

How to write a book in just 48 hours

Whisk away the country's best communicators to a quiet place called Neral. Throw them together in the reading room of the AICAR Business School and stir them up with a stimulating subject like "Brands Under Fire." Give them a deadline of 48 hours to put down their genius in writing. And voila!

That's what was done during the weekend of the 24th and 25th of November. The resulting book, designed to be of interest to practitioners and scholars in the field of brands and communication will be published in the next six weeks – at least that is the intention of the Subhas Ghosal Foundation.

Here's how it all began: around three years ago, four of the country's most powerful brands were caught with their pants down, so to speak. The brands were UTI's Unit-64, Cadbury's Dairy Milk Chocolates, Coca-Cola and Pepsi. You know what we are talking about: worms in chocolates, pesticides in colas and catastrophe in the country's favorite mutual fund. Consumer bodies screamed in anger. This was Sin, they said. Brand managers and their public relations consultants went into a tizzy. This was Disaster, they moaned. The media giggled all the way to the press and the picture tube. This they said with glee is Eyeballs.

Learning for the future

In an armchair in his home in South Mumbai, Mr. K. Kurien of the Subhas Ghosal Foundation and a doyen of Indian advertising saw what was happening and said to himself: This is Learning. The four cases would make an engaging and useful book for practitioners of brand management and communication.

The foundation assigned the task of putting the book together to the AICAR Business School, Walter Saldanha's brainchild. The students would do the research; the writing would be done by Ivan Arthur of AICAR and Kurien Mathews of TBWA.

Done.

The stories were written in chapters that made for interesting reading. But the two writers decided to not stop there. They wanted a halo for the book. They found that halo in what Anant Rangaswamy calls the "dustbin". Mr. Rangaswamy taught Event Management at AICAR, and during one of his idea generation sessions he came up with the concept of the 48 hour write-in. There were many good writer-philosophers in the profession, he maintained, who loved to write, but they did not have the time to do it. Invite a number of them to the inspirational quiet of the AICAR campus and let them loose on a topic that would excite them. Just 48 hours would be enough.

Like many good ideas, it lay forgotten, till the 24th, when it was retrieved, as Mr. Rangaswamy says in his blog, from the dustbin.

Writers in camera

The writer-philosophers agreed readily. Look at the list: Santosh Desai, Kiran Khalap, Gerson da Cunha, Prof. Vishwanathan, Prof. S. Ramchander, Gita Piramal, Rama Bijapurkar, Roger Pereira, Mahnaz Curmally, Vijay Gokhale, M.G. Parameswar, Pranesh Misra and Shekhar Swamy. If this circle is not a halo, what is?

In the morning of the first day, the group met for a panel discussion on the subject of “Brands Under Fire”. Then they sat down to write. By the next morning their learned pieces were printed out, collated and ready for the first reading. The entire event was covered by CNBC TV-18, who also provoked personal sound bytes from each of the participants. Watch this channel for the next five episodes of their popular program, “Storyboard.” It will give you a flavor of the book.

What gives the book dimension is the fact that it is not just about self-centered brands and their adversity or about merely advertising and public relations issues; nor is it written by any incestuous professional circle that meets at awards functions and tea meetings. Given the profile of the panel of writers, the output now spans all that space covered by marketing, social sciences, cultural anthropology, semiotics, academics and more.

A new writing experience

As the event got under way, it became clear that this was going to be a new experience in writing even for all these celebrity scribes; much like soloists now singing in a choir. One was tempted to give this experience a name – “*choreowriting*” perhaps?

This *choreowriting* took me back to the eighties when we had put together an event to felicitate Subhas Ghosal on his having received an international honor. There was a four-part polyphonic choir of Thompsonites singing Hayden’s “*See the Gallant Conquering Hero Comes*” while eight studio artists with brushes and cans of paint pranced up to a life-sized blank canvas on stage and started painting on it altogether like one body. As the last chord was sung and the last brush stroke applied, the painters stepped back to reveal what they had created in those four-an-a-half minutes of song – the portrait of Mr. Ghosal himself. The effect was magical: goose bumps and a standing ovation from the audience, tears streaming down Mrs. Ghosal’s cheeks and for the first time ever, a Ghosal at a loss of words.

When the 13 Writers in Camera stepped back on the 25th of November from the blank canvas called Brands Under Fire, they may not have produced as moving an effect, but they certainly gave birth at that moment to an exciting new writing platform; exciting for both participant and publisher.

Kaleidoscope

Brands Under Fire at first glance has turned out to be a scholarly kaleidoscope of writing styles, points of view and approaches to brand guardianship. The subject of brand crises has passed through the prism of this unusual process and suddenly we find ourselves looking at not just strategies for handling marketing adversity but innovative new communication models, issues of leadership, ethics, aesthetics, corporate governance and

a redefinition of the brand as a social entity. There's erudition, neat argument, narratives of past experiences, intellectual jousting and occasionally the invention of new concepts that may well serve as pointers to breakthrough practices in brand management.

The challenge for Titoo Ahluwalia, the Managing Trustee of the Subhas Ghosal Foundation, who was very closely involved in the entire project will be to do an encore when the applause has died down.