

## Case Study: Brand and communication strategy for the Joint Apparel Association Forum

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### **The strategy behind the Sri Lanka Apparel Brand**

Ruchi Gunewardene reveals the rationale and the thinking behind the development of the Sri Lanka Apparel Brand.

### **What is the background relating to creating a brand for Sri Lanka Apparel?**

This is a part of a broader strategic 5 year plan which has been developed by JAAF. That plan is an extensive one which covers various aspects of the industry and aims to enhance the entire apparel industry in Sri Lanka. It includes strategies related to productivity improvement, training, backward integration etc. all of which will raise the standard of the local industry. The branding initiative is one part of that plan, and was entrusted to the image building sub committee of JAAF which was headed by Mr. Kumar Merchandani.

### **But why is there a need for branding?**

Sri Lanka apparel is in fierce competition with other countries such as China, Vietnam, Philippines etc. for orders. And as we compete, we need to be able to stand out for certain attributes or values that are unique to us, and which cannot be easily duplicated by others. That's where branding can play a part.

### **So, tell us how you'll set about this.....**

Kumar and his team wanted to ensure that this project was approached in a systematic and logical manner, with a strong marketing outlook behind the entire process, so they brought STING Consultants on board.

We then set out a framework for implementing the plan, through discussions with that committee. There were certain conclusions that we came to right away. One of which was, based on the limited budget, that we would focus our entire resources on core customers (the actual buyers of apparel who are based in companies in the US and Europe). It was essentially a business to business plan.

In this way, we were able to link the investment that we were to make, to a return. In addition, we said that we should make some investments in really understanding what those core customer's perceptions were of the Sri Lankan apparel industry, and how we could position a brand that would be relevant to them. So, we set aside funds for research and information.

As you can see, we approached this entire exercise in a highly scientific and logical manner.

### **How were you able to get an understanding of these customers?**

That's where we brought in a market research specialist, ACNielsen. Our budget was limited, and they were really innovative and suggested that we interview actual buyers as well as potential buyers by sending a local market research person to the USA. This has never been done before and we thought it was a great way to be able to conduct face to face interviews and obtain first hand feedback on how buyers in the USA sees us, versus our main competitors (China, Vietnam etc) and then what they saw as a credible and strong proposition for the Sri Lanka Apparel brand.

We also used the services of a market intelligence company called Piers Global who provided us some extremely useful primary data on apparel purchases into the USA. This enabled us to pin point and target potential customers and also gave us a sense of the scale of the opportunities available.

So, not only do we know who these potential customers are, but we also know what they think about us.

### **And what were the findings?**

Price and quality are the key drivers in the entire decision making process, but we also found that understanding of the buyers business and being proactive were other factors which contributed to establishing a solid business partnership. Essentially, this is the reputation you build up over time and the confidence that you establish with buyers to ensure that you get repeat orders. These, along with speed of delivery are the vital factors that buyers are looking for.

**So, how does branding come into this then?**

The role that branding plays is to provide another dimension to the purchase consideration set. The basic "hygiene" factors must be in place, then branding can play a role of providing that additional value that customers or buyers would consider. Branding cannot be a substitute to replace one of the basic factors that customers are looking for.

We looked at several options for positioning Sri Lanka apparel, and what we did was tested these concepts with our potential target group, during the face to face interviews that ACNielsen conducted with them in the USA.

Through this process we narrowed down the options and focused on the ethical branding platform. We found that the buyers thought this was a key differentiator, it was relevant to them and it was a credible offer that Sri Lanka apparel could make.

By this time, Sri Lanka had also signed international conventions on work and labour practices which substantiated the ethical claim.

**What happened after that.....**

We had to make sure that Sri Lanka apparel could actually deliver on this brand proposition. So, we had several meetings with JAAF where AC Nielsen shared their findings and finally the committee concluded to go with what the research was saying. So, as you can see, this was not something that was pulled out of nowhere. It was based on customer insights from the actual markets in which they operate.

We were then able to brief the advertising agency, Grey Global Group to develop the brand and the supporting communication.

They developed the actual brand identity and came up with then theme " Garments without Guilt" which encapsulated the ethical positioning for Sri Lanka Apparel.

You must bear in mind that this is not a consumer campaign, because we realized right at the outset that we did not have the funds to take this to consumers living in USA and Europe. To do that, huge amounts of funds are required.

So, we see this as a sort of roll out. We intend to first take this to the actually buyers of garments in the large buying officers and then begin to roll it out to the broader consumers as it gains momentum and more funds are made available in the years ahead. We have a long term plan.

**What happens from here?**

The key is for the industry to take this brand on board, and actually live the essence of the brand. This they can do by incorporating the spirit of the brand in their own individual businesses and then carry the message through to their individual buyers. This way, there is a multiplier effect as the message goes out from the entire industry in their own individual ways, thereby consolidating what the Sri Lanka apparel brand really stands for.

This will not succeed if it is merely left to JAAF to implement. Because it cannot be implemented by an industry body. It can only be lived and implemented by the actual stakeholders of JAAF.

We believe that we have now set the groundwork to create an enduring brand for Sri Lanka Apparel, the industry must now take this on board and move it forward.

**Thank you very much for explaining the process and the thinking behind the creation of this brand for this crucial industry sector in our country. We hope it will be as enduring and memorable as Sri Lanka Cricket or Ceylon Tea!**

Let's see. As I said, it's up to the stakeholders of Sri Lanka Apparel to live the brand! Thanks.