

Big bank for the buck with Banali Malhotra, Director of Marketing, RAK Bank, UAE.

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*On a routinely warm Thursday afternoon in Dubai, UAE, I carefully went over my notes and research as I traveled to visit and talk with, **Ms. Banali Malhotra, Director of Marketing at RAK Bank, UAE.***

*I was genuinely eager to meet the woman who headed the **marketing** function of a bank known for it's innovative approach to communication. Entering Ms. **Malhotra's** office I was pleasantly surprised. I assumed the banking industry would be more, well boring. However, Ms. **Malhotra's** office was painted in bright colors, accented with graphic **designs**. Since it was casual Thursday, she was wearing a trendy cut white T-shirt, dark pants, and her long dark hair, pushed back by her sunglasses. She politely offered me tea as I gazed around her office. "Your office is pretty awesome." I happily complimented.*

*"Well, only the **marketing** department gets to have this sort of an office; it gets the creative juices flowing." she explained. As we sat down, I opened my laptop as **Banali** calmly looked at her notes and what followed was a freewheeling conversation*

BK. Tell me about the person; a bit about yourself

A.) I moved to the Middle East about 10 years ago, I was working in India with American Express and moved to the Middle East quite reluctantly. My spouse had to move as it was a career choice for him. However, I have to say it's been 10 years and so wonderful. There's really no going back now. I have two girls, so I'm also a full-time working mom and the 'juggling queen' as my girls like to call it. Juggling between their work, my work, their upbringing, spouses' requirements and household. So it's a lot on my plate but I love it all and wouldn't have it any other way.

BK. Was banking a chosen career or did you get into it by accident? Can you share with us your journey into banking?

Well, when I first finished my post graduation (I did my Masters in **Marketing**), **Marketing** is what I wanted to do but at that time I was in India. There, I did many summer internships including at **advertising**. After experiencing these internships, I realized being on the

advertising side of the fence would take a while before you can actually start contributing. So initially, for about three weeks I was a papergirl. I was photo- copying and handling client servicing. Both aren't really creative. Then, an opportunity came up from **American Express**. Which could have served as a possible financial decision as well as banks were more lucrative at that stage. In addition, timing wise, they are slightly more sensible than an **advertising** agency which in India remains open well past 7pm. I wanted to be in a more stable, structured environment, and that is how I started my work for American Express. I think I'm quite a loyal employee. **AMEX** was my first job and I was with them for 12 years. I was part of operations, risks, and sales. After moving to Dubai, **RAK Bank** offered me the head of **marketing** role and I grabbed it. I must say everyone tells me I'm the happiest now, than I have ever been.

BK. They say geography is history and the world is now a global village- the banking industry is not insulated from that- inspite of that, what in your experience are manifestations that are peculiar to the UAE, which does not resonate with trends worldwide?

A.)Yes, you are right about that. The UAE is a very unique market actually. There's a mix of different cultures here, very similar to New York in a sense. However, it's in a different manner because you have people from all over the Middle East/GCC. The Saudis', the Westerners etc. So when you're **marketing** here, you have to be careful to be non-offensive to the locals. But since the expat population is so large here, you can't ignore that which is striking a very fine balance. That is what makes this part of the world peculiar in comparison to the rest of the world dramatically.

For example, our communication and creative strategy is different between Abu Dhabi and Dubai. But having said that, I think these are some norms that we all follow here because, as time progresses, I think the UAE will continue to emerge. They are not as stereotypical as we may make them out to be. So if we continue to push the envelope you will see that there is room and sense of humor. People are evolving, traveling, going all over the world, so you don't have to be so clichéd in your communication and that's refreshing.

BK. In terms of top of mind consumer recall, would RAK Bank brand be within the top 5 sought after banks in the country? If so, what has been done for the RAK Brand to reach that status?

A.) Well yes, I'm pretty sure we are in the top, mainly because of our communication style. We follow our four "C's" which are, cheeky, combative, clear, and consistent. Through this style of communication is how customers see an advertisement without having to look for the logo. They will know it's a **RAK Bank** advertisement. This is what we have built for the last ten years. We try to stay away from the stereotypical communications. We do a lot of films, animations, 3D, 2D, even use animals to appeal to customers.

BK. In your estimation, would you term RAK Bank as a consumer oriented bank or a business-oriented bank? How do you position the RAK Bank brand to it's customer constituency?

I think we're definitely a customer centric bank and all our communication is aimed directly at them. All the products and services we **design** and communicate are always with the customer in mind. That is the central focus of what we do. It is the backbone off the bank as well, which is very important our entire mix. We always offer good products, backed with service quality and the communication is kept simple so that the customer understands exactly what we are saying.

BK. As the head of marketing at RAK Bank, what are you most passionate and particular about when it comes to brand strategy and marketing communication?

A.)The current **brand** personality has come about over the last 10 years, over that time, we stayed focused on what we wanted to do, so I'm very particular about how we communicate. It's important, we do not derail ourselves so people will consistently know what our bank stands for. We have different strokes for different folks if you may. We talk to our retail customers, premium, business banking, separately. However, each segment has its own communication style. Having said that, our style consistently modernizes. No matter what medium we use, the principles remain the same and I'm set on our messaging remaining clear, concise, and simple. For example, when we launched Islamic Banking in 2013, we were the last entrants into the market to do so. All of our competitors spoke typically the same way to the customer. Since every bank offers very similar products, we knew we had to stand out. That is when we introduced the animated eggs campaign. Initially we thought we would get a lot of adverse reactions because it was something this market hadn't seen before, but I was delighted to see how well the work was accepted.

BK. Digital & Social Media has made rapid strides in engaging audiences and allowing brands to be one among them whilst gaining valuable real time consumer insights- how is RAK Bank straddling the digital/social landscape and what percentage of your marcom budget is now oriented to that?

Well, we were the firsts ones in the region to get on **social** media. It was new to all of us, and the industry. Presently, we are very active on all **social** media, and rank number three in the region. Worldwide we rank at number 22.

Social media is so interesting in that sense, because we all learn it as we go along. Of course people do it as a personal thing, but as an organization we have to be aware of our tone and voice there also. What's expected on **social** is much far more different from what you expect at a call center or website.

We do have a full strategy for **social**. What we say and promote on here is very interesting. It's a great way to get people going, engaging customers in contests, games, etc. Currently,we have over 3 million views on YouTube, and 40,000 followers on Twitter. It's an essential segment of our media mix now.

We spend a decent amount from our budget, at the same time we try not to overdo it. We have what we call a "360degree approach" so every medium is important, creating **brand** awareness. We touch our TG on various touch points so it would resonate. They will most likely not recall where they saw it, but the **brand** will come to mind. If you ask someone, where have you heard

of **RAK Bank**, they would probably say, all over. Which is great, and that's how we target a 360degree approach and **social** is a big part. So if you are not there you are not relevant anymore.

BK. If you look back on your career, would you say it's been a life well encashed?

Oh absolutely, many times over. I love what I do, I love being here, and hopefully I have contributed in my little way. I feel happy, I feel blessed, and absolutely grateful.

This interview was conducted by Jamilla Ali, Chief Brand Influencer, ISD Global.

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