

NetworkKING KHAN- Profile of an avid Networker

Prof. Vinod Shastri

Assistant Professor, SIBM, Pune

E-mail : vinodshastri@sibm.edu

"Know the right people who know the right people" - Sahil Khan

All of eighteen years of age and splashed on the front page of a leading daily on your birthday -for whatever reasons- must be a huge high! Sounds more like a politician's son being soft-launched through a paid advertisement wishing him a happy birthday. But we are not talking of someone born with a media spoon in his mouth.

We are talking of ¹Sahil Khan, coming from a higher middle class family with no connections in the media or, for that matter, any high places. Then how did it happen? Did he achieve something really big or did he commit a big crime? Unfortunately, the answer is not as intriguing as the question- Sahil simply networked. And through his network, he could get the media coverage for the launch of his first venture.

"I was lucky to be introduced to the power of networking so early in my life", admits Sahil. But luck did just that- introduction. "Rest of it has been all sweat," continues Sahil with a hint of well-deserved pride in his voice. After all, at the ripe age of twenty-two, Sahil is the 353rd most networked person in India on Facebook with friends in twenty-two countries while yours truly at fifty is a lowly 23,622nd with friends in a measly nine countries!

We are obviously curious to know where it all started for this truly young entrepreneur with three start-ups under his belt even before he turned twenty- founder of the immensely popular online lifestyle magazine fondly called TTS (www.thetossedsalad.com), founder of a design firm by the name 'Three November Designs' and a core team member of Pune's first egg specialty eatery 'Yolkshire', from which he recently moved on to launch another venture in the food sector; Phew!

His college -Symbiosis Centre for Computer Studies & Research- was part of National Entrepreneurship Network (NEN), the largest aspiring entrepreneur community in India. Sahil was actively involved in the Network's events and that's where it all started. He started getting familiar and comfortable with the concept of entrepreneurship. "I met a lot of like-minded students through this community," informs Sahil.

Once hooked on to the concept of networking, Sahil made sure that he was seen at as many entrepreneur meetings and entrepreneurial events as possible. He also ensured that he met and spoke to as many people at these events as possible. "Later on, due to the kind & quality

of work I was doing through TTS and Three November Designs, word of mouth spread and my network started growing organically," says Sahil.

When he was stuck for something and asked for feedback from within his network, not only did he get valuable inputs, he also got referred to other people who had more expertise on that subject. "So I actually realized quite early that networking was very critical. Having good contacts always helps you to find the right people."

Sahil's college was also playing host to the monthly meetings of Pune Open Coffee Club (POCC), a network of new and budding entrepreneurs. "That is where I met a lot of entrepreneurs and was formally introduced to the concept of networking, exchanging business cards and all that," recalls Sahil and adds with a special stress, "Then came Twitter."

On Twitter, it's all about influence. Your presence and activity on Twitter gives a more precise assessment of your network. What matters in networking is not just your reach, but your credibility as well. "PeerIndex and Klout are two such companies which measure influence," Sahil informs. Besides being 353rd most networked Indian on Facebook, Sahil also regularly features in the 'Top 100 Indian Influencers' list compiled by Mumbai-based Pinstorm from time to time.

Sahil cautions that it would be wrong to assume that merely meeting people and exchanging business cards is networking; it is not. "In fact, that's just the beginning and I have learnt it the hard way," says Sahil. According to him, this is where the tough part kicks in- that of following up. Whenever he met interesting people, he either followed them on Twitter or added them on Facebook to stay in touch because "Recall value is of utmost importance in networking," he says.

Being such a highly networked person at such a young age, Sahil is widely regarded as an expert on Social Media and also consults a few small businesses on leveraging the social media for marketing. The print and the electronic media regularly approach Sahil for quotes and bytes on social media. So it is only natural that you would want to know his take on the views of ²Mike DiLorenzo, the Marketing Director of NHL Social Media who says, "Social networks aren't about websites, they're about experiences."

"I completely agree with Mike," says Sahil. "The websites have just made networking and staying in touch easier. The experience that these social networks lend us really determines their power," he adds thoughtfully. According to Sahil, Twitter over Facebook is the best example. Twitter is quick, short and sweet. Hashable has been built over Twitter to negate business cards and measure the relationship strength on the basis of your interaction with the other person. Google+ has touched about 25million users. Google had tried its hand at social networking earlier as well but had failed miserably. With Google+, they managed to create the right experience. He shoots example after example and you have to admit that when it comes to networking, this man knows his onions.

On the role of networking in entrepreneurial success, Sahil has an interesting take, "Hard work may pay off. Hard work coupled with the right network will pay off. In fact, that is what smart work is; it is not the absence of hard work. And networking is important even otherwise. Your friend needs a job, the gas connection is getting delayed; if you have the right contact,

just pick up the phone and things start happening."

Following the Germany Bakery blast in Pune, Sahil, was able to mobilize resources to create awareness & request people to donate blood and for Twestival (Twitter festival) to raise funds for a local NGO. He had also successfully organized a peace march following the blast. All thanks to his fabulous network.

"Speaking for myself, I'm not from the hospitality industry and being just about twenty is sort of restrictive in being taken seriously in India," laments Sahil. However, despite these inherent limitations, he got started off in the restaurant industry as a core team member "simply because of the people I knew," he insists. Spending over an year as a core team member at 'Yolkshire' and going through the rigmarole of scouting for a place to building the initial team to raising funds and to running the operations, he has seen it all and now feels ready and confident to launch his independent venture in the food industry.

Till it lasted, his relationship with the restaurant venture was a perfect case of a 'win-win' situation which according to Sahil is of paramount importance in networking. "You cannot just take from your network; you also need to give," says Sahil. "How many people of my age and profile would get this kind of an opportunity in India?" he asks. Not many; you have to agree. "I know the right people who know the right people," Sahil rubs it in as a reason for the kind of opportunities that keep coming his way. And the kind of opportunities he gets could be the envy of any youngster of his age. His advice to the budding networkers: Have a business card with your contact details and profession printed on it. Keep your profile on LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter updated. At meetings and events, don't be nervous; be shameless. No question is stupid, so feel free and ask the other person whatever is on your mind. Chat up the person for a while if you think he/she could add value to your network.

You are obviously curious to know whether there is a flip side to having such a large network. "Well, to be honest, remembering everyone is a challenge. So when you meet a Facebook friend or a Twitter follower and you cannot recognize the person in person, it does get embarrassing," admits Sahil. "But that's part of the game," he adds.

³Erin Bury, the Community Manager at Sprouter says his social networking principle is "Don't say anything online that you wouldn't want plastered on a billboard with your face on it." Has Sahil ever violated this principle? "I say a lot of things online which would seem awkward on a billboard," admits Sahil. But he firmly believes in 'saying it as it is'. "Yes, you could keep some of your thoughts to yourself so as to create and maintain a more professional image, but never try to be someone who you are not," he advises like a veteran and you cannot but admire this kind of networking.

References

(Endnotes)

- 1 Online and telephonic interview conducted on 05.08.2011 with Mr. Sahil Khan, Founder, 'www.thetossedsalad.com' and 'Three November Designs'
- 2 <http://www.mirnabard.com/2010/04/99-favorite-social-media-quotes-and-tips/>
- 3 <http://www.mirnabard.com/2010/04/99-favorite-social-media-quotes-and-tips/>