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SIMPLIFLYING: FROM BLOG TO INTERNATIONAL CONSULTANCY

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Shashank Nigam grew a passion for aviation into an international marketing agency

On the website of aviation marketing consultancy SimpliFlying is an interactive map that locates the whereabouts of the firm's clients. From air industry heavyweight Boeing in Seattle to Qantas in Southeastern Australia, the Singapore-based company counts at least 60 companies in the aviation industry as its customers.

Less than a decade ago, SimpliFlying started off as little more than an aviation marketing blog, the brainchild of CEO **Shashank Nigam**. How did an outsider with zero experience gain a foothold and flourish against overwhelming odds in a highly competitive, capital-intensive industry?

TAXIING DOWN THE RUNWAY

In January 2009, Nigam read an advertisement in Singapore's local newspaper about an airline conference scheduled to take place the following month. He persuaded the organisers into issuing him a press pass by promising to upload video interviews of the conference on SimpliFlying.com, at that time a fledgling blog the lifelong aviation enthusiast had set up only 10 months prior.

The same organisers then invited Nigam to a Dubai travel conference in March as an independent moderator. Although he was not scheduled to be a speaker, Nigam prepared a presentation on innovative branding in case C-level executives who had been lined up to speak dropped out. As it turned out, that did happen and the organisers asked him to fill up a slot that had previously been lined up for the CEO of a Middle Eastern airline. Nigam was quoted in Dubai's Khaleej Times newspaper, and his interview was broadcast on CNBC Arabia.

Two months later, Nigam attended a conference in Miami on the future of marketing and travel. Following a conversation with the CEO of Winair, an airline based in St. Maarten, Antilles, SimpliFlying landed its first consulting project implementing a social media campaign for an airline. Nigam attended the press conference that launched the airline's new content strategy, giving him additional exposure.

TAKING OFF

In September, the Digital Marketing Manager of Intercontinental Hotels Group (IHG), the hotel chain that owns the Holiday Inn and InterContinental brands among others, contacted Nigam to work on its social media strategy. If successful, it would be SimpliFlying's first major deal in terms of scope and revenue.

The Holiday Inn brand had been relaunched with a new logo along with refreshed bedsheets and pillows to underline its five-star positioning. However, the marketing was traditional: a pillow fight on a huge bed in New York's Times Square, without any digital components. In order to leverage social media in a consistent multi-channel marketing approach, Nigam helped to add user-generated photos being tracked and posted on Facebook for any local city where non-digital marketing events were being held.

For the InterContinental Hotels brand, a different approach was used where there was no user-generated content. Instead, content was created by hotel employees, such as a hotel concierge in Hong Kong filming short videos on how to bargain, or instructions to take the local subway from the airport to the hotel.

In contrast to helping Winair create its online presence from scratch, the IHG project was more about communicating the identity that InterContinental Hotels had already crafted, and using it to educate and engage its market. The deal was significant to SimpliFlying as it made official its first revenue stream: strategy consulting specifically for social media in travel.

The revenue from the IHG deal provided the means to grow the company, which had been hard to come by in the aftermath of the 2008 Global Financial Crisis. The deal also gave SimpliFlying exposure to global work, which the company secured with Chile's LAN Airlines and Turkish Airlines.

TURBULENCE: ARRIVING AT AN IDENTITY

SimpliFlying continued to win new assignments throughout 2010, but Nigam was cognizant of the fact that most people knew about his company as only a blog instead of the range of services it provided. With various types of jobs coming in, SimpliFlying needed to redefine its target audience and effectively communicate its service portfolio.

"We are not an agency," Nigam stresses. "I was clear about what I did not want to be, which was yet another social media guru or an expert." He believed that in order to remain competitive and differentiate itself in the long run, SimpliFlying had to focus solely on the aviation industry. He was reminded by a close advisor that SimpliFlying was founded because of a passion for airplanes and aviation, and that he should stay true to his passion.

However, agency work provided the lion's share of SimpliFlying's revenues. The IHG project accounted for 90 percent of the company's seed money, and other hotels were knocking on the door after seeing what it had done for IHG. Can the company survive on a non-agency, aviation-only strategy? How can the company develop a new revenue stream? What is next?