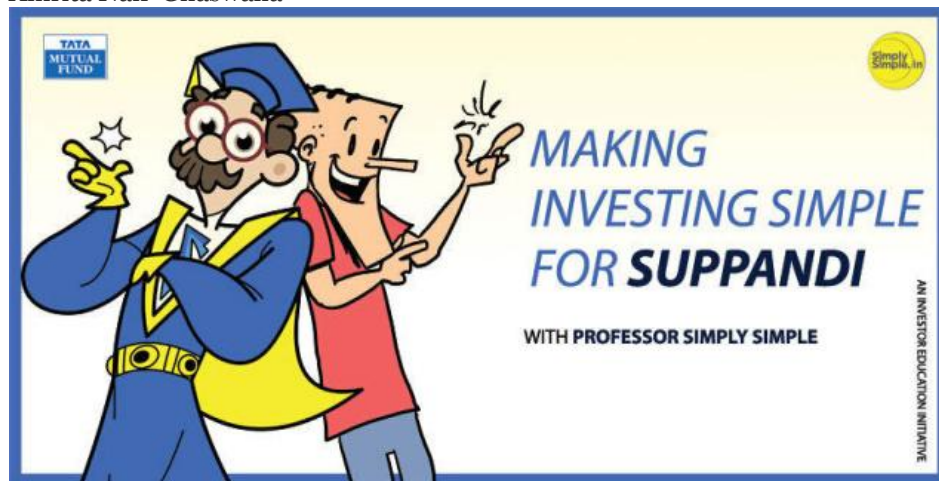


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How a Prof and a potato are selling units and tractors

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Cartoons are not just for kids anymore. Corporates and brand promoters are waking up to the potential of using endearing animated characters as a prime tool to reach out to adult consumers.

For Tata Asset Management, low financial literacy was a big roadblock in channelising household savings into mutual funds. For Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M), its tractor brand's presence in the potato belt was weak. Both the companies decided to latch onto cartoon characters to add to the warmth of the brand.

"While knowledge is freely available in a wired world, the formats in which they are available are not simple enough. People stay away from finance, because of the plethora of jargon that pervades the financial space," said Arvind Sethi, CEO, Tata Asset Management, a fund management company that handles equity, fixed income, and balanced mutual funds.

"More often than not, both buyer and seller don't understand the product they are dealing in. We realised early that the need of the hour was education. But by nature, education is not interesting. So the task before us was to figure out a way of making education interesting," Sethi told Business Line.

Tata Asset Management launched an investor friendly initiative Professor Simply Simple (PSS). "We started off with simple lessons that clarified financial jargon under the umbrella of 'Prof Simply Simple'. These tutorials are a set of simple presentations which attempt to explain a term by way of analogies and stories," said Sethi.

The lessons spread virally, and PSS became a popular education tool. Recently, Tata Mutual Fund and Amar Chitra Katha jointly released an investor education comic strip, 'What happens when PSS meets Suppandi', to explain investing concepts in an easy-to-read format.

Suppandi is a famous comic character who appears in Tinkle comics. A village simpleton, Suppandi is a lovable character, as is 'Aloo' a caricature of a potato, made to look like a strong farmer by M&M to sell its specialist tractor range.

M&M's communication was focused on presenting its M&M potato special range tractors as a complete solution for the potato farming community. The communication's main thought: 'Aloo Ka Asli Dum - Mahindra aloo specialist tractor - an Aloo comic' was distributed amongst the farming community to communicate the brand's aspects.

As Ravindra Shahane, Vice President, Marketing, Farm Equipment Sector, M&M said, "The comic book approach was adopted to tell the product story in an unique and engaging manner. The books were distributed on-ground during the brand's promotional programmes. We wanted the brand literature to be retained over a longer period, and comic books served the purpose well."

The idea was able to leave a huge impact on the target audience. A dipstick study conducted post some initial events, voted the comic as the most effective feature of activity by the audience. In a conversation between a healthy and a weak potato, M&M had the 'Tandrust Aloo speak' about the healthy benefits of acquiring the tractor.

However, PSS was conceptualised "with the sole objective to educate and bring awareness about finance and investing. Our goal continues to be education, not for selling schemes," maintains CEO Sethi.

He added that PSS was launched way back in 2006, much before SEBI's recent mandate to Asset Management Companies to set aside at least 2 bps of their daily net assets annually for investor education.

As for whether using a comic book approach would appeal to all members of the investee class, Sethi said, ``Story-telling is an age old format of communication from our childhood. But somehow on entering adulthood, we often discard this invaluable tool in favour of abstract definition and formulae. Our attempt through PSS is to get back to our roots, and re-discover the potency of story-telling to make financial concepts relevant."

The key differentiator, he added is the style in which the concepts have been explained. The simple and lucid nature of explanation connects with the masses instantly, a fact that M&M's Shahane concurs with, especially when one has to get the message across to a wide section of consumers.

Currently, PSS has a huge fan following of more than 96,000 on Facebook. The company said his lessons have been downloaded more than a lakh times from its website, and additionally, more than 1,000 letters of positive feedback each year, from across geographies, are received based on his caricature. Comics have turned out to be serious business models.

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