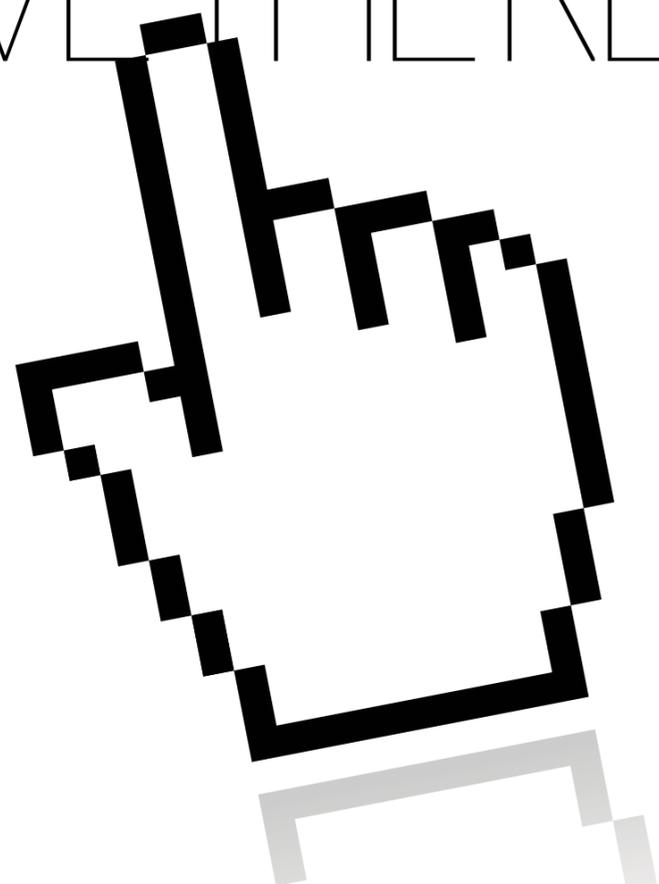




A CLICK ABOVE THE REST



As e-commerce picks pace in India and e-tail becomes more and more lucrative, **MARWAR** brings you popular start-ups by five Marwari entrepreneurs—Malvika Poddar, Kaushal Dugar, Neha Didwania Garodia, Manish Garg and Anushree Agarwal—and their takes on what makes them click in the online sphere.

Text * **Vinita Kapoor**



THE DIGITAL SPACE HAS WITNESSED A PARADIGM shift in the manner people do business today. From the customer's point of view, shopping is no longer a time-consuming task—a boon in the Information Age where one is always hard-pressed for time and spoilt for choice—and what's more, one can get the best deals, thanks to competitive price offerings and attractive deals from different vendors and the plethora of price comparison websites that are a part and parcel of e-commerce.

The Marwari business community has always adapted to the ever-changing trends of business and technology to make the most of emerging opportunities and e-commerce has been no exception. E-commerce can be conducted from home, which allows Marwari women to operate out of their houses and maintain a better work-home balance. Consequently, a large number of Marwari women have taken to online businesses, wherein they can cater to customers from the comfort of their homes, or offer new creations and exquisite items long

before their presence is felt in the market. For Marwari men, online business gives them the ability to maintain a store that never downs its shutters, with flexibility of operation and control over sales.

Going global

An online venture eases geographic penetration, as the internet transcends both geographies and borders, taking one's wares across the globe. Having shipped enough teas to make 20 million cuppas in over 75 different countries, Kaushal Dugar, the founder of Teabox.com, is in full support of leveraging this advantage. "Right from day one, since we opened shop, we've been a global company. And we've come far since then, after having shipped to customers across 75 countries such as the USA, UK, Canada, Australia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). An online business model also gives us advantage of scaling up much faster without having to worry about real estate costs. The technology back-end helps us understand our consumers better and recommend products relevant to them," says Dugar. Teabox.com is an online tea store that sells over 200 different varieties of freshly sourced teas from tea gardens in Darjeeling, Assam, the Nilgiris, Kangra, Sikkim and Nepal. The unique venture has a robust supply-chain model with goods delivered within just 3-5 (working) days of placing orders, anywhere in the world! Teabox.com sources premium loose leaf teas and special varieties of white, oolong and green teas, primarily from Darjeeling, Nepal and the Nilgiris. Darjeeling spring flush and summer flush are the top selling products, but teas from

Assam and the Nilgiris are slowly inching close. The teas cost about \$200–350 a kg (₹12,000–21,000) but can go up to as high as ₹80,000 per kg.

Hailing from Siliguri (in Darjeeling), Dugar comes from a family which has been involved in the business of tea

(Below) An assortment of six brisk teas for 'him' and six delicate teas for 'her' from Teabox.com and (right) Kaushal Dugar, the founder of Teabox.com



garden supplies and equipment. He studied business at the Singapore Management University, and during his eight-year stint there, set up two companies: one involved in e-waste management and the other offering luxury limousine services. He also spent four years working in a big four management consultancy firm as a corporate financial analyst. Later, Dugar came back to India and worked for his elder brother, who runs a tea export business in Siliguri. Witnessing the infrastructural challenges faced by the tea industry, Dugar decided to set up Teabox.com in 2012.

Extending reach

Malvika Poddar, a BCom (Hons) graduate, chose to start her online portal, Carmaonlineshop.com, to harness some of the other benefits of e-commerce such as supplementing and expanding the reach of an already established store. "We have been a brick and mortar store for the last 25 years and this was the next natural step for us, as we wanted our global customers to be able to shop from the comfort of their homes," she says. The e-portal was born as 'Carma', opposite the Qutub Minar, in 1989, in the affluent Chanakyapuri area of Delhi. Founded by her mother-in-law, Lekha Poddar, it was one of the oldest multi-designer high-end ethnic and accessory stores in the country. Renamed 'Sabyasachi @ Carma' in 2001, it has since been a luxury fashion store that exclusively retails Sabyasachi creations. Poddar feels e-commerce is a boon, considering the difficulty of setting up shops in small cities. Luxury wear was once an unknown arena in smaller cities, she claims, but now it isn't. Also, in bigger cities, luxury stores are not always accessible, considering the huge distance one has to sometimes travel. "Moreover, not all stores can be present in every developing city across the world. These trade gaps have now been bridged by e-commerce," she explains. Poddar's online store houses both established and upcoming Indian designers. "We stock Sabyasachi Mukherjee, Varun Bahl, Nikasha, Simar Dugal, Reynu Taandon, Pooja Talwar, Poonam Bhagat and Amethyst by Rahul Popli," she adds.

A self-starter

In addition to expanding the customer



Clockwise from top left: Malvika Poddar of Carmaonlineshop.com and some of her wares: (1) Madhubani zari bag; (2) Cuff adorned with a peacock motif; (3) Exquisitely designed earrings

The inspiration to start an e-venture comes from the desire to fill a void in the market and also from the quest to do something for the society

base, for some, the inspiration to start an e-venture comes from the desire to fill a void in the market and also from the quest to do their bit for society. For Neha Didwania Garodia, the founder of Mi Dulce An'ya, finding quality and organic clothes locally for her kids was a pressing concern. This, coupled with her desire to uplift the less privileged, led to the birth of Mi Dulce An'ya ('Mi Dulce' is Spanish for 'My Sweet' and 'An'ya' is an acronym of her children's names, Ansh and Manya), an e-store for infants that sells apparels, blankets and accessories that have a luxurious but vintage feel. Keeping health and environmental issues in mind, the 18-month-old brand uses only GOTS (Global Organic Textile Standard) certified organic cotton (a fibre that is free of harmful chemicals and is renewable) that is fairly traded and sourced from suppliers in Kolkata and Gujarat. Further, Garodia employs physically handicapped women and uses recycled packaging only.

Garodia, who grew up in Singapore, has a degree from the London School of Economics (LSE). She worked at a management consultancy firm from 2003-05 before getting married to Adarsh Garodia, who was heading a steel hardware manufacturing company and was to move to India in 2006.

Managing an online business on your own requires not just the right skills but also the right approach to keep it going, a skill which Garodia seemed to have developed hands-on. "I think the biggest asset of studying at the LSE is the exposure and structure in thinking that you acquire. Also, being a management consultant, problem solving becomes your nature. When you work in large organisations, you inculcate a level of professionalism," she says.



Clockwise from bottom right: Neha Didwania Garodia, the founder of Mi Dulce An'ya, and her wares: (1) Babies sporting dresses from the Classic Collection; (2) A four-piece gift comprising two swaddles, kimono-style onesie and a matching rattle; (3) A pair of snap clips in purple owl design; (4) Handmade, soft reversible yellow booties



IMAGE: SAYANTAN SARKAR

Wedding planning made easier

At times, finding the right products and services for a wedding can prove to be a real poser. It is while musing over a similar predicament that Manish Garg hit upon the idea of setting up a one-stop-shop, through his wedding-planning website, Shaadisaga.com. "In India, a wedding is a lifetime affair and no stone is left unturned to make it special and memorable. But when it comes to choosing vendors and service providers like caterers, florists, decorators and photographers, people are left with very little choice, as they cannot easily find trustworthy information, the market being heterogeneous and complex. To address this problem, we have brought on board the best of service providers, giving customers a choice to pick from over 1,000 vendors. We provide detailed information about their work and experience," says Garg.

Garg is a graduate from the Indian Institute of Technology, New Delhi, and has worked with an e-commerce company for two-and-a-half years before starting Shaadisaga.com with his partner. In addition to short listing, selecting and contacting vendors directly, couples can also create their own wedding-planning website/application by signing up

on the website and sharing their excitement, story, e-invites with their friends and loved ones. Before empanelling any vendor/service provider, they are strictly assessed on five crucial criteria by Garg and his partner. In the last four months, more than 2,500 couples have used their services.

Overcoming odds

When you take the road less travelled, facing hiccups is but natural. So it is with e-commerce, considering the fact that the industry is still raw and picking speed in India. But with perseverance and strong will, some Marwari entrepreneurs are surfing the waves, come hell or high water.

For Anushree Agarwal, the founder of Shopmicare.com, an online jewellery store, starting young was more of a challenge than an advantage in the initial days of setting up her business. "Starting a costume jewellery label in itself is tough, but starting it as a 23-year-old is tougher," says Agarwal. "Initially the *karigars*, suppliers and local artisans who worked under me, did not take me seriously. I didn't have retail space which I could show them. They thought my digital venture was a big hoax. I remember, once my chain supplier told me to switch over to another career, as my 'bold' and 'different'

designs wouldn't work in the Indian market," adds Agarwal, who sources her raw materials from all over the world.

Agarwal has studied fashion design from Mumbai's SNDT University and later fashion media and communication from the London College of Fashion. Her strong inclination for designing jewellery ultimately led her to launch her own label at the pop-up store StyleCracker Borough, at Tote on the Turf, Mahalaxmi, Mumbai, in September 2013. With an array of innovative and contemporary earrings, neckpieces, bracelets and body chains—the latest to hit the town—that complement both Indian and western outfits, her creations have since catered to celebrities such as Madhuri Dixit, Kareena Kapoor and Huma Qureshi.



Manish Garg (left) of Shaadisaga.com with his business partner Himanshu Kapsime

The winning strategy

Once teething problems are dealt with, the next common problem most e-businesses face is failure to create awareness amongst the target group, which can lead to low conversion ratios and sales. The fierce competition that all businesses face online, coupled with low attention span of surfers is a detrimental combination that can shut the brand down. Moreover, given the ease with which a business can be created online and the consequent, natural mushrooming of similar ventures in the market, the task of distinguishing your brand can be an uphill one. “Brands keep themselves afloat amidst such problems only by providing innovative solutions that improve brand-customer rapport and engagement,” says Garodia. “What we do is focus on a larger market—the global market—and organise a lot of pop-up exhibitions in different cities in India as well as overseas, to create awareness and drive traffic to our website.” Perks is another carrot that businesses dangle, which explains the proliferation of discounts and special offers online and on apps. Agarwal adds, “We keep having a lot of promotional offers on the website. It’s a win-win for the buyers as well as for me as a designer, as they get the pieces at a highly discounted rate and get them delivered right at their doorsteps. Apart from promotional offers, I keep having regular giveaways, which attract immediate traffic to the website.”

In addition to features such as free shipping worldwide, easy returns and cash-on-delivery facility that most e-commerce ventures offer, Carmaonlineshop.com has

a unique feature called ‘appointment’, which enables potential buyers to meet designer/s who can help them shop during special occasions, taking customisation and accessibility to a whole new level. “Customers often look for one-to-one interactions with designers but are unable to get access to them,” says Poddar.

Another innovative way to build a brand and demonstrate its impact is by interacting one-to-one with customers. “At Teabox, we’ve managed to translate and enrich the online experience through products such as the ‘subscription’ programme and ‘samplers’. Each of our sampler packs is curated by our in-house experts who come with decades of experience in tea. You can call it our own version of a guided tour of premium teas. And as part of the package, we include information on the origin, detailed tasting notes and the story behind their making. This makes the whole process of discovery an evocative experience—something that would be difficult to emulate in an offline store,” shares Dugar. Simultaneously, investing in technology to map success and increase penetration with analytical tools, SEO and social media marketing are some of the ways by which online businesses can inch close to success.

The Marwari element

In addition to right ingredients, guidance

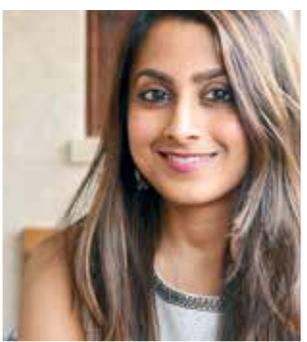
and coaching, foreknowledge of business also serves to hasten success in the online sphere. “When you are born into a Marwari family, entrepreneurship is in your DNA. You are surrounded by people who are involved in entrepreneurial activity. So, sudden decisions like starting your own business does not come as a surprise to anyone,” says Garodia. “Coming from a Marwari background, there were some core values that were inculcated in me. I was taught to constantly grow a business, to never let it stagnate, and constantly think ahead of time.”

While Garg staunchly believes in the rules that his 21-member joint family has laid down—that “there are no shortcuts to success” and “only incremental improvements on a daily basis is the key to success”—for Dugar, being a Marwari and coming from a family that has been involved in business for decades, has helped him acquire a robust entrepreneurial spirit and learn the art of perseverance.

The past few years have definitely witnessed a surge in successful e-commerce businesses, which in turn has emboldened customers from all over the country to shop or transact online. E-commerce ventures are surely here to stay and thrive, and these e-preneurs have proven that with the right attitude and techniques one can be a leader anywhere. ✨

In addition to right ingredients, guidance and coaching, foreknowledge of business also serves to hasten success in the online sphere

Anushree Agarwal
of Shopmicare.com



IMAGES: DHIMAN CHATTERJEE



Above: Earrings by Shopmicare.com, crafted from gold-plated brass and set with a sparkling array of fuchsia and white Swarovski crystals; (left) Handmade floral hoops adorned with Swarovski crystals