

MEDIA 2

Imagine joins the GEC brigade

An overcrowded market doesn't deter ambitions, finds Bindu Nair Maitra



NDTV Imagine's Sameer Nair believes that the days of single channel domination are over

These are interesting times for the Indian television industry. With the general entertainment space making news lately, the established market order seems set for a change in the future. There are the key incumbents, STAR, Sony and Zee looking at protecting their turf; newcomers like 9X, Viacom 18's yet-to-be named GEC and the soon-to-be-launched NDTV Imagine, who are looking at changing the old order and production houses looking to cash in on the boom.

Sameer Nair announced recently that NDTV's proposed Hindi GEC channel to be called NDTV Imagine would be launched before the end of January next year. Besides Nair, who heads NDTV Imagine as CEO, other key functionaries include Shailja Kejriwal, EVP-Content, Harsh Rohatgi, EVP-Revenue management and new ventures, Manoj Vidwans, EVP-marketing, research and communications, among others.

Nair agrees that it's going to be an interesting ride to the launch date, adding, "With two to three new players and three to four incumbents, the GEC space makes for an interesting volatile mix, controlling, as it does, 35 to 40% of the audience viewing pie."

The new market dynamics is likely to put added pressure on broadcasters from media buyers and advertisers, hoping to cash in, on an era of abundance. Nair disagrees, "STAR Plus enjoyed six to seven years of unrivalled supremacy that was an aberration. If there are three to four players between whom the market share is divided, they typically trade top spots, that's how richer markets like USA operate. It's how the whole market rises, as it is not one sole player who is dominating the market and at some level, depressing the growth. The domi-



'The extended Indian joint family'



'Female empowerment...TV style'



'Lots of women...Lots of drama'

nant player's price point becomes the benchmark. So this new order is better for the industry." Nair does not deny that there is pressure, but he believes that where margins on business and operating costs are concerned, it is the new kids on the block who have an advantage over the incumbents, adding, "Established players will have to revisit their own plans, from how business was done in the past, to what it will be like in the future. The newer GEC players will be entering the market, with all that already factored in."

He adds, "Older players have the advantage of already being present in the market and have the advantage of brand and programme awareness and brand loyalty. New players have to spend that much more time and money in establishing the brand. It's an interesting trade off."

Nair points out that they will be competing not just with rival GEC channels but also with any other form of entertainment that competes for viewer engagement, "We don't fight each other as much as we fight for audience share and to get people to spend time watching TV itself."

While NDTV Imagine has a line up of programmes from established production houses like Synergy Adlabs, Sagar Arts, Hats off Productions, Rajshri Films, Endemol India and SOL among others, Balaji Telefilms is absent from the initial programming line-up. Nair expects them to come on board sometime in June next year.

Nair has termed the launch of Imagine as the return of the GEC. But with viewership surveys noting the general decline of general entertainment channels, in favour of more niche channels, only the coming months will prove the extent of the challenge that lies ahead in the Hindi GEC space.