

## Passion driven

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*When you spend almost three decades in the automobile industry in multiple markets, you may get the feeling that a sense of deja vu is not far behind. But, prepare to be surprised and pleasantly at that. Meet **Samee Ahmed Mitkar, National Marketing Head for the KIA brand in the UAE** at its exclusive dealership **Al Majid Motors**, and you realise what passion and focus can do. Here, in a freewheeling conversation, **Samee** shares with us how both him and the **KIA** brand walk the talk on the '**Power to Surprise** '*

**BK.** You have huge automobile industry experience spanning more than two and a half decades- what attracted you to this industry?

A certain degree of uncertainty prevails at a time you join any particular industry. I have joined the industry to start a career with very little knowledge of the field. The interest and the passion developed with the time to a level that now I feel this is the only industry I enjoy working with.

**BK.** What is the overall car market size of the UAE in terms of number of units?

Roughly estimated figures indicate that the size of total new car market is between four hundred thousand and four hundred and fifty thousand.

**BK.** Kia in the UAE is competing with established heavyweight brands like Toyota, Nissan, Honda etc. apart from Group brand Hyundai- how has the journey been so far?

Since 2008, Kia Motors has consistently been one of the world's fastest-growing car manufacturers. In 2015, Kia once again recorded its best-ever global sales results, delivering more than three million vehicles (3.05 million units, shipment basis). For the first half of 2016, Kia reached its best-ever global sales mark of 1,470,822 units (retail sales basis). These figures indicate the quantitative growth as well as the qualitative level of acceptance of Kia as a reliable brand against the well established Japanese and other brands. Kia is focused on sustainable global growth, which will be achieved through a consistent stream of new and refreshed models and increased investment into R&D.

**BK.** Over the last few years, the focus at KIA changed to a great emphasis on making well designed cars- your hiring the likes of Peter Schreyer (ex Audi & Volkswagen) was a step in the direction- what prompted that thinking and when you look back, how do you evaluate the success/progress made?

Kia has achieved significant qualitative improvements in recent years, with an award-winning, design-led product range that enjoys more recognition every year. Design is a key driver behind

Kia's past, present and future successes' thanks to Peter Schreyer's contribution to it. The Kia brand remained at 74th place on Interbrand's 2015 list of the top 100 Best Global Brands. Kia also rose to 35th place on Interbrand's list of the 50 Best Global Green Brands in 2014 (2015 figure not available). A range of new eco-friendly products – and future investment in environmentally-responsible technologies – will help Kia continue to play an active role in shaping the future of mobility.

BK. UAE is an expat oriented market. Hence, re sale value of cars is a major decision influencer when buying cars. Do you see this being an impediment to the Kia brand for increasing sales & market share as a lot of the preference is given to brands that command better re sale value? How are you addressing this consumer perception?

One of the major factors, beside the beauty & the quality of the product that we proud of, is the warranty that we offer with the range of Kia vehicles. **Kia offers five years 150,000 kms manufacturers global warranty**, against any manufacturing defect. In other words the brand reflects the confidence it has on the quality of vehicles we produce, which is a key factor that dictates the residual value of the vehicle when it comes to pre-owned vehicles market. In addition, the features that we offer are higher in each segment that helps retain the good resale value of the vehicle.

BK. This market is very tactical, discount and price conscious. How has it affected your brand building strategy?

You are right. The task is very challenging as you are forced to compete with the heavyweight brands and retain the brand value at the same time. To encounter the challenge, Kia offers the product which is based on the value for money. Stylish, well equipped, vibrant, reliable and Hi-tech featured vehicles stand out in the segment. New Sportage, Optima (that includes hybrid version), Sorento, Carnival or even latest edition of premium sedan Cadenza are awarded for its Design, Road Safety, Quality etc in various part of the globe. Refer the first half of 2016 achievement below, the success which is rare to see in Auto industry.

#### 2016 : New Awards

- 2016 June: Ranked #1 in the 2016 JD Power IQS: Sportage (Small SUV) and Soul (Compact Multi-Purpose Vehicle) recognized as best-in-segment
- 2016 June: Highest quality brands in the US, Strategic Vision
- 2016 June: Highest among all popular brands in 2016, AutoPacific Vehicle Satisfaction Awards
- 2016 May: Car of the Year, Diesel Car Magazine UK (Sportage)
- 2016 April: 2016 Best Family Car of the Year, Motoring TV, Canada (Optima)
- 2016 April: 2016 Best Crossover, Motoring TV, Canada (Sorento)
- 2016 April: Kia Sportage, Top Safety Pick Plus (TSP+) from IIHS
- 2016 March: Kia Optima, Top Safety Pick Plus (TSP+) from IIHS
- 2016 March: 2016 Middle East Car of the Year (Sportage: Best Small SUV)
- 2016 March: 2016 Red Dot Awards (Optima: Best of the Best, Sportage: Winner)
- 2016 February: Australian Automobile Association (Optima: Medium Car under \$50,000, Sorento: Family Wagon, Sorento: AWD SUV \$50,00 - \$65,00)
- 2016 February: Wheels Magazine, UAE (Optima: Best Saloon)
- 2016 February: Consumer Report (Sorento: Best Midsized SUV)

- 2016 February: Kelly Blue Book (Sedona (Carnival) & Optima: 16 Best Family Cars List)
- 2016 January: iF Design Awards (Optima & Sportage)

**BK. Market and consumer dynamics are changing ever so rapidly with the confluence of technology, social media, digital eco systems etc. How does the Kia brand stay on top of these tectonic shifts and leverage the positives emerging from such an environment?**

You are right; the marketing dynamics are changing rapidly and leaning towards advance technology for the exposure leaving behind the traditional marketing tools. Appreciating the Digital and Social media influence, Kia Motors Corporation (KMC) has taken an initiative long back and is one of the most active brands in the field of digital marketing. I invite you to visit the KMC site and experience yourself the sustaining strategy and one of the most impressive sites in digital marketing field.

**BK. Which is Kia's flagship model that sells the most in the UAE? What do you attribute that to?**

Kia vehicles are some of the highest quality products in the world today, as the brand has more than doubled its global sales since 2008, vehicle quality has equally improved and that reflects in number of vehicles you see on the road. Sportage is the bestselling vehicle in SUV category, followed by Optima and Cerato in passenger car segment. Rio and Picanto is the best pick for fleet operation.

**BK. In Kia's marketing mix, which media takes dominance and do you base it on consumer/market insights, past sales data or anything else?**

Unlike the other developed countries, our market is still depending on traditional means i.e. Print, followed by OOH, Radio, TVC and then the digital channels. When it comes to media preference, the first question that comes in mind is "Is it assessable"?

However, the trend is changing at modest rate, and we expect that digital marketing will gain higher ratio as it has a provision of which is missing in other means of marketing and that is "measurable".How

**BK. In terms of brand recall for Kia in the UAE, where would you place the KIA brand on a scale of 1 to 10?**

In terms of volume sales, Kia ranks # 5 in competitive segment and # 7 in overall segment.

Personally # 1 and why not.... It offers you everything that a consumer looks for. Kia's '*The Power to Surprise*' ethos is core to everything the brand does – and is behind Kia successfully repositioning itself from the image of a low cost, low quality brand, to one which offers high value, high quality and great design, comfort, safety, advance features and the value for money.

**BK. Could you please tell us something about Kia's experience in the luxury brand segment with specific reference to the Quoris?**

Kia is now appreciated around the world as a manufacturer of high-quality vehicles and adding the premium class vehicles in the range with the feature no other brand offers; the recent example is all new Cadenza. The long term objective that Kia is struggling for is to change the brand perception as a quality car manufacturer. Until we reach that stage, consumers will be

reluctant to be driving the car like Quoris that matches the quality level of any competing and well established premium brand vehicle.

**BK. How much of a necessity does bank financing support help drive sales? Do you also see that leaving behind some set of customers who are not in a position to get car loans?**

The banks are playing the most important role and have the major share of total car sales under financing schemes. Infact they are the backbone of the industry. The industry rely on these institution as they are seasoned, professional and are equipped with all the necessary elements of scanning the consumers financial capabilities, reliability through their strict terms and conditions. Comply the terms and enjoy the facilities.

**BK. A lot of dealerships in the UAE have their own Car Rental brands as well- seems to be a natural extension of the dealership business. Has Majid Motors thought on these lines especially considering that you have the dealership of Kia for the entire UAE?**

Yes, It is under process.

**BK. How does the Kia brand out think the competition from heavyweights- is it through marketing, customer orientation, service, product mix, pricing?**

We believe “the word of mouth” as the strongest media and every satisfied customer as a Kia ambassador that force us to implement the right balance in marketing, customer orientation, service, product mix, pricing.

**BK. In the coming year, what are the new models that we can expect from Kia? Are you launching anything new at the Dubai Motor show in November?**

Kia will launch new vehicles in new segments with a renewed product launch strategy. Future models will reinforce Kia's position as a vibrant, dynamic brand for the young-at-heart. Between 2016 and 2020, Kia will launch 37 all-new or new replacement vehicles, as well as 61 model derivatives and upgraded models (total: 98 models)... that includes “Soul” full electric vehicle and hybrid version of Optima launched in other market, followed by a dedicated hybrid NIRO, scheduled to launch by end of this year.

**BK. Driverless cars, hybrid models, the Uberisation of the world etc etc- where do you see the automobile industry headed in say 10 years time?**

The change is obvious, and that may start with the introduction of hybrid models followed by an advance smart drive and driving assistance system. However, it is difficult to fix a time frame, although Kia is very keen and focused on it future plans and investment on developing state-of-art global R&D centers enabling Kia to fast-track the development of its next-generation ‘DRIVEWISE’ Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS), forming the foundation for the development of autonomous, ‘self-driving’ vehicles in the future.