

The Guru of Market Research

Ayaat Attar talks to the go-to guru of market research, **Vishal Pandey**, on his award-winning research-driven market entry expertise

Chasing a deadline for a Ph.D. assignment in Strategy and Entrepreneurship, the Managing Director of Glasgow Consulting Group, Vishal Pandey, puts down his pen as he takes a break to chat with Aspire, letting us peek into his stellar professional journey that spans close to over two decades.

Shifting gears

Vishal started his two-year-long stint in Hotel operations as a management trainee at Taj Hotels, but when the process-oriented job failed to stimulate his intellect, he found himself looking for avenues to tap into his hidden potential. It was on his brother's advice that the young lad, acting on the counsel, immediately shifted gears from operations to sales.

His search for something more suitable landed him his next job with the sales team at the luxury hotel chain - The Oberoi Group. Not the kind who gets easily complacent, his quest for excellence continued and he was all game to be challenged further. The thing about growing pains is that once they kick in, they need to be attended to. So, on insight, he zeroed down on looking for an industry that specialized solely in advisory and business development. His aspirations were soon met when the booming real estate market in Bangalore was flooded with multinational companies looking for sizably large spaces to set up their offices. Vishal brought together his newfound passion for advisory and sales with the technical expertise he carried while working for Colliers International. What ensued by a random chance was a business development and research-oriented job that he was offered at a research and consulting

firm that combined both the attributes he loved - interacting with customers and trying to answer a client's business problem.

Riding high on the success of his career thus far, his desire to study further brought him to Glasgow, a city in the western lowlands of Scotland. Here he achieved a Master of Science qualification in Business and Real Estate, following which he landed an excellent offer from Deloitte Consulting in Dubai. It was a strategy and operations-related consulting job role focusing on tourism, hospitality, and real

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estate, along with a great promise of learning and regional exposure. An uphill journey so far, he was ready for the next significant phase of life braced with the tools of knowledge and leadership that he had gathered along the way.

Playing to Win!

Vishal observed that the Middle East though holding top spots across sectors generally lacked credible data and its fair analysis for several reasons. Detecting a gap and spotting an opportunity, he decided to establish a full-service business research and advisory firm with core expertise in market intelligence, market-entry, and trade development. In 2010, along with a partner, he launched Glasgow Consulting Group (GCG). “The underlying ability to anticipate competitors’ moves and analyze markets is the key to win-



ning,” says the expert.

With a tagline that reads, “Turning Marketing Insights into Winning Strategies,” GCG’s style of functioning draws from Vishal’s inherent research-driven personality. As winners of the 2018 MENAA Customer Delight Awards: Best Market Entry & Market Intelligence Firm in the MENA region, the company delivers sixty to seventy-five client studies and projects each year. Presented as a report in a deliverable deck which can range from 50 to 100 slides, the firm puts in plain sight whether the client’s business will be profitable or not; should one enter the market at all; or what is the right go-to-market strategy for the

given products or service.

Given its price-conscious buyers and fairly competitive margins across sectors, the MENA market is a complex one. While it is crucial for firms like GCG to assess on behalf of their client where one should price and position a product or service in a highly ambitious market, it is equally imperative for them to match up with the constantly changing expectations of their clientele. “Every client engagement we initiate reinforces our message of innovation and growth, and how a product needs to stand out in order to win,” says Vishal, who is very committed to finding new sustainable and profitable growth for all of his customers.

As a niche business carrying out client-focused work, GCG stood surprisingly undaunted by the presence of well-established global firms dominating the research & advisory space. “A company like IPSOS or a PwC has their clients invested from the word go. But when you are a small startup swimming in the same pool, you need to stand out in terms of your value offering. That way, you offer what an IPSOS or PwC doesn’t,” reasoned the specialist. Ten years into the business, GCG stands apart in its business model of B2B focus and “fact-based” consulting, delivering one effectual result one after the other.

Sherlock at work

Al Mandoos, an intrinsically UAE-based footwear brand with an international presence, was once a local sandal brand with aspirations of breaking into the bedazzling footwear market of Saudi Arabia. When GCG was brought into the picture, they resolved the problem statement (to enter the Saudi market or not) by examining the target market through aggressive and detailed research.

While interviewing the CEO of a Retail Mall in Saudi Arabia, Vishal noticed the Saudi man wear office shoes and not sandals (unlike Emiratis). On further scrutiny, it came to light that just like the Kuwaitis and Qataris, the Saudi Arabians preferred wearing shoes during work hours and wore sandals for all the other times of the day, a trait uncommon to the Emiratis, who stick to sandals throughout the day. Subsequently, a make-or-break recommendation was rolled out to Al Mandoos to expand their product offering to include shoes when entering the Saudi market apart from advising on the best locations to open in Riyadh and Jeddah. Their sound advice was well received, and the owner of the home-grown Emirati brand considered the recommendation when working on the Saudi-focused product offering and locations.



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Few years on, the stores of Al Mandoos found great success across Saudi Arabia and currently hold a good positioning in the market.

Practical and highly analytical, GCG has always kept the client's best interest at the helm of things and has on occasions advised them against taking the step forward. When a bunch of investors from Syria expressed an inclination towards setting up an alternate medicine university in the UAE, at a time when the phenomenon was not even recognized, Vishal's organization went with a no-go, despite the enthusiasm of the client, thus saving them from a loss of millions.

Vishal believes in offering the right advice to a client situation backed with sound data and justifications. In full conviction and data, he once told a client not to enter into the Bottled Water manufacturing business as it was a highly competitive category with a few hundred players. The client still went ahead with his own decision. Vishal smiles and says, "we are now very good friends," as we still went ahead and did a complete market study and financial feasibility and helped them in connecting with over 20 F&B establishments "pro-bono" so they could start supplying to them. Vishal calls himself a true connector and is always looking at ways to add value as he believes these things drive lasting client relationships.

Scaling against the storm

For the astute planner that Vishal is, choosing the name 'Glasgow' for his venture came to him quite organically. Derived from the Gaelic word 'Ghlaschu' – meaning 'dear, green place', it lives up to its name by providing the right approach and strategies for clients to enter, evolve and grow. The company conformed to its name when the rest of the research & advisory market was visibly shaken by the unanticipated advent of COVID-19. Although they did experience some slowdown in 2020 during the lockdown, they quickly spotted new opportunities and set renewed focus on sectors like logistics, automotive & mobility, industrial, and manufacturing, amongst other sectors well in line with the regional government's sector priorities. Bagging three new clients amidst the worst natural calamity the generation has seen, Vishal's key piece of advice to firms still battling the aftereffects of the pandemic would be to reinvent and pivot their product and business model offering according to the altered market space. He urges business owners struggling to cope with the situation not to get bogged down by circumstances but instead work on areas they still have some control over, like designing a more impactful website, strengthening or changing one's market strategy, a renewed focus on new product development, and making sure to be adequately informed and flexible with the changing scenarios.

Partnering with the self

While an analytically charged workplace keeps Vishal aware, a more Zen approach in his personal life involves staying away from the needless clutter of too much social media and politics. He is mindful of the fact that success is always relative and believes in the attitude of gratitude as the guiding principle in his life.

An ardent movie-buff, when in the pre-climax scene of the critically acclaimed film 'Chak De India!' based on life incidents of a real-life hockey hero, actor Shahrukh Khan's character urges his team to zone out their opponent and focus on making the most of their time on the field, Vishal took home more than just a great cinematic experience.

The father of two has the rest of his day planned. Having taken a fruitful break reliving close to fifteen glorious years of his research and consulting career, he goes back to finishing his third and last assignment of the second semester of his Ph.D. studies that makes him an ongoing student and lifelong learner. ✨