

Goodwill as a vector of differentiation

The most enduring of brands are created through the smallest of gestures

YESTERDAY, the Karachi Sheraton's corridors were filled with the lilting tunes of Santa and Rudolph his red-nosed reindeer. The lobby had carol singers in resplendent red capes singing carols, and bringing in the 'bada-din' as it is often referred to in India and Pakistan.

Just a week ago in Islamabad, the Indian and Pakistani blind cricket teams gathered in the falling dusk where the tricolour and the white-n-green both swayed side by side, celebrating a rare 1-2, where Pakistan hosted and won its first World Cup for the Blind, and India reached the finals for the first time, to finish worthy runners-up.

The scene shifts to Doha, and the Indian triumphs were there for all to savour. Despite the disappointments of the hockey team, the shooters, the tennis legends and the athletes all charged with raging adrenalin were making sure India held its head high and flag unfurled.

All this, while you must be wondering what's common between the Indian Blind cricket team that went to the third World Cup and India's contingent to Doha.

Well, in both cases, there was a small but significant 'vector' that was parked subtly on the tracksuits and T-shirts on display, a vector that said that some companies, some brands *care*.

Take, for instance, the American

sportswear and fitness brand Reebok. The Indian arm of Reebok went well beyond its calling of just outfitting some of Indian cricket's regular heroes, Dravid, Kaif, Yuvraj, Laxman, Bhajji etcetera. The company decided to shift gear and look at supporting athletics and blind cricket. Unselfishly. There was frantic activity, endowing hundreds of athletes of varying

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shapes and sizes with sports kits in the shortest of possible periods of time, finding fabric that would suit the weather, and designs that would accentuate the comfort while engaged in each sport. Quite Herculean. Achieved too — thanks in large part to the creative and highly responsive efforts of Reebok, the brand

that said, 'I am what I am'. This is no empty advertising slogan coined for a few brief moments of television air time or square inches of billboard display. It is something that takes hold, seeps deep within and inspires the undreamt-of.

A few weeks ago, outside the Reebok store where some of the blind cricket team members had come to pick up their kits, especially the half-spiked cricket shoes, one passerby stopped and got chatting with the India captain Manvendra, only to be quite taken aback with the captain's words: "Reebok has shown faith in us, we have to do well." And that, the Indian team *did*, with a place in the finals.

It's the season of cheer and goodwill, as Santa would make us believe, across the world from Malibu to Mumbai. But the goodwill shown by such companies doesn't have to wait for the last week of the year, does it?

With some companies each spending over Rs 200 crore by way of annual advertising and promotion budgets, when athletes who need Rs 5 lakh for an annual training programme are turned away, when the self-respect of a visually challenged team is sometimes brushed aside with a "sorry, not possible" wave of the hand, you are left wondering how and why the 'goodwill' that is such an intangible yet important part of the balance

sheet, suddenly flies out of the window.

More than five decades ago, Shell, the oil major, ran a special campaign in the US, where the company urged safe driving with a simple message: 'We want you to live, because we want you to buy our oil.' The goodwill of a simple message, of an honest-to-goodness piece of reasoning from a do-gooder brand, went on to make such a lasting impact on the consumer's mind, it remained a 'goodwill' company for years after the campaign ended.

The bugles may have sounded, the medals won, the honour of representing your country and doing it proud done with. It is time now for a small silent thank you for the few brands and companies that decided that the season of goodwill and cheer should not have to wait for those who deserve every bit of it and more. They have entered the deep recesses of human heartspace. The salutations may be the smallest way of conveying a big thank you, but when the balance sheets of companies are frozen this December 31, many corporate executives may have to wonder, 'Did we miss out on a chance to add some health to the figures with 'goodwill'?'

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