

METROPLUS

CHENNAI • MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 2008

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Brand Disney

ENTERTAINMENT Disney is not going to be just about films in India; it has ambitious plans of selling its characters across various media in the country, says SUDHISH KAMATH

With the first Disney co-production "Roadside Romeo" out, you will not be just watching Romeo. You may also be drinking Romeo (mugs), sleeping Romeo (bedspreads), wearing Romeo (clothes, footwear and jewellery), studying Romeo (notebooks), talking Romeo (on mobile phones) and even may be playing with the Gang (toys).

As Mahesh Samat, general manager of The Walt Disney Company (India), explains: "Our idea is to fundamentally create a great story and leverage the memorable characters that come out of it into different lines of businesses."

Also, as Matthew Ryan, senior vice-president (Brand Management), spells it out: "When there is so much conflict between kids and parents today, Disney has the ability to operate that intersection between what parents want the kids to have and what kids want."

Memorable

Even when Walt Disney created Disneyland, he was clear that it wasn't going to be the place with the fastest rides. "It was about building experiences that will bring the stories alive. No matter where we develop the product from, we make sure that our stories have timeless themes and memorable characters... They export well, they import well. We are yet to come across a culture in the world which does not accept the Disney storytelling," insists Ryan.

The strategies differ from market to market. Chairman of The Walt Disney Company, Andy Bird, says though he gets requests for a Disneyland in India "on a weekly basis," India may not yet be ready for it because it isn't familiar with its range of properties. "In China, the media, TV and movies are heavily regulated, but organised retail has been growing at an enormous rate. By contrast, retail is very fragmented in India but media is big here. So our strategy in India is almost the opposite," says Bird.



BUILDING A NEW DISNEY GENERATION (left) Romeo and Laila and (right) Indian Mickey and Minnie Mouse PHOTO: ANU PUSHKARNA

Disney entered India about three years ago with its television presence. "The channels are complementary to each other and not competing," insists Antoine Villeneuve, senior vice-president and managing director, Walt Disney Television India. "Disney targets the 'twens' — kids who know exactly what they want. Hungama is about mad fun and Jetix is for younger boys who like action."

Recently, Disney got the Cheetah Girls to shoot in Jodhpur (the made-for-TV movie premiered during Deepavali), and had turned High School Musical 2 into a highly successful franchise in India, dubbed in Hindi with three original songs produced by Shankar-Ehsaan-Loy. Now, the company gears up for its first Indian original Disney movie made for TV in

association with Shah Rukh Khan's Red Chillies Entertainment and has picked up international home video rights for Aamir Khan's "Taare Zameen Par".

Also in the pipeline are four live-action films, including Bharatbala's multi-lingual "19th Step" with Kamal Hassan and Satyajit Bhatkal's "Zokkomon" with Darsheel Safari.

"For the first time outside of the U.S., we have come up with style guides for characters," says Samat. Not just Romeo. Mickey himself got an Indian makeover. Disney will be doing a Mickey Mouse show in Mumbai and Delhi in November. "For the first time, we will do some local costuming to make it more fun for kids. The idea is to make our properties more relevant and increase the reach," he says.

The reach and relevance formula has worked and how. Disney turned a park ride into a super-successful movie franchise ("Pirates of the Caribbean", of course!) and then turned one of its biggest animation hits into a Broadway musical ("Lion King" grossed \$ 3 billion — more than any movie would make in its lifetime).

Making it relevant

Who would've thought of a designer Warrior Mickey range by Manish Arora on the runways of Paris? Or on Bajaj fans? Or characters from Jungle Book on Kissan jam? "The idea is not to just slap the character's faces on products, but to see how we can make them relevant," says Roshini Bakshi, regional director (Consumer Products), as she pulls out a Roadside Romeo mug with the lovable villain Charlie Anna's face and a caption that reads "The Boss." "By putting 'The Boss' on it, we have made it possible for you to gift it to your Boss."

Disney's strategy is to make sure that the new generation of babies wake up to a tub of Disney's personal care range.

"We are looking at strategic tie-ups to build a new Disney generation. Disney Baby is rolling out in the market with a mass market pricing," adds Bakshi. In a world dictated by conflict, commerce and competition, perhaps, having imaginary friends is not a bad idea.