'We have never been a threat to any market that we have entered; neither has any market been a threat to us' Pramod Bhandula, managing director, JCDecaux India, is one of the veterans of the out-of-home industry in India. He has rich experience of more than three decades in the OOH advertising industry. He has played a key role in establishing the company and its business in India ever since it set up shop. In an exclusive interview with **network2media's Neha Nagpal**
, Bhandula shares his experiences on the journey so far and his thoughts on the future ahead: Excerpts:

Outdoor media ownership in India is highly fragmented. Does this impede the growth of the industry and throw up unique challenges?

Impede is not the right word to use. However, you can debate on the kind of scale and rate at which the industry should have grown. But there has surely been growth. Some years back, we used to talk about an industry size of 500-600 crore, thereafter, the figures that were quoted were hovering around 800-900 crore, today, we are talking about 2000 crores. even though exact figures are hard to come by. Hence, we have clearly grown at a rate of over 20 percent every year and this is significant to my mind. I would say that we are slow, steady and growing.

JCDecaux is the only foreign outdoor company to have established leadership position in India while many others have failed, what do you attribute this success to?

I do not think it is right to say that foreign companies were not there before us or that they did not succeed. We would like to believe that each organisation is professional in their own rights and we respect all of them. I would not like to comment on any failures. But as far as JCDecuax is concerned, our company has very clear thinking based three basic things:

1. We have a philosophy that very clearly defines that whatever we are bringing to the city must be of service to the communities.
2. Its design must fit into the city aesthetics and gel with the surrounding environment.
3. It must provide defined benefit to the advertiser, as ultimately, it is the advertiser who is investing in the development of these assets.

So, the city has to be benefit, the industry has to benefit and the advertisers has to get the right RoI on the investment he is making. If anyone succeeds in sustaining these three fundamentals, then the business is going to work. It's very simple mathematics. It's the same across the any industry. This is something we are passionate about and we know our business, and we want deliver the best to the city and to the advertisers.

What is your assessment of JCDecaux'x growth experience in year 2010? What were the key milestones surpassed in the year?

2010 was pretty good after 2008-09, which was a bad phase for the industry, last year appeared to be a healing phase, when the industry and businesses started to recover. Last year was good for us and as I see it, the next couple of years will also be good for the industry. As a milestone, I would like to mention that this is the first time that Delhi witnessed a wide

range of international quality street furniture in the specially designed vending kiosks, toilets and utilities and bus-shelters etc.

Apart from Airports, BQS and street furniture, what are the other outdoor media formats that is of interest to JCDecaux in the Indian context?

We have a clear motto for outdoor advertising market, and that is to focus on street furniture. Since this is a predominantly billboard market, we would not be able to create any difference with additional billboards. We are not majorly into billboards, however, this does not mean that we do not deal in billboards at all. We have billboards in Europe, but they are different in terms of servicing and visuals. They are not very huge, they do not create visual clutter and are very well designed and makes them pleasant to watch. However, our main focus area is developing street furniture, which provides some service to the city and its people. **How is the company leveraging the knowledge and expertise gained through international experiences to drive the business and growth in a fragmented and difficult market like India?**

We have always said that we have never been a threat to any market wherever we have dealt or gone in; neither the market has been the threat to us. We have always acted as a complement to each other. For example, the first bus-shelter created by us in the NDMC area in Delhi is now seen across the city. This model is now being replicated in other cities as well. Hence, its a great service to the city and a significant contribution to the industry.

The bus shelters developed by us in the NDMC area in Delhi are also equipped with rainwater harvesting systems. This is a great conservation initiative. Its green and environment friendly

What are the international development oriented projects that can be successfully replicated for the Indian market both from the city development as well as outdoor advertising angles?

Each country, each city has different requirements and different designs based on individual environment. JCDecaux is known for creating and providing specially designed furniture for a particular city based on the specific requirements of that city. For example the bus shelters designed for India, is only for India, you will not find that anywhere else in the world. Also, if we compare between cities, the bus shelters in Delhi are different than what you see in Mumbai. Research is in our DNA and we invest heavily in understanding a city and the specific needs of its residents.

What are your thoughts on Digital OOH? Does it have a future in India? If so, then will the growth of digital OOH only be restricted to ambient locations like malls & airports? Or will it impact conventional outdoor advertising as well?

Digital OOH has a great future. As a professional who has spent over three decades in the industry, I can foresee that it has great future. Change is a constant process and so is development. The billboards that you see today were not the same fifteen years back. At that time, there were hand painted billboards that were time consuming and cumbersome. It would take days to get a single billboard creative ready. Then came the change in the mid-nineties, when digital printing changed the entire scenario. Today you see all digital printing around. So it took us 15+ years to see such refinement in billboards. The same will happen to digital OOH. It will take time but it will grow. I see a very positive future for Digital OOH in India.

Tier II & III markets are becoming increasingly important for brands. Does JC Decaux have plans to establish presence in these markets?

We have started in three metros, Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. There few other metros still

to look at. We are just a young, four year old company, its a journey that we have to pass through. Let us have the presence in the metros first, then we will surely look at smaller cities. Tier II and Tier III are huge markets, these are definitely on the cards.

What are your views on IOS I and IOS II? Will research in the OOH domain become a reality in the immediate future?

At least it is a start it is good that someone has taken the initiative. Although it will take time, it requires huge amount of investment and it is extremely difficult in this fragmented and unorganised sector. It is not easy, but it is a good start. Let us not hurry, let us look at the long-term perspective. let us not talk about anything short term. In the long term, research will be good for the industry and it is the industry players who have got to invest in the growth and development of the industry.

How successful has the industry bodies like DOAA/IOAA been in curbing various malpractices that are hindering the industry's image and growth? Do you see any workable solutions to stop the menace of proliferating growth of unauthorised/illegal displays?

I think cities have also started realising that unregulated and unauthorised growth is bad for the city. It creates visual pollution. Everybody is concerned about it. But the reality is that the authorities, the city bosses will have to take care of it. Nothing will change according to what I will suggest or what I would like to change. You and I cannot stop it. The authorities have to enforce. They are working towards it. Although this may not be a priority with the authorities, and it may not be the only problem that they are dealing with. But llegal displays have certainly managed to draw attention from the authorities. Industry bodies have made significant progress through lobbying and taking these important issues to the authorities

Do you think that an industry association managed by hired professionals will help achieve the goal of self-regulation?

Self regulation is always talked about. However, the situation might be quite different on-ground. It will be good if some mature and organised people emerge, they will definitely have some values and philosophies, which will automatically bring some discipline and self regulation. Today being a foreign player, we cannot even think of doing something illegal, if this sense of value can be developed in local players, this will do wonders for them and even for the industry. Self regulation and its imposition in its true sense would benefit everyone.

In an industry woefully short of talent and structured training, what specific steps are you taking as an industry leader to nurture talent and foster growth and retention of quality manpower?

I don't know why people talk a lot about lack of good talent, there is a lot of good talent and good people in the industry. Today, the industry has a whole lot of new breed, skilled professionals. I can see change. Today, if you look at the agency side, there are so many creative people there. This is one of the reasons why we get to see some fantastic innovative campaigns.

I do not even see retention as a problem. The industry is evolving, and for betterment, change is a part of the journey. It is healthy for the industry as well. It helps in developing a knowledge sharing process.

What are the big changes that you would like to see on the Indian OOH landscape in the next few years?

I see lot of changes. We are an emerging market and yet to get maturity. So, working towards maturity, there is always a scope to add something, to be better. If we take the same

example of bus shelters that I stated earlier, it proves, that people are open to the change, it is inevitable. If change is happening for the better, then it is always welcome. Change is inevitable and no one can stop it.

How do you see JCDeacaux's presence and leadership position being consolidated & enhanced during the same period?

We are clear and committed in our thoughts. We have to bring changes, the industry should look up, we feel that it will look up. We are present in three cities; we are looking at expanding in many more cities. We will bring the best of best practices. That is what we are known for. We will be exemplary in all our processes be it cleaning and maintenance, design and aesthetics etc. and we will always strive to bring the best value to our advertisers. You can contact Pramod Bhandula here