

News monitored for: Pepsi - Brands



News monitored for: Pepsi - Brands



In Indra's Darbar

How management grads from ISB made PepsiCo chairman Indra Nooyi sit up and pay attention

• Nikhil Menon •

Clear and bright, the morning of 16th April 2012 promised a fine day for the city of Purchase, New York. But the weather was the last thing on the minds of the three Indian students who stepped out of a limousine and stood nervously in front of the PepsiCo headquarters. For they were each silently rehearsing the details of their presentation for the hundredth time. After all, Indradeep Das, Sunitha Subramaniam and Sameep Mendiratta were about to meet PepsiCo chairman and CEO Indra Nooyi for the incredible chance to leave their mark on the food giant's Indian business.

The team of three postgraduate students, from ISB's (the Indian School of Business) 2012 batch, beat 200-odd entrants in February this year, to win the 'Become Indra's Advisors Contest'. The contest, which concluded its fifth edition, is run by PepsiCo in India to get creative solutions to actual business problems from B-schoolers across the country. For the three friends, this opportunity came totally out of the blue. "We heard everyone talking about it and there were posters all over the campus. On asking around, we realised that this contest is as big as it gets and that's why we decided to participate in it," recalls 32-year old Subramaniam, a strategy and finance major.

Incidentally, their team 'Nothing Official' isn't the first group from the Hyderabad-based institute to get the big prize. "Two ISB teams before us have won the competition in previous years and that really encouraged us," Mendiratta, 28, says. The topic for the current competition was "Transforming

breakfast for Indian consumers'. Each team was asked to create business solutions in the branded breakfast foods category using PepsiCo's Tropicana and Quaker brands. Nothing Official's presentation to the PepsiCo India management team (including CEO Manu Kapoor) was sufficiently impressive to beat the five other finalists (including runners-up JBIMS Mumbai and FMS Delhi) and walk away with top honours. Subramaniam, Mendiratta and Das also got pre-placement offers from PepsiCo India, besides the chance to meet Indra Nooyi and her team.

While they thoroughly enjoyed the business class flight to New York, where they were greeted by a limousine that took them to their hotel a day prior to the meeting, meeting the person who could one day become their ultimate boss was a slightly unsettling thought for the trio. But if they expected her to be formal and stiff, the PepsiCo chairman really surprised them. Subramaniam smiles, "She really blew us away with her energy and friendliness." Recalls 26-year old Das, "She was very curious to know where we're from and how we won the competition, and also asked a lot of questions about our concept and the perception of Pepsi in India." And Mendiratta adds with a hint of pride, "She turned to Albert Carey (CEO, PepsiCo Americas Beverages) and said that ISB is the best B-school in India and that we had beaten a lot of people to win the competition."

The fifteen-minute presentation summed up Nothing Official's proposed modifications to PepsiCo's existing breakfast offering: oats brand Quaker and juice brand Tropicana. The team

suggested some on-the-go breakfast options, as their survey of over 120 customers across age groups suggested that paucity of time was a big problem for a lot of working people. "The idea we presented was that breakfast shouldn't slow you down; you should be able to take it with you," Das says.

Another issue the team tackled was that oats, cornflakes, etc are wholly alien to the Indian diet. "We realised that the typical Indian breakfast comprises unbranded products such as *parathas*, *idlis*, *dosa*, etc. Also, juice is not a typical breakfast item, as most people prefer tea or coffee," Mendiratta explains, adding, "So we had to ensure that our solutions didn't force people to make too many lifestyle changes." Nothing Official went one step further from just creating a slideshow. They prepared actual samples of the products and offered them to Nooyi and her team at the presentation.

Samik Basu, chief people's officer, PepsiCo India Region, also attended the meeting in New York. He says that the management was impressed by the students' analysis of the state of the packaged breakfast market in India, besides their identification of opportunities and creative product solutions and brand improvement ideas. "Their recommendations were backed by in-depth financial

analysis, pricing recommendations and marketing plans, and was very well put-together," says Basu.

The presentation was appreciated by Nooyi and Carey who felt the ideas were 'feasible' and 'in line with what they were already doing'. Company officials say that the ideas proposed by the team have been shared with the R&D team for further testing.

Nagina Singh, director-talent acquisition, PepsiCo India Region, says the contest has helped the organisation generate interest in India's premier B-school campuses. "The uniqueness of this contest has been the key reason behind its success over the last five years and we plan to keep evolving it in terms of form and size in the future," she says.

The ISB team, meanwhile, is back in India after their exciting experience and in talks with the company over the roles they want to take up when they join PepsiCo. But no matter how the future pans out for Subramaniam, Mendiratta and Das, they all agree that the experience of being invited to Indra's *darbar* will stay with them forever.



Top (L-R): Indradeep Das, Sameep Mendiratta, Sunitha Subramaniam

Left: The trio with Indra Nooyi, PepsiCo chairman

nikhil.menon@timesgroup.com