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No doubt about it

Firm's marketing strategy resonates with Web comic

By Martin Desmarais

BERKELEY, Calif. – Common knowledge suggest you can't squeeze water from a rock, but Sandeep Sood is trying to do something just as challenging – finding humor in the outsourcing industry.

As dominant as outsourcing has become in today's global economy, and with plenty of controversy and media hype surrounding the practice, it still remains a relatively dry and boring topic, populated by an alphabet soup of terms such as BPO, KPO, EPO and LPO.

Sood is doing his best to change that with "Doubtsourcing," a Web comic and e-mail newsletter that tackles the outsourcing industry with a comic sense of self-deprecating humor and insider observations. For Sood, the exercise is his way to comment on the inherent issues and problems of the outsourcing industry, as well as market his own Berkeley, Calif.-based software consultancy, Monsoon Company.

A 1998 graduate of the University of California, Berkeley, with a bachelor's degree in economics, Sood worked for PeopleSoft for a year before kicking around with a number of start-ups and eventually launching Monsoon as BCM Digital in 2001. The company has taken a "slow and steady approach," as Sood describes growth. Monsoon has six employees in the United States, with 90 workers in three Indian cities: Pune, Chandigarh and Mumbai.

Customers include Wells Fargo & Co., Cisco Systems Inc., Hewlett-Packard Co. and Microsoft Corp.



The Web comic "Doubtsourcing," shown above, was launched by Sandeep Sood as a way of marketing his Berkeley, Calif.-based software consultancy Monsoon Co. Image courtesy of Monsoon Company

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Monsoon Co. founder Sandeep Sood.

we have screwed up projects and learned from it [and we know how to keep these problems from happening again]."

He does not agree with a pervasive sense of denial emanating from within the industry and believes that, if anything, admitting to the challenges will show clients that a company is willing to tackle and overcome them.

Sood is very outspoken about the outsourcing industry. In addition to Doubtsourcing, he also has a blog called "Outsourcing 2.0" about offshore development, and writes and speaks frequently on the topic.

His biggest pet peeve is the use of the "flat world" metaphor, as coined by author Thomas Friedman in his book "The World is Flat." Sood believes it is time to retire the overused metaphor. In fact the tagline for Doubtsourcing is "the comic for a round world."

"The world is not flat," Sood said. "It has curves and lumps and is, as a whole still round."

According to Sood, the flat-world metaphor is about capability and the fact that now information work can happen anywhere, due to communication technology, skilled labor and cost incentive – but when it comes to quality of work the world is not flat. If it was, he explained, the customer support experience would be the same whether the call center operator lives in California or India or Costa Rica.

"If it's flat, Chinese products would have the same quality standards that American ones do. In a flat world, 50 percent of offshore IT projects wouldn't fail due to communication and quality issues," Sood writes. "The world is full of strange curves and contours. All this 'flat world' talk tends to gloss over the cultural differences, language barriers ... management challenges, time differences, etc., that global collaboration brings up."

"When we accept that the world is still round, we can have a better conversation about these challenges, deal with the management issues and work harder on bridging cultural understanding," he continues.

Sood believes that the flat-world metaphor has become so influential in how people think about outsourcing that they forget about these challenges and assume that everything will just work out.

He said India is a perfect example of this and has fallen into the trap of "overpromising" when in reality much of the outsourcing work is of poor quality.

"I think it is the natural time for these companies, and our company, to step back and figure if we are over-promising, to figure out if we are really delivering and, if we are not, is this hurting the overall brand of India," he said.

"Whenever companies complain about the quality of work, Indian companies say, 'Look, we have this certification and that certification,'" he added. "When you look under the hood, we have been really great at certifying the mediocre quality [but this has to stop]."

Sood does not doubt that his criticism, veiled in comedy or not, may not be well received by all – including by potential customers – but he is committed to his approach to marketing Monsoon.

"There is a lack of humor regarding outsourcing. There is zero creative marketing in the industry," he said. "If no one else is doing it and they are afraid to do it, then we have a chance to do it and make a name for ourselves."

Vijay Chattha, founder of the San Francisco-based public relations and digital marketing firm VSC Consulting, said that Sood's marketing approach with "doubtsourcing" is nothing short of genius.

"The beauty of what Sandeep is doing is he is working in an industry that is traditionally very boring ... if you try to find an outsourcing company on the Web they all look the same with lists and columns of services and the same dull colors," Chattha said. "What a comic or something fun can do for a company in the outsourcing industry is open doors."

"Sandeep has created a brand that can separate himself from all other companies," he added.

Chattha points out that the use of animation and comics is not groundbreaking in advertising

In January, Sood launched doubtsourcing.com, to house his weekly Web comic, but he has been sending out his Doubtsourcing strip to an increasing list of friends, clients and interested third-parties for a year. Over 10,000 people have signed up for the e-mail version of the comic. The comic strip is written by Sood and drawn by Aron Bothman. The plan is to make Doubtsourcing a daily comic in March.

Sood believes it is important to have a sense of humor about the problems and challenges that have plagued the outsourcing industry.

He feels too many companies pretend there are no problems and do not want to talk about them, which he said only compounds the situation.

"I think it is important for one company to stand up and say, 'Look this is tough work,'" he said. "[Monsoon admits] we have screwed up projects and learned from it [and we know how to keep these problems from happening again]."

and has, in fact, been a strategy since the dawn of the industry, but in outsourcing it has not been done, which is what is so innovative in Sood's case.

Still, Chattha said, the strategy is not without risks, particularly because Indians traditionally have not publicly vented frustrations and certainly most consider outsourcing a serious business. "You always walk a fine line with comedy," he added. "But if you create a response that is the intended role."

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