



Sanjay Shah, CEO, Navia Asia, has a rich experience of 30 years in the out-of-home industry. He is known for his ability to conceptualize, start and manage all phases of a project life cycle, from needs assessment to implementation. Shah began his career as a freelancer and then joined JWT as senior media manager, leading the team handling the OOH business for all JWT offices. From there he moved to Portland India (OOH specialist of GroupM) as deputy general manager - West & Central. In 2004 he joined Starcom MediaVest Group to set up StarSight as its CEO. In this article, Shah takes a look at the potential of the skywalks project in Mumbai.

The first skywalks tendering process is just over. It met with limited success in the sense that while one got a successful bid, the second one got just one bid, and the third had no bidder. Is this an indication that the skywalk concept is yet to capture the attention of OOH media owners to their potential, or the lack of it?

In Mumbai, transport interchange activities, passenger transfer between trains, buses, taxis and private vehicles make the station area most congested. The problem aggravates with roadside hawking and vehicular parking.

Skywalks, according to MMRDA, are elevated, dedicated walkways for pedestrians, connecting railway stations/high concentration commercial areas to destination points with a high concentration of pedestrians.

The purpose of skywalks is to ensure efficient dispersal of commuters from stations/congested areas to strategic locations such as bus stops, taxi stands, shopping areas, off roads, etc., and vice versa. The objective is to bring about decongestion of crowded streets.

The thought behind this initiative is no doubt excellent, and should theoretically be a good solution to the congestion near railway stations and bus depots identified by MMRDA. But, is it the right solution given the Mumbai environment – the crowded suburbs and narrow roads surrounding and leading to stations and bus depots?

Which bring up some basic questions regarding the practicality of skywalks. Would commuters really want to walk the roughly 1 km of a skywalk stretch, either before or after having gone through a harrowing train journey in crammed and humid conditions? Particularly when there are comparatively easier, cheaper and better options to walking, like share taxis and share auto-rickshaws.

Would this then not be a 'god (MMRDA) sent' opportunity for drug addicts and encroachers who sleep on roads and footpaths to use these skywalks?

Would the senior citizens be able to manage the steep and high staircases of these sky walks?

How would the privacy of the people staying along these skywalks be protected? Is there sufficient security?

I am sure the authorities must have taken into consideration all such relevant issues before deciding upon these skywalks. But have they been implemented? However, the first and only skywalk up and ready at Bandra does not seem to answer these issues. Further, there are 50

more skywalks planned by the authorities across Mumbai city and its suburbs. Would they pose the same questions?

What's there for advertisers?

I would not like to get into a discussion on the merits or demerits of skywalks. To come straight to the point, what is in the skywalks for the advertiser and the marketer? Do these skywalks have any potential from them and in turn the OOH rights owner?

There are two kinds of potential opportunities in a skywalk: inside the skywalks for the pedestrian traffic, and external for the traffic moving on the roads.

Inside the skywalks, I believe there could be tremendous scope for advertising. My belief is that 'every location is an opportunity'. With the recent development in the OOH field, and availability of excellent technologies, these skywalks could make for a huge media potential.

But what would be the OTS? And, most importantly, the key question is 'for whom'?

In the absence of any considerable pedestrian traffic, who would be the audience? Would the advertiser get the desired reach and frequency? If the above questions are answered, I am sure these skywalks could be a great opportunity for advertisers with substantial reach and frequency.

Is there any scope for large formats for visibility to the vehicular traffic? This could be a possibility but every individual skywalk will have to be viewed and considered from its position and its visibility to the road traffic.

The first Bandra Kalanagar Skywalk that was constructed by MMRDA does have excellent visibility to road traffic that could be explored. But it has to be at a right cost. The way things have moved, a lot is left to be desired.

All this brings up a very important question: Skywalks – for whose benefit? The jury is still out.

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