



HELPING YOU FOCUS:
Atul Phadnis, the brains
behind the TV guide
channel What's On India.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOUMIK KAR

The Guide

What's On India is raking in the moolah by helping viewers find something worthwhile to watch on the telly.

Ajita Shashidhar

STUDIES HAVE FOUND THAT 70% OF television viewing in India is unplanned," claims Atul Phadnis. That means an overwhelming majority of viewers switch on their TVs without knowing what to watch. Not surprising considering they're spoilt for choice—they have to choose from 11 Hindi general entertainment channels, 15 news channels, 9 movie channels, and over a hundred other channels. Consequently, many often spend hours flipping between them. Reason: They're convinced that one of those myriad channels is showing a programme they really want to watch. But truth be told, they're often just chasing a

shadow. They never find that programme but instead only end up making many little stops as they go back and forth on a remote controlled journey.

This journey without end proved to be an inspiration for Phadnis. It led the 36-year-old to launch What's On India. The channel serves as a programme guide, helping people zero in on something they want to watch.

Phadnis first sniffed out the opportunity for a TV listings channel during his stint as Vice-President of audience measurement company TAM Media Research. "Many

people told me they spent a lot of time trying to find something worth watching," says the What's On India founder and CEO. "A guide that could provide the schedules of current and upcoming TV programmes would be perfect for them. That's how I got the idea to get into the electronic programming guide (EPG) business."

The First Seeds...

Phadnis needed not an inconsiderable amount of funding to launch the service. And he didn't have it. But that little matter didn't deter the budding entrepreneur, who set about fattening his bank balance. He started offering consultancy services to media companies across the board. He got into the branded content space (in-film and in-television brand placements). And in 2005, he partnered with Julie Peterson, Star TV's then Head of Planning and Research (Asia-Pacific), to launch Media E2E, a media services company. "The only reason I got into consultancy and branded content was to pay the bills for the EPG platform we were developing," says Phadnis. But he still needed money.

At the time, the channel's premise was still a nascent concept. Though the onslaught of new broadcast ventures had begun, digital platforms such as direct-to-home were still in their infancy. And since little was known about EPGs, Phadnis struggled to get investors on board. "Fund-raising was difficult, but, thankfully, we managed to get a few far-sighted angel investors on board," recalls Phadnis. "They believed in the concept." The company got its first round of investment from First Wealth Advisors in 2006.

Pune-based tech outfit Persistent Systems developed the EPG platform for What's On India. By the time Phadnis was ready with his first EP guide, in 2007, the digital revolution had already begun. Hathway Cable was his first customer. Soon, a host of DTH as well as digital cable companies such as Reliance Big TV, Airtel Digital, Den, and Digicable came on board. When the business began to pick up, Phadnis decided to put his consulting efforts on the backburner. "Our success depended on how easily the industry embraced technology. Had digital TV not been there, our growth would have been slow," he says.

“We make the broadcaster’s content sound interesting and help consumers make the right choice.”

—Atul Phadnis,
Founder and CEO, What's On India



A Channel Is Born

By 2008, Phadnis decided to seek a fresh round of funding to scale up his business. When he approached private equity (PE) companies, he found they weren't as excited about EPG as they were about his idea of launching a TV guide channel. "We literally forced him to migrate into launching a channel," laughs Sandeep Singhal, Managing Director, Sequoia Capital. Sequoia owns a minority stake in the company. The PE firm has also invested in Asia Media, a guide channel in China, which, Singhal says is doing well.

"Atul had the concept in mind. We told him we would be keen to engage with him if he launches a channel," says Suvir Sujan, Co-Founder, Nexus Venture Partners, which also holds a minority stake in the company. "It's a great business model. Unlike other broadcasters, it hardly has content or distribution costs," says Sujan. Both he and Singhal claim that the business model seemed so sound that they were willing to back the project even through the thick of the downturn.

The biggest plus for What's On India is that both broadcasters and distribution platforms (cable and DTH operators) have

embraced it with open arms. "Distributors treat us like partners and don't charge us a carriage fee," says Phadnis. Most of them, he says, look at the channel more as a value-add they offer subscribers. For broadcasters, it is a neutral platform to advertise their own content.

In fact, What's On India makes most of its money by airing promos of shows on other channels. Apart from providing TV listings, it also airs short videos of these shows. "We make the broadcaster's content sound interesting and help consumers make the right choice," says Phadnis. "Broadcasters love this neutral model, where they can offer more in-depth information on their shows to their target audience," claims Sujan of Nexus.

The channel has also launched some of its content in the form of a show called What's On My TV, where television celebrities talk about their favourite TV shows. Then, there's a show called What's On The Sets, which is shot on the sets of popular TV shows, giving viewers a feel of the kind of work that goes into making them. "All this content is intended to help increase the interest levels of viewers in various shows," says Phadnis.

However, the channel is yet to attract any advertising revenue. But Phadnis claims to be in no hurry: "We want to establish ourselves before we approach advertisers. Even worldwide, 75% of the revenues of most EPG channels comes from show promos," he claims. "We want to attract advertising revenue, but we would rather do it slowly." Phadnis is clearly a firm believer in that old saying: slow and steady wins the race. And he intends to win. ■

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