

'ONE DOES NOT HAGGLE WITH DOCTORS, AND THAT'S WHAT WE EXPECT CLIENTS TO DO WITH US'

Abhishek Shah, founder and MD, Be Positive 24 Innovation Design, has a candid conversation about how the agency has evolved over the last 20 years, why it hasn't won at Cannes yet, sticking to a 45-member team, and more...



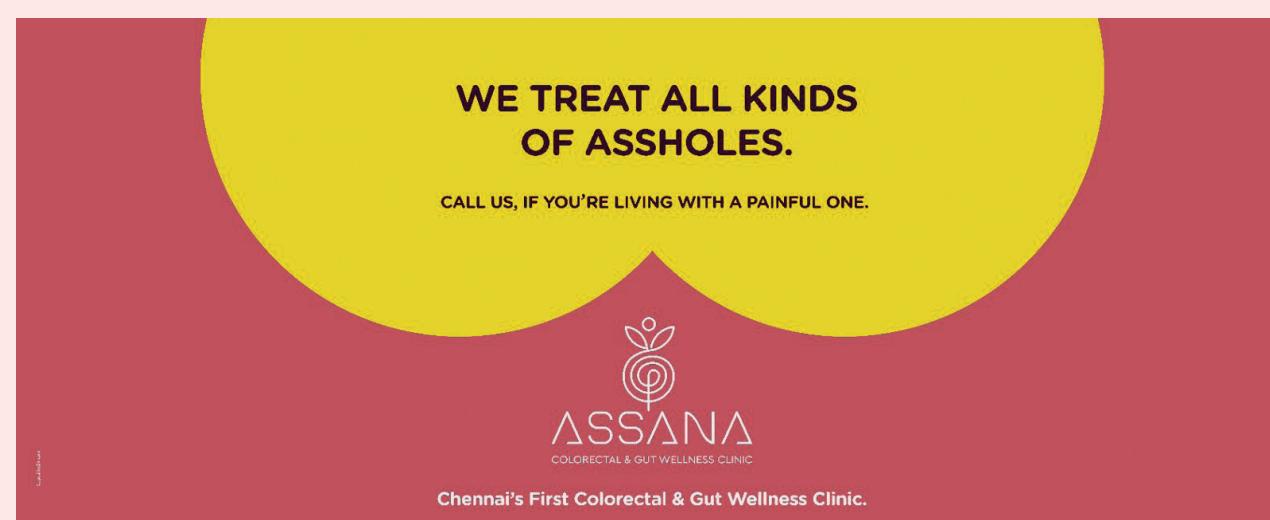
Could you tell us the story about Be Positive and the journey?

The name struck me when I was in the 10th grade, after a heartbreak. This was back in 1996. I was down in the dumps, and that's when I thought I needed to be positive. It stuck. It became a self-defence mechanism, where I was looking at the positive things in life.

In 2002, I met my then partner, with whom I worked at the same company. He wanted to start an agency called 24. Over the years, it evolved from Be Positive 24 to just 'Be Positive all the time'. Clients often mix it up with Be Positive 24x7 and that's when we tell them – we're sorry we don't work on weekends.

That's how we started 20 years ago, as a pure-play creative boutique. We had worked across agencies, both large and boutique. When we started our careers in the late '90s, agencies were treated like advertising gods. Clients looked up to us; we were seen as 'one step above'. Somewhere by the mid-2000s, I was shocked to see how far we had fallen from grace. Agencies had moved from being

The agency's
Grand Prix
winning
campaign for
Assana.



partner-advisors to mere vendors.

That didn't sit right with me. I wondered what went wrong with an industry I loved deeply. My first email ID was iloveadvertising@yahoo.com. That was in the ninth grade. The change in perception hurt, and I questioned why the agency business was no longer securing the revenues, pride or trust it once commanded.

Undercutting had become rampant.

When we started the agency, over a mug of Coca-Cola (because we were teetotallers then) we laid down a charter for the agency. There were five clear principles

No jargon: Jargon is the easiest way to confuse or falsely convince a client.

No 'search, find, replace': There was one common template agencies used for all clients and then changed only the brand or category. We wanted to start from scratch with every business.

Clear financial expectations: We are not a not-for-profit. We intend to make money from clients, but also make more money for them. No undercutting, no behind-the-scenes dealing

No options: The day one asks a doctor for options in a prescription, we will give clients options. Until then, share the problem, let us understand it, and let us solve it, like a doctor does. One does not haggle with doctors, and that's what we expect clients to do with us. We based our business model on doctors who are respected professionals who earn on their terms, when patients meet them. We are not linking it to hospitals because they could be money-making schemes.

A six-month trial: We decided to try this for six months. If it didn't work, we would do whatever it took to survive.

The point you made about undercutting is extremely prevalent now. How do you deal with it?

I'm not suggesting for a moment that undercutting doesn't exist. But when we discussed what was wrong with the industry, trust was central to the conversation. Clients believed that the more they spent, the more the agency earned. So if an agency recommended higher spends, it was assumed to be self-serving.

We decided not to link our income to client spends. We created a fee structure based on our experience and expertise. That fee became our gratification.

That's something one can do as an independent agency. Over this 20-year journey, have you had offers from bigger firms, and were you tempted to sell?

One can afford to remain principled as long as one doesn't want to scale. I trade scale for principles. We have received multiple offers and continue to get them every year. We are a highly cash-rich organisation with a consistently growing positive bottom line. That's where the devil lies. We want to remain truly independent. We've bought our independence at the cost of scale.

While Be Positive has been around for two decades now, does this feel like the year the agency has truly arrived, especially after the big wins at the Pepper Awards and the Maddys?

This is the year we have arrived publicly. The company turned 20 on 12 December, which also happens to be actor

Rajinikanth's birthday. All my companies are registered on this date.

Over the last two decades, we have built a strong reputation in our markets and circles. Our gratification came from creating work that worked in the market. Before this year, we had already won around 165 awards.

But winning on the big stage, and winning big twice in the same year at the Maddys and the Pepper Awards is a dream come true. It validates consistency and proves it wasn't a one-off.

While client accolades came in over the years, now that there have been big wins, has client perception changed? Do they want a taste of awards success too?

Of the 35 clients we work with, nearly 20 believed we had already won such accolades earlier. The vibe among clients is positive, but it's not about 'working with the agency of the year'.

Client pride was already high. We've built relationships that translate into extremely low attrition. A substantial number of our clients have been with us for over 15 years and have seen our entire growth journey.

How has the industry changed over the last 20 years?

We have moved from a highly creative, brand-oriented industry to a performance-driven one. The needle has shifted from branding to business.

In 2014, after a change in management and a partner split, we reassessed our journey. Advertising, as a function, had diminished in relevance within the marketing chain. When campaigns worked,

agencies took credit; when they didn't, agencies deflected blame.

What the 'big four' do for large corporations, we do for family-owned businesses in the INR 500–5,000 crore bracket. We work on business plans, organisational structures, vision, and finally marketing plans. We reverse-engineered from PowerPoint to Excel and this was a pivotal moment.

There were no longer briefs being received. We were co-creating business plans. Clients trusted and adopted what we proposed. It felt good to become the agency that validates the client's business thinking.

We also evolved into product design—something Covid pushed us towards. Covid was a great leveller. Friends, family and extended networks kept reaching out for advice because their existing business models were no longer viable.

As these calls increased, people became uncomfortable about taking up our time. So we structured it into a consulting model with a fee, which led to the creation of our consulting wing.

Another investment I made was in upskilling. I've attended the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity every year since 2019. Five visits gave me the confidence that our work can win a Lion.

I consistently shared our showreel and portfolio with jury chairs and members whenever possible. The feedback was encouraging and they said that the work could win, but wouldn't, because it came from an 'obscure part of the world' with limited global relevance.

Our campaigns were regional or city-specific, while Lions favoured scale.

It was a bittersweet pill: validation of quality, but rejection due to scale.

I was once part of a roundtable with the Ascential team. We were one of six shortlisted agencies. We were the smallest by far. The campaign budgets others discussed were our annual topline. I argued that if Cannes Lions wanted to be inclusive, it had to accommodate smaller agencies. Otherwise, it risked becoming a festival of high-budget creativity alone.

Months later, I received an email saying they were creating an indie stage based on that feedback and wanted us as the first showcase partner. I was thrilled—until I saw the cost: Euros 40,000. It circled back to the same challenge for smaller agencies.

There are millions of micro-agencies creating exceptional work with deep local influence. Cannes needs to nurture these micro-organisms.

You mentioned earlier that the focus has shifted to performance-based campaigns. Can performance marketing build brands?

We've taken a backdoor entry into branding. Performance marketing cannot work without a strong brand. The misconception is that branding and performance are opposites.

During Covid, many believed branding was expendable and performance was everything. But consumer behaviour doesn't change that easily. In high-stress situations, trust becomes paramount. Even then, people questioned whether to trust Pfizer or the Indian government for vaccines.

In a trust-deficit world, branding matters more than ever. We've now come full circle. Clients understand that without branding, performance cannot deliver sustainable business results.

I see the future agency model as a hybrid - part business consultant, part brand consultant. It can no longer be a pure-play creative communication function alone.