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Context to the nugget

Sudhir speaks about why it is easier to grow a category than growing market share in a category. He also speaks about his experiences with Kissan to make the point about limited real estate in consumers' minds and therefore suggests that brands should win where they are by solving unsolved problems in what they are doing well than going wide. He also goes on to speak about how he thought about his early career choices and his father's influence in getting him to join HUL.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): I'm picking up on a similar theme Sudhir. You talk about growing a category versus growing a brand and you frame it as a choice between doing more versus doing better and that's something I reflect on as well in the context of journeys. There is always this choice between specialization and generalization and maybe trying out adjacencies. Give us a sense of how you think about this in the context of brands and maybe reflect on as you would apply to journey.

Sudhir Sitapati (SS): Yeah, I think Deepak in the book I think there are two separate points and I'll answer them separately because the first point is why is it easier to grow a category than to grow market share within a category and the second point is why should a brand do what it's doing better rather than doing newer things. They are two related but separate questions. I think the first question is that category growing represents an unsolved consumer problem. Gaining market share represents a problem that is already solved and you're trying to go and get a piece of the cake, right? So, from a consumer point of view it's always easier and better and more profitable and in whichever way you look at it solving an unsolved problem rather than someone solved the problem already and you're trying to solve 5% that problem 5% better. This is why it is generally easier and better to build categories and bake your own pie rather than take a piece of someone else's pie as a general rule of principle. The second point is that within brands it is always better for a brand to do what it does better rather than to do many things and it goes back to the question on what brands are fundamentally. Brands if there are set of associations, you've got three or four pieces of real estate in consumers' minds and the consumers' minds are the most expensive place and difficult piece of real estate to get. Now what your job is to deepen those associations and really have them stronger. A new association the cost of doing it is always much higher than the cost of deepening an association and also when you get new associations in you start weakening the older associations.

DJ: Give us an example here.

SS: So, I gave an example in a book when I was a management trainee I worked in the Foods category for a brief while and I saw that what sold in the market was basically Kissan tomato ketchup and Kissan mixed fruit jam that was 80-90% of our business. Twenty years later I came or 18 years

later I came as a Director of the Foods business and I looked at our Foods business, it was still 90% of tomato ketchup and mixed fruit jam. In that interim we had launched many, many things as Kissan. We had launched Kissan soy juice, we had launched Kissan staples, we had launched Kissan health food drinks, etc., etc. But the fact is that in consumers' minds Kissan was this fruits and vegetable brand and it wasn't anything else and guesses what less than 15% of Indians consume Kissan. So, the same amount of money had we spent deepening those associations and gone from 15 to 30 we would have been a lot better off rather than trying to get new associations with Kissan. So, there's always an unsolved problem in what you're doing well and to do more of it very rarely like there might be a 10% chance that you are kind of hitting a wall but 9 out of 10 times there is always more room and it's always easier to win where you are rather than to go wide.

DJ: And if you reflect on that in the context of your journey or professional choices, is there a parallel in terms of how you think about that over time?

SS: I think quite early on and probably in IIMA itself I kind of doubled in on the fact that marketing was something I was good at and something that I enjoyed and I've kind of broadly despite a lot of distractions here and there and you know how things are, you can always get distracted, I liked building consumer brands, I liked doing advertising, I liked doing innovation. So, I've kind of kept myself focused on these areas and with time I have also realized that I kind of enjoy it and I have stuck to that journey rather than learning too many new tricks.

DJ: But if I may go back to that and persist what gave you that conviction? I remember back in 1999 when a lot of us were running around like headless chicken saying we'll get into a bank or a consulting firm or something else that pays the big bucks; you had extraordinary clarity that this was it. What gave you that conviction at that point in time?

SS: I think you know I must say that my father was fortunate who was... he was a generation into the corporate world. He was in L&T; he had worked with banks. So, he had a good sense of the world after you join after 10 years, 20 years. So, I think he was... one of the few things he was very clear about was that I joined Levers. He also felt that I should do marketing, he knew me well, so he was actually one of those guys who never really... I was never a good student throughout because he never... he didn't allow me to do tuitions, he never really wanted me to do one thing. But one of the few things he wanted me to do in life was to join Levers. I think he had a high regard for the institution but I think he also saw it and I must say that when... at IIMA, so I actually got into Levers before I joined IIMA and I didn't take it though my dad wanted me to join Levers. So, when I was in Xavier's they recruited management trainees and he wanted me to take it but I said no but he was still keen so I did my summers in Levers and I also once I kind of... on the one axis there was a push there and then I guess professor A. K. Jain's marketing one did create a pull. So, I did get fascinated by him and the clarity of thought and the deep rigor because a lot of people come in thinking marketing is fluff, but you know A. K. Jain was anything but that. It was just... just because it's not numbers all the time it doesn't mean you can't have depth of thinking. So, I guess those were the two influences that really have kept me going in.

DJ: And if I may persist further what gave your father that conviction that HUL was the right thing for you? What about HUL appealed to him?

SS: See he had a belief that... he was an old-fashioned guy, so he had a belief that the first job a person does, he was an engineer, he was an IIT engineer, and should either be in the shop floor or in the market. So, it was an old-fashioned view and it's a 100% right, these things don't go out of fashion. I don't think and I can say it as many times, I don't think young people should work in air-

conditioned offices on excel sheets for the first 4-5 years of their life. So, he was very clear that that foundation of being out in the heat. So, it was a value system of his.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Sudhir, earlier in the conversation speaks about knowing which decisions to get right. If we juxtapose that with what he says here, it is fascinating that his father was flexible about several things but was particular about this one thing which is about Sudhir joining HUL. And one could argue that one decision made a huge difference in his journey. Sudhir also refers a lot to Professor AK Jain in the book and during this conversation. I had the privilege of interviewing him in the context of a felicitation function some of the alumni led by Rama Bijapurkar had organized a few months back. If you wish to listen to that conversation, you could go to YouTube and type AK Jain and my name Deepak Jayaraman and you should get the YouTube links to our conversation.

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End of nugget transcription

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Sudhir Sitapati - Nuggets

- 51.00 Sudhir Sitapati - The Full Conversation
- 51.01 Sudhir Sitapati - Getting the problem definition right
- 51.02 Sudhir Sitapati - Choosing to stay in HUL
- 51.03 Sudhir Sitapati - HR - a department with teeth
- 51.04 Sudhir Sitapati - Entrepreneurial Professionalism
- 51.05 Sudhir Sitapati - Identifying and nurturing potential
- 51.06 Sudhir Sitapati - Building a personal brand
- 51.07 Sudhir Sitapati - Specialization versus Generalization
- 51.08 Sudhir Sitapati - Core Competence versus Competitive Advantage
- 51.09 Sudhir Sitapati - Company men, Mavericks and Rogues
- 51.10 Sudhir Sitapati - Secret sauce behind the culture

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive’s / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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