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The sound of money

A bank tries to differentiate itself through music. Will that be pure melody to consumers' ears?

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It's rare to see bankers sway to any other tune than cha-ching, the sound of money. At HDFC Bank's central Mumbai headquarters, about 200 executives led by their managing director Aditya Puri assembled for a session that would last for an hour.

Holding centre stage was Rajeev Raja, co-founder, Brand Musiq, whose firm specialises in sonic branding, the art of creating brand recognition through a signature tune for the brand. To drive the point home, Raja plays the Airtel tune created by AR Rahman on his flute. "Who can guess the brand?" he asks. A lady banker enthusiastically shouts out the answer and gets a bar of chocolate as a prize.

Next, Raja takes the audience on a tour on how music can bring images to your mind. He asks every member of the audience to close their eyes and plays the Raag Hamsadhwani. He then asks members of the audience to spell out the images that came to their mind when they heard the tune. Most people in the audience come up with similar answers, like the onset of dawn, flowing river and so on. Raja has underscored his point - music brings associations and imagery to mind.

Hence last week HDFC Bank got its employees together to launch its sonic branding or musical logo (Mogo). Set to the tune of Raag Bilawal and Raag Shudh Kalyan, the first raga is an expression of innovation and dynamism while the latter reflects the caring, humane

nature of HDFC Bank. In the brand anthem, contemporary western instruments such as the piano and guitar are used along with the sitar, to create a blend of global aspiration and Indian earthiness.

The Mogo will be used across multiple touch points such as ATMs, phone banking, mobile banking app and the website. The objective is to create a distinct brand imagery where the Mogo helps form an emotional connect with consumers across platforms. A company statement says that the musical logo creates a sonic imagery of a brand that's in tune with the evolution taking place while remaining true to the brand's core values of operational excellence, customer focus and so on.

The Mogo is to be present across touch points in the bank's journey from hi-tech to hi-touch, says Kartik Jain, executive vice-president and head, marketing, HDFC Bank. "The intention is to create an emotional engagement among various stakeholders ranging from a farmer in rural India to urban city dweller and from a government employee to a corporate one, through the use of sonic branding across platforms," he adds.

The exercise started with the bank holding focus groups to understand the brand essence and attributes. The brand essence that came through was 'everyday evolution' with an underlying message of 'caring'. The brand was also associated with the avatar of a sage and creator followed by the attributes of



courage and caring. Based on this feedback, the agency looked at which instruments would best connect these attributes. The sitar, piano, guitar, santoor and dilruba were all tried out. After that three different sets of music compositions were researched with customers. The customers had to come up with their perceived visual representations of the music. The chosen tune was selected because it had all the right attributes of caring, surprise and joy. The first reaction from employees was that the Mogo was extremely soothing. The Mogo has been adapted to ringtones and caller tunes. The entire composition will be played in bank lounges and so on.

Raja says that every time BrandMusiq executes a project, the proof of concept comes through very clearly. In the past, the agency has worked on brands like Vistara, Mahindra Holidays and Cadbury Eclairs. It will soon unveil sonic branding for Lenovo. Raja, however, says that a Mogo is much beyond an attractive signature. "If you execute it strategically, then you can unlock much more than just brand recognition," he says. "Sound evokes a million words and images," adds musician Merlin D'souza who's worked along with Raja on this project.

Much like a new-born baby, the Mogo might evoke positive reactions, but a brand manager advises caution. For

companies that have a substantial subscriber base running into millions like Airtel or a HDFC Bank, a Mogo might work. But for brands who do not have such numbers, it's very difficult to justify the marketing spends behind popularising this signature tune. HDFC Bank's Jain sees an advantage. For a brand that's often faced with the gargantuan task of taking its message across India and translating brand literature into several languages, music is the big unifier. No one has ever heard of a CMO getting sacked for a poorly translated brand message (that too in a language the CMO did not understand). However, if such a situation was to arise, music could always come to the rescue.