

FEATURES/ZEN GARDEN | OCT 1, 2011 | 13243 VIEWS

Artist Shombit Sengupta's insights on branding

by Subroto Bagchi

Shombit Sengupta, the brand, came to this world in humble packaging, says Subroto Bagchi



Image: Mallikarjun Katkol for Forbes India

Shombit Sengupta

PROFILE:

Founder-chairman, Shining Consulting, author, artist.

INSIGHTS:

- A brand must feel like a 30-year-old, irrespective of whether it is about beverages or banking.
- If you need to understand the Zap Generation, you need to first know your own child at home.

"I was born in 1954, in a village about 30 km from Kolkata, in a refugee colony. My father was from Dhaka and my mother from Khulna [in Bangladesh]. My father was in politics. My mother was a school teacher. We grew up in a slum without electricity. But my mother had a Christian colleague and I loved going to her place.

We would go there and stay over sometimes. I learnt a lot about Christianity. She used to invite my mother to the Bell Institution, which was a railway club. I used to go along and watch movies like Hamlet. I used to listen to a lot of Western music there.

My father was an educated man and he got me a lot of Russian books. So, even as I grew up in a refugee colony, my mind started absorbing and opening up to Western art, literature, music and, through these, the idea of design.

Along the way, I met a gentleman named Sudhindra Roy. He used to work in a government office, but was an artist.

He told me one day, never do something that you don't like! He said that when the mind, brush and

colours come together, only then you can create art. I didn't understand it then, but it took me 40 years to realise that this man articulated my life in those words."

So, Shombit Sengupta decided to study about the mind, the brush and colours. He completed his schooling and joined the Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata.

One day, a woman friend took him home; she had lovely colours, canvases and other art material from England; she let him play with these. One day, she took him to the American Library at the US Consulate. Shombit felt odd in his Bengali kurta and pajamas and was awestruck by the place.

There, he opened a book and, on the first page that he opened, saw Vincent van Gogh's Sunflower. In that moment, a spell was cast on him; a voice told him that he had to go to Paris and learn art. But he had no money. When he told his mother about it, she sold off her only necklace, bought him a one-way ticket and with all of \$8 dollars in his pocket, Shombit arrived in France.

A kind-hearted man named Dr. C.K. Pine, who had no idea who the young man was, gave him a place to stay and 300 francs to start his life with. No questions were asked, no favour traded. Staying with Dr. Pine, Shombit started looking for work so that he could pay for his art education. It was very difficult; so difficult that he almost accepted the job of a pimp in a brothel.

But on his way to work on day one, as the train stopped at a station before a tunnel — the final stop, the point of no return, lay ahead — Shombit jumped off and walked all the way back. He was desperate, but not willing to be desolate. From there, started a long journey of personal transformation.



He changed eight jobs, starting with sweeping the floor of a printing press as an undocumented alien. The owner severely underpaid him but, at great personal risk and kindness, hid Shombit whenever the French gendarme came looking.

Then he got his first regular job as an artist in an advertising agency and finally Sen (as he came to be known) became part of the haute-couture of strategic brand design.

Years later, he gave it all up, took a plane to Bangalore, bought an old, dilapidated factory in Whitefield, re-designed it himself and started his next life. Photographer Mallik Katakol and I are here to engage this man on what he thinks is the future.



Image: Mallikarjun Katkol for Forbes India

Tell us what every CEO must know about the future before they think of strategic branding?

"The Zap Generation", he replies and switches on the flat panel on a wall to show us a documentary he had shot in India's heartland. As it unfolds, Mallik and I gulp a dozen times, listening to rural young men and women reveal the nexus between desire and technology, where karma is meeting its creator.

"Those born before 1986, belong to the compromise generation. They are defined by the need for savings, the need to sacrifice; they are given to domination by elders, and have a pathological need for security. Those born after 1986 are a mutant lot. They are about, not technology, but the speed of technology; they have their own code language. They have an ego; they are global, knowledgeable and sexually liberated, they indulge in themselves and have no role models."

Why should every CEO know about the Zap Generation?

"The CEO must understand that the brand is under threat. A brand may be a 100-year-old household word, but it is all about the past. A brand must feel like a 30-year-old, irrespective of whether it is about beverages or banking. Thirty, because, it is the age of unstructured emotion and passion. The second thing is about your people brand. If most of your people are above 45, you have an issue. These people belong to either the compromise generation or, if they are older, the retro generation.

They are disconnected from the Zap Generation. They need to be re-moulded. Finally, CEOs need to pay serious attention to the channel. The Zap Generation is driving channel modernisation; we have not seen anything yet on what the future holds.

The CEO must go to the shopping aisle and see if his brand is already looking jaded.

The CEO must look at the aisle through the eyes of a 30-year-old.”

Where should the CEO begin?

“Look around and see life around you. Look at real life; real people. Without the human society, there is no brand! A brand is for tomorrow. Today is already over. You need foresight.

That foresight is about knowing who your customer is; what the trends are and what your competitive environment is. Often, CEOs know only about their own brand and nothing about their competitors’.

That is why understanding the human society, looking at what sociologists are saying, following technology, health, education and the perspectives of competitors are very important for a CEO.”

Mallik and I wish we could go on, but I am here to write a column on Shombit, not a book. So, I ask him my last question:

The compromise(d) and the retro generations think today's young are flippant, shallow and attention deficient. How can they be the future?

“The Zap Generation has in-depth knowledge about all subjects. They know any subject better than their parents. They have a different kind of intelligence. If we don't listen to them, we will fade out.

When this generation becomes 30-45 years old, they will not be in a compromising situation. Their logic is sharp and their arrival is very good for India's future and we must create leverage out of their knowledge.

Industries should take this generation seriously as it will contribute hugely. But here is what I want every CEO to know: If you need to understand this generation, you need to first know your own child at home.”

We bid goodbye and get into our car. Mallik and I are afraid to speak to each other, each thinking the other is a retro.

Subroto Bagchi is co-founder & gardener, MindTree and a best-selling author. His brief: Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs.