**'Kerala OOH market is not confined to key cities'**

Kerala makes an interesting case of a state where the outdoor media is not limited to the key cities. The small towns are just as attractive for the advertising brands given the demographics of the state. Hence, while the geographical area of the state is relatively small, the target group for any advertising brand is significantly large. **Varghese Thomas, CEO, Century Communications & CMD, Screenery** , talks about the OOH opportunities in Kerala and the growth experience of his OOH firms, in conversation with **network2media's Rajiv Raghunath** . Thomas is also general secretary of the Kerala Advertising Industries Association (KAIA) and a Board member of the Kerala Chamber of Commerce. Excerpts from the interview:

**What is your assessment of the OOH development in Kerala? Is it comparable with the other key markets in the country?**

The Kerala economy mainly draws its sustenance from non-resident Indian (NRI) remittances. Notably, the OOH market in the state maintained its growth momentum even during the recent slowdown. This can be partly attributed to the relatively high purchasing power of the local population. Kerala is regarded as an excellent test market for all kinds of products except for industrial goods.

**Is the OOH industry in Kerala particularly focused on the Kochi market? Which are the other promising markets in the state?**

The OOH industry is not just focused on Kochi alone. Kozhikode (Calicut) and Thiruvananthapuram are also good markets. At the same time we cannot overlook so many small towns in the state. On should look at Kerala as one large market comprising a collection of cities and towns.

**What are the OOH properties popularly used?**

Billboards are being excessively used. I feel there is a need for a boarder portfolio of media properties. We can see that LED screens are making a presence in Kochi, Kozhikode and Thiruvananthapuram.

**As the general secretary of the Kerala Advertising Industries Association, what are the common issues that you take up on behalf of the OOH industry?**

Among the various issues at hand, delayed release of purchase order (PO) is something we are addressing. Media owners have to contend with delayed payments owing to the delayed release of POs by the media agencies. This has deeply affected the media owning firms' businesses as while they face cash flow problems, they still have to pay site rent to the civic bodies on time. Worse still, these rates are rising sharply and so is the cost of infrastructure. Besides, the OOH industry has a high dependence on different government bodies like corporations, PWD, National Highway Authority, etc. Any delay in their projects also adversely affects the OOH business in the state. Our association is looking into these issues.

**Is your associated linked with IOAA?**

No.

**As CEO of Century Communications & CMD of Screenery, what has been your experience in building up the OOH firms?**

Let me explain that Century Communications is in the business of billboards and railway station advertising, whereas Screenery, which is a consortium of four OOH firms, is focused upon city and road beautification projects, development of pole kiosks, signages, etc. Our consortium is structured in a way that each director steers one part of the business. Both the firms have done well and we are geared for big growth. We are also into LEDs, street furniture, lamp post ads, traffic signal ads, mall branding, etc.

**Are you looking to expand into markets beyond Kerala?**

Century Communications began its forays into the national market in 1988. We plan to build on this in the coming year. You can contact Varghese Thomas here