

The Image of Goodness

*He may have been business-savvy at 13, started his first venture at 18, running the site with one of the world's largest collection of Indian images and won the Star Youth Achiever Award. **Sandeep Maheshwari, the CEO of Imagesbazaar.com, however, wants to be known more for helping others than for being a successful entrepreneur.***

Let's start with your background. What is it that made you take the entrepreneurial path?

I think it was quite natural for me to go down this path. For me, it was all very spontaneous, not thought through or planned at all. In fact, that is how I have always been. When I was 13, I used to get limited pocket money. My father had given me a scooter and I used to rent it out to my friends on a per-hour basis. In this way I would manage to earn between Rs 1500-2000 a month.

What were some of your early ventures?

I ran eight to ten businesses in the first few years after 12th. I started a helpline for students in 10+2, where I tied up with institutions and got a percentage fee if students joined through me. Then I started out with Amway and multi-level marketing. After some time, I realised I should start my own multi-level marketing company. At that time, I was just 18. I made liquid soap and sold it to my friends, family and acquaintances. After that I went into event management, then modelling, then acting and then photography. Then I left photography and went into Japan Life, another multi-level marketing firm, where I did quite well. At 20 I was earning Rs 1 lakh a month. Then I started another multi-level marketing company in partnership with three other people and this also did very well. Once that also shut down, due to personal issues, I started out as a network-marketing consultant. That is when I wrote a book. It is the only book in the world that opens from right to left. But it didn't work out as planned and I had to self-publish it. That's when I went back to photography.

When and how did this all culminate into the stable, successful business you now have?

I think my turning point was when I created the world record in photography. In the beginning, I was doing everything—besides taking photographs, I would attend the model's calls, counsel them, prepare the portfolios, get the prints done and so on. This would mean that I was constantly out of time. Then I wondered, what if I could manage my time so that all my jobs are slotted? If I do 20 portfolio shoots in a month, I could do 4-5 of them at one go and leave the rest of the week to attend to other things. If I could do four to five portfolios in a day, I could also do fifty. With this thought I approached the



Sandeep Maheshwari

Limca Book of Records, which set some conditions. When it finally happened, I clicked more than 10,000 shots with 122 models in less than 10:45 hours—the target was 12 hours.

There was another reason why this happened. At that time I didn't have enough money to hire so many models. I used to charge Rs 3,000 for every portfolio. Even at that price there would be many who could not afford it and go away. I called up those people and told them I would create their portfolio for Rs 500. All of them registered and during the world record, I created their portfolio. I got around Rs 50-60,000 from these 122 models, which I invested in creating the world record.

Why was Mash Audio Visuals started?

It started with ModelsGuru.com. I had started the website with a view to help those models who hadn't got any work. We would create portfolios for several aspiring models and then send them over to the advertising agencies, but ultimately only the professional models would get picked up again and again, leaving the newer ones without work. I would often feel bad and almost guilty when these models would call up

and ask if there was any work for them. So then I decided to shut down that business and to set up Imagesbazaar.com as a platform to give exposure to freshers.

When I did some research, I found out that there was actually a big market for this—US\$ 1.5 billion worth. I was convinced that this was going to be the next big thing. I used up all my savings and even borrowed from friends and relatives and spent a year building Imagesbazaar.com.

What were some of the challenges you faced?

One of the biggest challenges we faced was soon after we launched Imagesbazaar.com in 2006. The first few months sales were really low, while the expenses were quite high. The site used to be down for days, weeks, sometimes even a month. I would be swinging between the technical people and the server managers, and meanwhile, since the site would be down, there would be no sales. Then I decided I had enough and started learning the programming languages myself and things improved considerably.

When did you first realise that Imagesbazaar.com was going to be a success?

For the first six months, the business didn't take off at all due to all the technical and other problems. Even marketing exercises, like sending electronic mailers, were futile because the site would be down.

The turning point, I think, came eight months later, when we re-launched the site after fixing the glitches. We sent out mailers and sample CDs to all the registered as well as potential users. We also advertised in Brand Reporter, Impact, Afaqs, Exchange4Media and similar magazines.

What was the reason for the launch of ShotIndia.com?

Imagesbazaar has high-end, creative images taken by the best of photographers, using huge set-ups and teams. ShotIndia.com is more of a platform for aspiring photographers. The idea is to get more and more of them to upload their pictures on to the site. The site was launched six months back and it already has shots taken by more than 4500 photographers. It is user-generated content and once the picture gets uploaded, if someone buys it, they get 50 percent of the cost of the picture. If I were to put it simply, if Imagesbazaar is for the classes, ShotIndia is for the masses.

What's in store for the future, for your business and for you as an entrepreneur?

There are a lot of things happening in Imagesbazaar. It now stands on its own feet. There are systems and processes in place. So the next step for Imagesbazaar is more on the content side. So far we have only stock images, but in the future, we want to include stock videos as well, to be used by anyone—Bollywood movie or TV commercial. We will also add 3D



Popular print campaigns that have used stock images from Imagesbazaar.com

graphics, animations and basically anything to do with digital content. In, say, five years from now, I want Imagesbazaar to be the world's largest platform for Indian digital content.

At the personal level, the overriding motivation for me remains the same—to help people and share the fruits of my success with them. I am also writing a book on my experiences. And the tagline of that is what I believe in—"If you have more than you need, share it with those who need it the most." Because of my success, there are two things that I have more than what I need—one is, of course, money, which I will continue to share with the community in many different ways. The second thing I have is knowledge. So the next role I want to take up is that of a mentor, a motivator and a public speaker. All this is again so that I can help aspiring entrepreneurs understand the secrets of running a successful business.

I genuinely feel there is a need for someone to come forward and say that there are things beyond money. Right now everybody in any profession or business is only thinking about making money. There are things above and beyond money and once you have made enough for your needs, go out and help others, because they need you. ■