



GREAT ASPIRATIONS

Gaurav Sinha, director of branding agency Insignia, tells Alicia Buller how aspirations and value-for-money will keep the rich spending on travel

Gaurav Sinha is perched at a large bare-wood banqueting table. Is this the same dining table he says he started his branding firm Insignia from just seven years ago? Judging by the firm's recent annual turnover of US\$8m and the room's striking agency-chic furniture, it's unlikely.

By the table is a giant "to-do" list that's been ostentatiously clipped onto a wooden easel. Neat scribbles reveal an extensive roster of company errands. But most striking of all is the caliber of clients on the list.

The luxury travel and lifestyle brand communication agency is brushing shoulders with and providing services for some of the UAE's biggest travel hitters: think Jumeriah, Emirates, Fairmont and Dnata Group.

So how does a company of just 30 people clinch brands that would be the envy of much bigger agencies?

"It's not been easy. It's taken us a long time to get where we are," says Sinha, managing director of Dubai-based Insignia. "We were dreading last year but survived it without having to fire anyone. But the market is still very flat and we're doing one third more work for one third less."

The former regional head of marketing for Hilton says his firm's hyper-focus on luxury travel and lifestyle branding has held it in good stead.

Last year the company cemented its association with the travel industry by joining up with ABTA, the UK's largest travel association. This membership

is the first of its kind in the region and reflects a growing need for firms to specialise within key sectors.

"Companies that survive a recession will be those that have focus and specialist value-add. Last year separated the men from the boys. We survived it. In seven years we've grown from around US\$0.5m turnover to US\$8m. Insignia has never been about size, it's more about quality and strategic accuracy," Sinha says.

Insignia has clearly found, and clung onto, a space in the market by honing a specialist skill and offering a full-service branding agency around it.

"We are experience-enrichment capitalists – that's what we do. In this industry it's important to create a niche and remain there. When you try to be all things to all people, there's a threat of becoming nothing to anyone. But there is a paradox because we do offer full service solution. Digital, eptymology and branding – you have to bring those skills in."

With his larger-than-life energy and a clear passion for getting marketing right, it's easy to see how Sinha

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built his company from scratch.

In the capricious and competitive world of travel branding, attention to detail is what makes all the difference. Now, more than ever, travel companies are looking for knowledge that can keep their well-heeled customers spending.

"The rich are still spending but [the recession] amplifies the need for value. Being rich doesn't mean being stupid. Brands need to continue developing to meet those aspirational needs, to make people spend money. Everyone wants a little bit more, for a little bit less," he says.

Sinha adds that travel branding is a different beast to general branding because an actual experience is being sold – not just a product on a shelf. Selling an experience demands multiple customer touch-points along the way.

"You have to articulate the creative strategy along the entire people chain to ensure that the luxury culture is clearly understood and promoted to the target audience. Insignia comes on board as the voice for the customer... to enrich that brand experience and create memorable moments of truth," he says.

"Moments of truth" is advertising speak for a damned good time and an exceptional experience. Insignia advises local travel brands on how to provide unique and compelling competitive advantages and communicate them to their target audience effectively, whether it's luxurious bathrobes, sumptuous linen or fine wines, it always comes down to service and effectively delivering

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the promised "message".

"You need to communicate the essence of what your brand brings to market. You need consistency in your language style and visual language.

"Messaging should be consistent all the way through, whether the customer is on the telephone or reading an advert – it's important all touch-points are consistent. It's not easy, but if it were, we'd be out of a

BIO IN BRIEF

- Gaurav Sinha is the founder and managing director of Insignia, a Dubai-based branding and brand communication agency. A thought leader in the luxury, travel and lifestyle marketing sector, Gaurav has been working in the Middle East for the past 17 years.
- After a decade of working within the advertising sector ending with a stint at global advertising giant Lowe, he moved client side and was the marketing manager for Hilton International for the Arabian Peninsula.
- A full service agency, Insignia lists clients such as Emirates Hotels & Resorts, Jumeirah Group, Fairmont Hotels, Emaar Healthcare, Emaar Hospitality and Dnata Group.
- In his spare time, Gaurav is a member of the Luxury Marketing Council, an active blogger and is currently working on his first book.

job.”

While the downturn does not necessarily equate to changing branding strategy, it does amplify the need to get back to basics: that’s taking care of the customers and retaining them.

“It’s how you define value. It comes back to enriching the experience, it’s not about value by price points. It’s about getting more for the same money you were expecting anyway.

“It’s about making sure you get that extra bottle of wine as compliments from the hotel. And most importantly it’s about that dynamic one-to-one engagement that makes the real difference.”

Sinha adds that the recession has meant a long-term correction for the Dubai hospitality market and that the travel industry will broaden and mature as a result.

“As the decade of decadence comes to an end people have to reinvent hospitality and I think we are seeing Dubai mature. You will see more partnerships coming about. This summer the Dubai Tourism Board is announcing a campaign to increase inbound traffic by rallying up competitive hotel brands under the same masthead, for an offer where kids go free. I don’t think even Singapore could do that or Hong Kong. That’s the beauty of Dubai, it’s nimble and agile.”

But while this rallying spirit is a good thing for Dubai and its hospitality industry, questions have been raised in the media about the growing cloud of bad publicity surrounding Dubai tourist arrests and how it will affect overall health of the tourism industry.

“I blame the media for this over-hype. People were paranoid with 9/11 – ‘no one is going to travel again’. But we must remember two universal truths; first, people forget, and, second, people travel. People coming to Dubai need to be respectful to local culture – if you tow the line you can have a fantastic time here.

“Hotels are mobilising etiquette guides in rooms now. I blame the traveller for not being able to do their due diligence before turning up somewhere. Yes Dubai has a degree of strictness to it, but Dubai also has a lot of strengths and a lot of liberal openness for travellers.”

Sinha argues that while “you can’t argue that the superlative segment addresses a aspirational need of travellers”, Dubai, in fact, has a whole range of hotels that are not necessarily pumped up in the media. He claims that the critical masses will now come through as the sun sets on the emirate’s brash, glam image.

One key factor in creating brands that matter in Dubai’s tourism industry is addressing the sheer variety of cultures with a universal message, in an emirate that plays host to more than 150 nationalities.

“There needs to be a degree of intelligence applied to the market, you can’t have one rule that applies to all. Brands need to be very conscious of ethnicity when mapping out communications strategy. Sometimes you don’t have the luxury of huge budgets so you have to find universal key messages; this is what we do, and that means we have to conduct qualitative research. We create messages in many languages.”

So if Sinha was helping to launch a luxury brand



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today – as he has done with so many Dubai hospitality firms – would he do anything differently?

“First, building luxury brands is not necessarily about the money behind it – you need to have the vision before the money. And hotels that are launched today need to have better ethics to remain sustainable as a brand,” he says.

“You also have to come on board as a luxury brand in a very engaging way and consider its multi-dimensional aspects. You need to help empower the local economy. The tapestry of the luxury segment has become a little more delicate and a little more intrinsic.”

As Dubai continues to emerge from the worst of the recession, only time will tell how and when the emirate’s hospitality sector will broaden. But Sinha is certain of one thing. “Dubai will come out of this stronger – we’re achieving iconic status at a very rapid pace,” he says. ●