generation of blue-blooded public relations professional who are valued not only in India but across the globe today. We combined this with a disciplined approach to planning and executing public relations campaign and our clients benefitted from it. Genesis hence, led the PR 2.0 journey for India and it grew from its struggles to become best and the most successful public relations firm. I was privileged to have led a team of talented professionals whilst I was at its helm for over a decade and a half (1998-2010).

RT: As former CEO of Penn Schoen Berland for India and Asia, what were your learnings about research and polling in the sub-continent?

The biggest challenge that faces the Market Research Industry in India is the quality of data collection, i.e. respondent and response veracity. This was the one thing that we focussed on through the use of technology and investment in data collection quality.

The second challenge was that research was mostly about data, very little focus on insights and hence MR was commoditised. We kept our focus sharp as a consulting firm that uses research to inform communication decisions. Hence as a consulting firm, our clients were happy to pay the premium to help them find answers to their most significant communication challenges. This allowed us to invest in improving data collection. Our biggest differentiator was that clients trusted our advice because it was based on sound insights and expertise.

RT: How has Public Relations evolved over the last two decades that you have been part of it?

Whilst many claim that Public Relations has evolved over the years, in my conversations with Practitioners and Buyers of Public Relations services, I have seen little evidence of it. While I see the scope widening to include policy, digital, amongst others and a wider prevalence of use of technology – it's limited to no greater than 15-20% of the business. The single most important currency in the India Public Relations space continues to be press coverage of some sorts.

I see AI led tools making a large part of the front line talent redundant over the next 3-5 years and yet see only limited investments in talent development to lead the public relations in the new world.

RT: You had once said that “Reputation is all about managing that ‘moment of truth’ when the customer comes into contact with the brand”. Can you explain this?

Moment of Truth is defined by the former CEO of SAS Airline, “as an interaction/moment when a customer comes in contact with a company and has an opportunity to form an impression about that company”.

When companies manage these moments of truth well, customers form a good impression, as a result company earns their loyalty and business. Extending the same principle for other stakeholders, i.e. employees, business partners, others; good reputation is earned. So at the heart of good reputation is ‘good deeds; good words’.

RT: What, in your opinion will be the future of the Public Relations business?

Reputations are more vulnerable than ever before in a naked world where we live online 24X7; where everything is discoverable and every one is a citizen journalist. A world where, geopolitics makes policy maker look inwards while the technology makes the world borderless.

Companies will need good counsel to help navigate this complex reputational landscape. I do believe good Public Relations will be key to a companies sustained competitive standing. But, for this the Public Relations profession in India will need to move beyond being mere ‘know who’ driven to being ‘know how’ driven.

RT: How do you spend your leisure time?

I am a passionate club golfer and a HOG so time on the road and the golf course with friends. Weekends with family, food travel and music. I would love to read a bit more.

RT: What advice would you give to youngsters, who are aspiring to join the world Public Relations?

Don't join the profession because you love meeting people and heard about the razzmatazz of Public Relations. This is a serious and demanding profession.

Join only, if you are passionate about both, the science and art of persuasion and can be life-long learner who wants to be a practitioner, like a doctor or a lawyer. Invest in acquiring the right know-how you need to succeed.