

The Advertising and Television Production Innovator
By Michael P. Ryan, PhD

Sanjiv Sharma
Chief Executive Officer
Optimystix Entertainment
Mumbai, India

“Technology always came to advertising first. We were always hunting technology. We always focused on quality; our clients demanded it. When the Indian economy opened up, we were first to globalize. We all wanted to excel. I took that mind-set to television.”

Sanjiv Sharma explains that television advertisements in India were traditionally shot and post-produced on 35mm film. In 1984, Mansoor Khan, who was studying at MIT, returned to India with a Low Band Umatic editing suite. Mr. Sharma, who was then working with Ogilvy, teamed up with him and together they overcame initial skepticism to revolutionize TV advertising in India. Video technology enabled the 10-second spot. They won creative awards. Then cable television arrived in India in the 1990s so that he could bring advertising-television production qualities to television programming. He produced a hit for News Corporation’s Star TV with *Let’s Make a Deal* and a second hit with *Night Fever*, a celebrity karaoke show. Then in 2005 came *Indian Idol*, the biggest hit Sony Television has ever had in India. In the last 10 years, Mr. Sharma’s company, Optimystix, has produced over 30 shows for Indian TV. Their big recent success is *Comedy Circus*, which they created and has aired every Saturday night on Sony TV since 2008. Sanjiv Sharma is “The Advertising and Television Production Innovator.”

Mr. Sharma studied marketing at the Xavier Institute and then joined the film department at advertising agency Ogilvy. He recalls what he learned working at Ogilvy: “Ogilvy in India did the advertising work for all the great brands. I began to learn about brands. It is the most important thing in business. At Ogilvy I learned about brand-building.” But, he was a young person in the film department and says, “I didn’t produce or direct in those days. I had to insure that the film got done. We had very demanding clients. It was for me an introduction to the creative process.” After five years learning the trade, he and a partner launched their own television advertising venture.

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He and Mansoor Khan started up Mobius Productions. They believed that video technology could allow them to break out on their own. “Film production took three weeks in India,” he explains. “We promised to deliver the product in 10 hours. It was a paradigm shift, a complete technology shift in India.” However, he also emphasizes that it was not as easy as it might look in retrospect. “We were met with skepticism and disbelief. People said to us: ‘I will keep the check ready, but show the work first.’”

Mr. Sharma explains that video technology enabled dramatic innovation in the TV advertising marketplace. Video technology, because of substantially lower costs, enabled the 10-second spot. However, he emphasizes that the lower costs of video did not necessarily imply lower quality. They won many creative awards with their work. “We showed you could also produce great stuff on video.” In 1990 he became an entrepreneur, again, when he founded Pallet Communications—a name that conjured the artist.

Competitors were quick to imitate their video technology business model; more than half the business moved to video technology. “We were under pressure to get better and better. So, we went back to film. The quality of images was still higher in film in those days and there were certain creative things, such as slow-motion, that was not good on video.” His company became a full-capability TV advertising producer.

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“We had great brands, great budgets, and a great business. I was not interested in TV one bit,” he recalls. In the late 1980s he says that a friend “convinced” him to do a TV “sit-com” (situation comedy) for Doordashan, the state television network. But he did not believe that business opportunities with Doordashan were right for high quality programming. Then cable television arrived in India in the 1990s so that he could bring advertising-television production qualities to television programming. In the late 1990s Sony Television asked him to do a project. “We did it and it all started there. Earn from advertising; invest in television” was their financing model for entering TV production.

Mr. Sharma explains that the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, which stormed cinema around the world and the Oscars, based its story in part on a very real TV quiz show in India, *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* “The *Millionaire* phenomenon in 2000 changed TV in India. They licensed the format from the U.K. They cast the biggest Indian star to host. They had production costs that were unheard of in Indian TV. It was a revolution. *Millionaire* brought a new era in Indian TV. Suddenly, I could enter the TV programming business and not have to cut corners and sacrifice the quality of the end product.” In 2000, with TV writer Vipul D. Shah, Sanjiv co-founded Optimystix Entertainment.

News Corporation’s Star TV licensed the rights to put *Let’s Make a Deal*, the American TV show made famous with its long-time host, Monty Hall, on Indian TV. He and Optimystix got the deal to produce the show for Star TV. “It was a scale that I liked. I could compete on production quality with the best in the world. It was an exciting time.” But, looking back, he says, producing and directing that show was a huge challenge for him and his company. “We had to use eight cameras for that show; I had always only used one camera before that.” But, the number of cameras was only the beginning. “I looked at how others were doing TV production. I didn’t like that TV

production seemed all ad hoc; they didn't plan. But, I have an extreme inability to deal with chaos. Our advertising clients would have never tolerated it. We introduced a white board, planning, and coordination to the production process and episode direction. Rather than chaos, the set was silent. Everybody knew what to do and when to do it."

He and his company produced a hit with *Let's Make a Deal* and a second hit with *Night Fever*, a karaoke show, for Star TV followed. That show also challenged his direction capabilities. "We had a 360-degree set with 14 cameras. Performers, anchors, 600 people in a live studio audience—it had to be a big party but the cameras could not stop rolling for at least 25 minutes. Even now, no show is more complicated to stage manage."

Sony TV licensed the rights to air *Idol* in India. Mr. Sharma and his company got the contract to produce *Indian Idol* in 2005. "The show took the country by storm. We had 55 million votes [by SMS phone] for the season one finale. It was a defining moment in Indian TV. It was the biggest hit Sony Television has ever had in India. With *Idol*, from the cab driver on the road to CEOs to politicians—everybody wanted to be a part of it. One of our most difficult decisions was who would sit in the studio audience." He observes that *Indian Idol* changed how the global television business looked at India. "After that, at the big international TV gatherings twice a year at Cannes, everything was different. In the past our business meant nothing to them. They were suspicious of the piracy and our legal system. *Idol* made us a player, a buyer in the global TV business."

Mr. Sharma explains that television sets in India today cost as little as 30 dollars, so "the small town folks form the largest part of the TV viewing audience. We created *Comedy Circus* for Sony TV with a simple format that teams a 'soap star' with a stand-up comic. They perform in front of a live audience as a duo. *Comedy Circus* has aired every Saturday night from 9 until 10 since 2008. It has been a runaway success, a favorite of elite urban audiences, too."

Mr. Sharma took advantage of significant change opportunities in advertising and television in the business of Bollywood. He says, "I believe the film marketplace is now maturing and it is time for us to bring our production quality standards and management skill sets to feature films." Will Sanjiv Sharma innovate Bollywood feature filmmaking next?