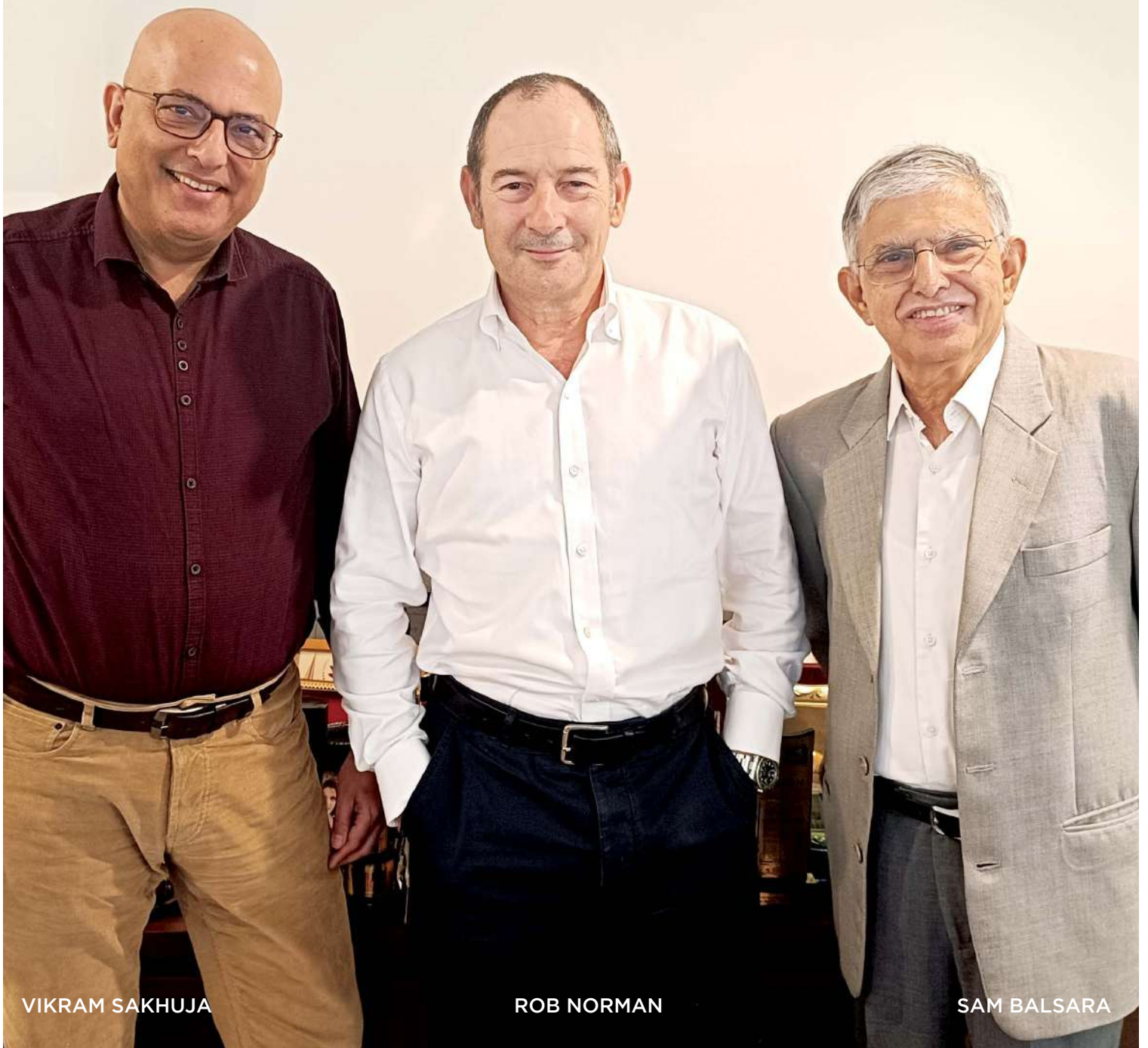


# ‘MADISON IS AN INCREDIBLY FOCUSED AGENCY’

BY NEETA NAIR



VIKRAM SAKHUJA

ROB NORMAN

SAM BALSARA

Last week Madison Media announced the appointment of Rob Norman as Advisor to accelerate Digital Transformation for key clients.

Rob is a known name in the Digital space - having been the Global head of Digital at GroupM. He has also been CEO of GroupM, North America. Currently, he is an independent board member at Piano, MiQ, Simpli.fi and a few other digital first companies. His role will be to offer advisory services to Madison's top clients, while introducing the agency to new tools, concepts and workflows.

India is hardly unfamiliar territory for Norman who claims that he has spent the most time of his life visiting the country, after UK and US. Post doing some quick math he quips, "It may well be my 40th visit to India and I am still familiar with many clients here, despite the fact that for the last few years the focus of my work was US."

Starting out on what he calls his 'second life' after stepping down from WPP, Norman used his core strength and knowledge of how Digital-first companies do business with advertising holding companies to advise people that occupy different niches in the market on the best means to land, expand, and build such partnerships. He hopes to do the same for Madison's key clients in India, a market he thinks is not much different from the west. "They are actually quite similar in terms of consumer behaviour being on an accelerated curve of device and service adoption in the broad Digital world," he says. In conversation with **Rob Norman**, **Sam Balsara**, Chairman, Madison World and **Vikram Sakhuja**, Partner and Group CEO, Madison Media and OOH

**Q] From WPP, which is a holding company present in so many countries, to Madison - a very proud homegrown company in India, which has recently come fourth in the world ranking for independent media agencies as per RECMA; what would be the differences and advantages of working in a completely different ecosystem?**

**Rob Norman:** Madison is a very entrepreneurial business. It's incredibly focused on the market here.

We've got a mission to maintain our market share and deepen our service with our existing customers. We have to leverage our expertise in understanding the current and evolving behaviours of 1.4 billion people and use it to our advantage. I am part of that extra effort to bring together the knowledge and experience from other markets in the world and determine whether and how we can give them a context for the Indian market to create value.

**Q] Sam, from you I would like to understand what led to the decision of bringing Rob onboard to envision digital transformation for Madison's clients?**

**Sam Balsara:** While India has taken great strides in Digital transformation, we are still at 40% Digital AdEx which is much less when compared to the western markets. As we operate only in India, we wanted

some exposure to what brands are doing there. How are they looking at Digital? What are the new opportunities? How do we properly integrate Digital as a medium into our overall plan and use it synergistically with other media? These are the kind of big questions in our mind and also that of some of our large advertisers. We thought it would be a good idea to get somebody who has been exposed to global markets, especially the US, to learn and adapt something from that for our brands here.

**Vikram Sakhuja:** I consider Rob to be one of the top minds in the Digital world. This gives us a unique opportunity to validate what we are doing here at Madison. I believe that he can catalyse our entire practice taking it to a new level altogether.

**Q] How do you plan to go about realising the intended Digital transformation for brands? Would you begin with the traditional or the new-age brands?**

**Rob:** We have come to a stage where we can't look at brands and media as traditional or new anymore. It has to be looked at from the perspective of the end consumer - how they communicate, shop, and entertain themselves. The role of media has always been to find the meeting places between brands and

Madison Media is a part of Madison World, India's largest homegrown communication agency group

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It was established in 1988

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Madison World through its 11 units served as many as 500 Advertisers, last year

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## VIKRAM SAKHUJA



consumers. While those meeting places have changed, driven by technology and consumer behaviour, you still have to find those people in those places. We want to be able to go with our clients on a journey to make sure that we are relevant in what we communicate, whom we communicate to and where their consumers choose to receive that communication.

**Q] You've been here for a couple of days, interacting with people internally and also meeting clients. What would you say is the state of digital preparedness at Madison and where do you want to take it from here?**

**Rob:** What happens is that businesses develop organically, so you go at multiple speeds. There are some things that you are really good at and if those talents are matched with a client that shares the same sensibility and ambition, you move up the Digital adoption curve quicker than you would with a less adept or less enthusiastic client. My philosophy has always been that if we could do the best work that we do for some of our clients, for all of our clients at all times, then we would have a terrifically better business.

So, one of the things that I've been doing both internally at Madison and while talking to clients is starting to understand where we're doing the best work and who's doing it and then looking at how we can propagate that work across the team. We've just produced a book that is a sort of compilation of the best work we've done to serve as a prompt for everyone to do the work of that quality and to use those examples to talk to clients and say, this is what we can do and this is how it worked for this company, raising the bar in the process.

**Q] Madison has many clients that have been with the agency for years. Which ones are you really excited to work with?**

**Rob:** Madison has a range of clients with vast portfolios and different needs. I can't really pick a favourite. Even the seemingly prosaic ones like Asian

Paints are a fascinating business and the work they do in terms of leveraging their community of painters is something no one would have thought could be activated in advertising or marketing a generation ago. I always like to look at businesses and figure out such assets that would have been difficult to use in marketing earlier, but are really valuable, and now with so many avenues like influencers and recommendations available, we can take these core operations and amplify them in a marketing environment. So yes, I am quite keen on those.

**Q] What is the biggest challenge for media agencies in India today?**

**Rob:** I don't want advertisers to think that we are moaning but the complexity of delivery of a great media strategy and great media execution is very different from what it was 20 years ago. That's

because we've had multiples of the number of platforms and data sources available to us. If advertisers want the same quality based on those areas I just talked about, the appropriate response is not to reduce the compensation of people whom you are entrusting with doing that job. I'm not sure if advertisers have got around to signing an appropriate economic contract with the people that are doing the work for them in this area. The industry in India is being slowed down by the compensation models of some advertisers.

Clearly, as one of the counter arguments to that advertisers would expect greater degrees of automation

and less manual processes. It has some legitimacy, but with a couple of caveats. While it's perfectly justified when it comes to doing things like reducing error rates and reproducing processes quicker and effectively, we also know that a lot of the real strategic inputs that are required in such a complex environment are not in themselves subject to automation. An ideal scenario for me would be a very senior level team of people who understand business and brands as well as platforms and customers, and below them have those

## BIGGEST CLIENTS

Godrej, Marico,  
Asian Paints,  
Titan, Blue Star,  
TVS, Raymond,  
CEAT, Pidilite,  
Bajaj Electricals,  
McDonald's,  
Lodha, Shaadi.com  
etc

“Over a decade ago, possibly I had got seduced by this notion of expanding to other countries which was a mistake. I think for the right reasons, India is where all the action is.”

**SAM BALSARA**



operating the automation tools at a high level. That's a good stasis to be in.

**Q] You were one of the first persons across the world to have the title of a Chief Digital Officer of a huge network. Since then, what have become the must-have in-house digital efficiencies for an agency today and which are the ones that can be outsourced?**

**Rob:** By the end of 2018, which was around the time when I left WPP, I had developed this understanding that no one should have the title of Chief Digital Officer because it signals the need for one which in turn means that the business has not become digitally native as yet. Everyone's got to do it themselves instead of running down the corridor to find a 'Digital person'. Having said that, you certainly have to think about all resources that are possible in the Digital world and then determine which ones are practical and useful to own and which are the ones that you can partner on. I think Sam's probably glad that he didn't build a metaverse department 18 months ago. I'm not too sure what the 'Chief Metaverse Officers' appointed by some of the big agency brands like Publicis and IPG are doing right now. My guess is they're now the chief AI officers; quick slip of the business card.

This brings to attention the wider issue of the extent to which you need to be a 'first mover' in this world versus a 'fast follower'. I argue that it's better to be a 'fast follower' because, empirically, I haven't seen first movers on Digital platforms maintain a sustainable competitive advantage over time. What this means is that if you think that the back cover of Vogue is the most powerful medium in the world, you could buy them all for life, if you had the money, and the second mover will never get hold of it. In the Digital world there is no analogue for that idea, and so there's merit in observing, learning and doing meaningful things that are likely to move the needle in the business.

**Q] In the recent past media agencies have seen their territories being impinged on by tech companies and consultancies to some extent. With this digital transformation card will you be competing with tech companies, consultancies or other media agencies?**

**Vikram:** The idea is to follow the consumers across

platforms, and so anybody concentrating on Digital only, is probably going to be missing some trick or the other because the game is all about 'integrated'. Similarly, we are in the business of actually executing the plans. Whatever the consultants and tech players might be doing, our competing space is the media agencies.

**Q] What is the emerging platform that you think will go a long way in India?**

**Rob:** If you're an advertiser or an agency, for the most part, the best thing that's happening is CTV. The idea that you can use some of the targeting and data capabilities of the internet on the biggest available screen and with the most desirable programming and context is a joy forever.

**Q] Sam, Madison was named after the Madison Avenue in New York. 35 years later, would you aim to have an office there or elsewhere, now that you have Rob Norman on board with a worldview and global experience that can help you expand to other markets outside of India?**

**Sam:** Over a decade ago, possibly I had got seduced by this notion of expanding to other countries, which was a mistake. I think for the right reasons, India is where all the action is. The kind of opportunities open to us that seemed reasonably attractive, didn't really materialize as good opportunities. For example, we went to Sri Lanka for a particular reason then we withdrew from there because it's a dot compared to India. The other neighbouring countries, or even those in Southeast Asia are relatively small. Also, as I see it, you want to go to some place with some competitive strength, otherwise it doesn't make sense. So, the growth potential here in India is so huge that we came to the conclusion that it's not a good idea for us to spread our resources thin, unless we had some other master plan like wanting to be a network and being in 100 countries, which we don't.

**Feedback:**

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