

communications and consulting firm, worked with them to create short, inspirational videos to build awareness and generate interest in the Video Challenge prior to its formal launch.

Even as these were going up on the “India Is...” website, we were working to secure the active participation of India’s diplomatic missions, cultural centers, and tourism offices. To create interest among visitors to India during the contest period (October–December 2011), we produced “India Is...” bookmarks that were sent to all Indian visa offices. Anyone applying for a visa would get his passport back with our bookmark.

This was an incredibly busy period for us and for the Skarma team. While they had barely a month to develop a robust, fully functional technical platform for the contest, we were also working with them to put together a credible board of jury members before the launch of the contest. We were able to get an excellent mix of filmmakers, critics, and academics for the board. In our brief to them, we conveyed that the entries would have to be judged on technical parameters and also in terms of the relationship of the theme to India.

We announced the competition on September 1, 2011. “Create an original short video (under three minutes) that illustrates best what you understand or perceive ‘INDIA IS.’”

Starting October 1, 2011, we accepted entries, with the participants standing a chance to win up to \$7,500 and/or a Free Return Trip to Incredible India.⁵ We set some basic rules:⁶

- Participants must be above eighteen years old;
- Videos must be under three minutes; and
- Videos should fall under one of three themes:
 - India is Colorful
 - India is Creative
 - India is Wherever You Are

The competition was open for submissions until December 31, 2011. Through that three-month period, our online presence grew steadily and started to drive entries from unexpected corners of the world. The contest closed with the advent of the new year; the Video Challenge had received more than 260 entries, of which 245 qualified for the competition. Of these, 123 entries were received internationally from 42 different countries in six continents. Apart from that, through this period we received close to 25,000 hits on our website from more than 16,000 unique visitors from 149 different countries.

In January 2012, our board of jury members judged the 245 valid entries and shortlisted 30 finalists, ten from each category—Colorful, Creative, and Wherever You Are. We were now ready for the final phase that envisaged online voting on the shortlisted entries. In an effort to go beyond the social media following that we had already build and impart greater momentum to online voting, we partnered with MobileFilmWorks for the voting phase. MobileFilmWorks is an online and mobile video content company dedicated to delivering the best in independent film to the Internet and the mobile community. Their subscription base of over 280 million gave our finalists and their films a chance at global exposure and viewership from an audience they would previously have had minimal access to. We now had two different platforms that our films were being showcased on and could be voted for on: the “India Is” website and under its own genre on MobileFilmWorks’ platform .

On the February 1, 2012, the Video Challenge announced its finalists to the public and went live for a six week-long online voting process culminating on March 15, 2012. Our finalists were spread over twelve countries, namely: the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Thailand, Slovakia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and, of course, India. On March 23, 2012, the “India Is... Global Video Challenge 2011” announced its winners:

CONTESTS AS A TOOL OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THE “INDIA IS...” GLOBAL VIDEO CONTEST

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Key Words

India, social media, multi-media, crowd-sourcing, photography, video, reputation, nation branding, outreach, cultural diplomacy

There is a growing recognition amongst public diplomacy practitioners for the need to reach young people. In large parts of the developing world – in Africa, in South and Southeast Asia, in the Caribbean and elsewhere – persons below the age of thirty-five constitute approximately seventy percent of the population. Among them, the educated, urbanized youth are growing up in an era in which connectivity and information on the go are taken for granted. India or Indonesia, Nigeria or Nicaragua, the phenomenon is rapidly gathering momentum.

How do we engage with this new generation? How do we encourage them to connect with India in ways that are interesting, creative, and positive. And in the process, can we also add some value to Brand India? If contests are a good way to engage with the global youth, how can we develop a contest that meets our objectives?

This was the backdrop for the “India Is... Global Video Challenge”¹ that we launched in September 2011. We decided that we would target a core audience in the 20–40 age group through an active social media campaign across platforms such as Facebook,² Twitter,³ and YouTube.⁴ A modest budget of U.S. \$100,000 was allocated for the program, along with a principle commitment to sustain it for three years, pending satisfaction with the initial results. To run a campaign mostly targeted at the youth, we hired Skarma, a Mumbai-based company where the average executive was an intimidating twenty-six years old.

This was not a lot of money to launch a brand new global campaign. We thought a few high profile endorsements would be the best way to get it off the ground quickly. We approached Dr. Shashi Tharoor, a member of parliament and former Under-Secretary General at the United Nations, and Mr. Shekhar Kapur, a celebrated Golden Globe Award-nominated filmmaker, to come on board as brand ambassadors. Dr. Tharoor has spoken often about the importance of soft power, and Mr. Kapur is that rare Indian filmmaker who has managed to transcend the boundaries of Bollywood to direct globally acclaimed films. Dr. Tharoor’s one million-plus followers on Twitter and Mr. Kapur’s active presence on social media were major attractions, and we were delighted when both graciously agreed to lend their time and their names to the campaign on a pro bono basis. Skarma, a Mumbai-based

⁵ “Prizes,” India Is, <http://www.indiaais.org/prizes.php>

⁶ “Rules - ‘India Is’ Global Video Challenge,” Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YMQZOWdhjI&feature=plcp>

¹ “The India Is... Global Video Challenge,” Public Diplomacy Division, Government of India, www.indiaais.org

² “India Is...” Facebook, www.facebook.com/realindiaais

³ “India Is...” Twitter, www.twitter.com/realindiaais

⁴ “India Is...” Youtube, www.youtube.com/realindiaais

- Grand Prize Winner - “That Indian blaze in my dream” by UmangKhanna
- Jury’s Choice Award - “Slovakian Dreams of India” by AnezkaChmolova
- Best International Entry - “India Is: For Skiers” by Jonathan Simpson
- Best Entry Prize (India Is ... Colorful) - “Is India Colourful?” by Ravikiran D
- Best Entry Prize (India Is ... Creative) - “Odd Balls” by MatiurRahman
- Best Entry Prize (India Is ... Wherever you are) - “The Wall” by Pramod
- Special Mention Award - “Gitanjali XII” by Nicola Gamberi& Elisa Miggiano

The inaugural year of the contest has left us with some tangible assets, beyond the 245 entries, the 30 finalists, and the seven winners. Our Facebook page has almost 65,000 fans, and a potential “friends of fans” reach of almost 40 million; our Twitter followers span 30 different nationalities, and our YouTube channel has received over 42,000 views in the short span of six weeks. Additionally, the “India Is... Global Video Challenge 2011” was featured on 48 websites and covered by at least three newspapers^{7,8,9} as a direct result of its growing online presence.

So what’s next? Buoyed by the encouraging results of the first year, we have decided to exercise the option of funding the contest for two more years. We believe that we are in the process of creating a strong “India Is...” brand that will create partnerships and collaborations with a broad range of companies, organizations, and products that are looking for global outreach.

The “India Is...” brand is also getting ready to diversify. In its second year, the video challenge will be accompanied by the “India Is... Photography Challenge.” With the growth of the platform, we now hope to make a success of the “Photography Challenge” in the coming months, returning with a newer website and a more interactive presence on social networking sites. We will be foraying deeper into making this a world class online competition by designing and developing additional online applications to increase user interface satisfaction and concentrate on streamlining the process to enable more people to participate. The objective, once again, will be to engage with the broadest possible cross-section of audiences around the globe.

We now have the Tourism Department and its well-known Incredible India¹⁰ team on board as a key partner. Incredible India is an international marketing campaign launched in 2002 by the Government of India to promote tourism in India to a global audience. This gives us access to its online portal and its global network of tourism offices. We are also working to ensure that our technological platform is state of the art and user friendly. Our partnership with Google India gives us access to Google Maps, the world’s largest mapping platform. This will allow us to geotag the entries of the photography challenge on a map of India. Additionally, we will use Google’s latest product, Google+, currently the fastest growing social media platform, for our sign up process. And the Taj Group of Hotels,¹¹ which operates in fifty-two destinations, in twelve countries spanning five continents, will play the role of Event and Hospitality Partner to the “India Is...” brand. They have committed to hosting four events over the next two years. Its vast network of premium hotels around the world also makes the group an important partner to showcase, exhibit, and promote content generated through the “India Is...” contests.

Looking back over the past year, we have reason to be satisfied. Despite a modest budget, we have created a platform that enables us to connect with young people across different geographies. The demographics of our Facebook page speak for themselves. As of June 2012, percent of the fans on our Facebook page were in the 18–24 age group and another twelve percent in the 25–34 age bracket. The fact that 60 percent of our fans are in the targeted 18–34 age group is significant. Their geographical distribution is equally important. Countries as diverse as Indonesia, Egypt, Morocco, Iraq, Peru, Argentina, and Malaysia provide the largest number of fans, with cities like Cairo, Jakarta, Alexandria, and Medan coming at the top.

From a public diplomacy perspective, these are encouraging insights and give us the confidence that, over the next two years, this platform is set to grow exponentially. The interest already seen from several companies and organizations also gives us the confidence that by the time we exhaust our planned three-year funding, the “India Is...” brand will be strong enough to become self-sustaining.

“India Is...” page on Facebook, www.facebook.com/realindiais

“India Is...” page on Twitter, www.twitter.com/realindiais

“India Is...” page on Youtube, www.youtube.com/realindiais

“Prizes,” India Is, <http://www.indiais.org/prizes.php>

“Rules - ‘India Is’ Global Video Challenge,” Youtube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YMQZOWdhjI&feature=plcp>

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⁷ Karthik Subramanian, “Ministry Taps Social Media to Tone up Image Abroad,” *The Hindu*, Nov. 28, 2011.

⁸ Mansi Choksi, “Country Road, Oh DARLING yeh hai India,” *Times of India*, Oct. 30, 2011.

⁹ “When is the video contest?” *Deccan Chronicle*, Nov. 30, 2011.

¹⁰ “Incredible India,” Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, <http://www.incredibleindia.org>

¹¹ Taj Group, Indian Hotels Company Limited, <http://www.tajhotels.com>