

The smart box

Tata Sky has managed to convert what was once considered an idiot box into a smart, interactive medium for round-the-clock entertainment, information and services in India

Today's couch potatoes never had it so good. In recent years, the television-viewing experience has changed drastically with a host of foreign channels providing endless surfing options to the Indian populace. So when Tata Sky wanted to launch its television broadcast services in India, it conducted a rigorous pre-launch survey and analysis; it was searching for a crucial insight into the market, some concept or idea that would provide it with that 'wow' factor — the unique value proposition that would bring in the viewers. What it found was a very unusual differentiating platform — interactivity.

Tata Sky launched its Direct-to-Home (DTH) services in August 2006. Within a year, it had garnered over a million subscribers. Today the company has close to four million connections and is leading the pack in spite of the fact that it costs significantly more than a regular cable connection. Interactive television has indeed proved to be the 'wow' factor for Tata Sky. In spite of being an offering that lies well outside the scope of normal television broadcast, it has worked wonders and gone a long way in establishing the company as a leading service provider in the broadcast industry.

Tata Sky offers a range of interactive programmes through its Active series and these have been largely responsible for capturing a major slice of the DTH market. The Active series is aimed at a varied audience — children between the ages of 3-12 years, housewives, adults and senior citizens — with programmes ranging from educational modules and cookery classes to broadcasts of live *aartis* (Hindu religious rituals) and shopping.

The Active series is based on extensive research conducted by the company prior to launch, that revealed home personal computer penetration in India was extremely low compared to TV penetration (close to 115 million). By introducing interactive modules, the company hoped to change consumer TV-viewing behaviour and generate the required impetus for marketing. Says Tata Sky chief marketing officer Vikram Mehra, "World over if you look at DTH platforms they typically thrive on

content exclusivity, but in India this is not allowed. So the interactivity modules proved to be a huge differentiator for us."

The 'active' difference

Some of the more popular interactive programmes are those aimed at children — Active Stories, Active Learning and Active Wizkids; these engage children through colourful and attractive visuals, fun games, animated voices and cute cartoon characters. The programming gives children an opportunity to proactively participate in several activities, thereby gaining knowledge and skills while making learning a fun process.

On Active Stories, children watch and read stories from the rich Indian heritage of *Jataka Tales*, *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesh*. Most stories have an embedded moral. Recently Tata Sky tied up with Walt Disney to offer several Disney storybooks for viewing pleasure. Children have the option of listening to stories in English, Hindi, Marathi, Tamil or Telugu. The stories also enhance sight-reading skills as the text appears at the bottom of the screen. Children can watch and listen at whatever pace they are comfortable with; they decide when to move on to the next page, a flexibility that is not available in regular or conventional channel programmes.

Active Learning tackles mathematics, general knowledge and science by offering nearly 50 questions each day on a range of subjects — something like having a personal quizmaster on call. Children who respond get an instant report on their performance. The content for



the quizzes, though earlier generated by 24x7guru.com, now comes from the publishers of *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Through Active Wizkids children can listen to and sing nursery rhymes, learn to spell, solve maths problems and do several art and craft activities through its instructional modules.

No wonder then that this range of programmes is well appreciated by toddlers, children and parents. Explaining the significance of Tata Sky's educational services, Mr Mehra says, "When we launched, the main focus was on education and it continues to be our biggest push area. Today there are over 850 schools (including big chains like Eurokids and Jumbokids) that use Tata Sky education services within the classrooms to teach." Tata Sky has a school programme where the company interacts regularly with principals and teachers; the company sends them the monthly content schedule and receives useful feedback from the schools.

Providing 'active' convenience

Tata Sky has paid a lot of attention to creating adult-specific interactive programming. There is an Active Cooking channel in association with well-known chef Sanjeev Kapoor that is hugely popular. Most housewives in India do not have regular access to a computer and the internet. Tata Sky has converted the television into a recipe repository whereby viewers can access up to nine different recipes each day (three video recipes and six written ones) on demand at any time they find convenient.

Senior citizens were another core target audience. The Tata Sky team launched an Active Darshan channel that telecasts live *aartis* from five major temples across India including Siddhivinayak and Iskon temples in Mumbai and Shirdi Sai Baba temple in Nashik.

Tata Sky's Active Mall is a shopping channel that provides convenient access to products such as cook books (through Hungama.com), floral bouquets (through Ferns 'N' Petals), and mobile ring tones, wallpapers and games.

Payment can be done through a credit card or cash. Other adult interactive channels include gaming and astrology platforms.

'Active' value addition

What's interesting is that Tata Sky has found that interactivity has gone far beyond being a differentiator, and is now the core proposition. A survey has shown that out of 180 minutes of TV viewing per day in a household, 34 minutes are spent on interactive programmes. "Interactivity is becoming a very big reason for people to buy Tata Sky and to pay that additional amount. We are trying to add as much value as possible to the current TV-viewing experience. These services are no longer just value-added services; they are fast becoming the core business," says Mr Mehra.

While factors like a robust product and smart advertising have played a role in building the subscriber base, a key factor which sets Tata Sky apart from other brands, according to Mr Mehra, is the company's consumer focus. "We take great pains and do a lot of research to find out customer needs. We have a large development team based in Bangalore. Our marketing and interactive teams do strict quality checks for language and grammar in the educational applications. For us interactivity is strategic and not tactical," Mr Mehra explains.

Which is why the company continues to innovate and build on its core offering of interactivity. In October 2008 Tata Sky launched Tata Sky+, a unique personalised service that uses video recorder technology to allow subscribers to record up to 45 hours of live TV. "We are the only ones offering this in India at this point of time," adds Mr Mehra.

In its three post-launch years of operation, Tata Sky has broken new ground to completely innovate the TV-viewing experience in India. By closely targeting consumer needs, the company has pushed the boundaries of television broadcast in India, and redefined the scope of the medium to make it a hot, new and personalised platform for information beyond entertainment. ●

Jai Wadia

