Car Ke Side Effects

The coming of Nano will indeed bring four-wheelers within reach of a huge population but what of the infrastructure needed to support the projected volume explosion—in an environment that's already struggling for basic road safety

I met my namesake on the plane to Frankfurt—a co-traveller if you wish—and before we turned in for the night, we ended up talking about the much-awaited 'Rs 1 lakh car' from the Tata stable. I was reminded of another recent conversation with a potential client, during which we spoke of 'holistic' and sustainable approaches to business and society. Both conversations converge to the archetypical contradictions we see in India. While trying to solve one kind of problem, we create another; we sometimes create undesirable effects simply because we are compelled by competition.

Think about it. In the guise of progress, we create wonderful technologies, materials and processes. Every new discovery or invention fascinates us to the point of obsession. Every commercial stakeholder seems blinded by its 'virtues' and before we know it, we've used it everywhere. Then, along come some activists who point out its adverse side effects and try cleaning it up.

Coming back to the Rs 1 lakh car (by the time you read this, you've probably already seen the product live at the AutoExpo), let's look at the good it will do. It will bring four-wheelers within reach of a huge population that was hitherto below the car line. Apply Muhammad Yunus's micro-financing paradigm and every bicycle owner with half a steady income will become a potential buyer.

Anyway, the moment one becomes a car owner, one ought to also become disciplined, law-abiding, traffic-literate, responsible, etc, in addition to moving up the social ladder. Besides, from a Tata standpoint, it's called corporate social responsibility (CSR) of the highest kind. If you want to remove poverty from a society, make things cheap, let everybody buy it and do what they want with it. Feed base human instincts to encourage the mindless race for material acquisition.

But what of the infrastructure needed to support the projected volume explosion—in an environment that's already struggling for basic road safety.

For well nigh three decades or more, we strangled our automotive industry by reducing it to a handful of 'licencees'—and suddenly when we opened the floodgates we took it to another extreme. That's what worries me about the future of Indian IT as well. The sheer short-sightedness of it all. Our political will or the abject lack of it. This *'do now, think later'* mindset has to go.

Some of you may have guessed already that I'm trying to draw some parallels between what we've been doing in Indian IT and Tata's pet project. The fact that both are low-cost—at least that's the temptation both have succumbed to—brings to light how we continue to glorify

Success comes to you when you believe in something and then go out there and give it all you have— and more. It's all about trusting your gut feelings and not about statistical validation.

subservience, and as a virtue, at that! It is such a pity that the most influential civilisation, and one of the world's richest cultures, is happy playing third fiddle.

Do you first decide what you want to create, and then build efficiencies and scale, or do you first decide a price point and then give justifications about why quality cannot be achieved? *You* be the judge. Compromise leads to mediocrity, and it's a downward spiral. That's why my co-passenger was so impressed by how we started up our company. He said to me, "There're a zillion reasons to claim something won't work! Success comes to you when you believe in something and then go out there and give it all you have—and more. It's all about *trusting your gut feelings* and not about statistical validation." Well said, Sunil!

Whenever I have mentioned my company in my writings, I have resisted the urge to showcase our thoughtfulness (pun intended). What I believe we have done with

considerable success is that we have had our people take an all-round 360-degree view before jumping into doing something. This means that we try our best to estimate the impact of our work, however remote–especially the interfaces that will be affected by what we propose. It does sound idealistic but, in my view, is not merely practical–it is the only way. It prevents us from being afflicted with the 'I'-disease. [I will elucidate on this in a future article.]

There's still hope. I cannot fault our finance minister for wanting to discontinue benefits to IT exporters from next year on. While the lobbying will continue in the hallowed corridors of power, each of us will have to bear the burden of finding out what value we have been providing, and to whom. The same goes for the champions of the Rs 1 lakh car. While the developed world is waking up to smell the coffee, Indian IT professionals must lie down and stare at the ceiling.

From the land of Ayurveda must come a call of holistic and sustainable business practice. Let's look at transportation infrastructure first, before we think of a Rs 1 lakh car; the same goes for IT. **i.t.**

Do you first decide what you want to create and then build efficiencies and scale or do you first decide a price point and then give justifications about why quality cannot be achieved? *You* be the judge. Compromise leads to mediocrity, and it's a downward spiral.

Sunil Malhotra
The author is the CEO & founder president of Ideafarms, a design led IT services company based in New Delhi. He is a business design strategist, smartsourcing champion and a breakthrough thinker in globalisation. Ideafarms provides HCI consulting, IT and innovation services to globalised enterprises.