

#FUTURE

KOCHI | 22-23 MARCH 2018

SCRIPTING THE FUTURE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN ‘GOD’S OWN COUNTRY’

When the Kerala Government approached MD Niche Media Consultants for strategizing and brand positioning Global Digital Summit #FUTURE, an ambitious gathering of experts in digital technology in India and abroad, they never thought that the objective would be accomplished in the first edition itself with massive 765 media clippings worth Rs 30 crore in terms of ad value!

Initially, they had a lurking doubt that it could also end up as one of the plethora of tech conclaves that are routinely held across the country without any substantial media publicity. There is media fatigue about such conclaves – the organizers knew it; so did we. The mandate they gave to us was that it was a prized event for them and it must not peter out into a regular, monotonous conclave that doubles up as a jamboree.

Stripped to its essentials, this government conclave revolved round just six technical sessions spread over two days, but what was encouraging to us was a formidable line-up of speakers ranging from Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella (who did an onscreen address) to former RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan and Infosys non-Executive Chairman Nandan Nilekani.

Our challenge was three-fold: how to pitch the two-day event (March 22-23, 2018 at Kochi) in a state that rightly has the bragging right about its touristy appeal and thereby the stubborn but plausible moniker of God’s Own Country. After all, it was not happening in India’s Silicon Valley (Bengaluru)! The second challenge was how to position Kerala as an emerging powerhouse of India’s digital/IT revolution and tell its digital advantage to the outside world. Lastly, we had to create and sustain media interest in the summit of a technical nature. On top of that, we had to make it an enduring

event through brand-position because it was going to be a biennial conclave. Apparently, there were lots at stake for the state government, especially their reputation to hold the event of such magnitude in a glitch-free manner and in a blaze of media publicity.

Things were hardly looking up, though. The event was just a month away, and there were only 50-100 registrations; the number went up marginally to around 200 with two weeks remaining. It was enough to give some jitters to the organizers who had set a target of 1,200 registrations with a fee of Rs 5,000 (discounted fee was announced for startups).

Our initial strategy, which included four ramp-up events in Bengaluru, Kozhikode, Kochi and Thiruvananthapuram did create some buzz. But we realised that was not enough and it had to be stepped up through another set of strategy. And the result! There were 1,200 paid and 600 other registrations. We had ignited such an interest and created such an aura about the event that the registration process had to be stopped a day prior to the event, warranting us to come out with a press release to announce it.

The core of our renewed strategy was to convene a meeting of editors by the Kerala Chief Minister a week before the summit. At the March 15 meeting, the CM dwelt upon the magnitude and huge implications of the conclave. The editors' meeting itself was well covered by the media, giving a powerful trigger to pre-event publicity.

This was followed by a series of quality press releases, at least one a day, offering insights into each of the six sessions and highlighting the expertise and eminence of the speakers. All our pre-event contents carefully highlighted how digital technology could be the game changer by impacting people's everyday life. The media lapped it up, giving traction to the event and emboldening us to execute our further strategies.

A curtain raiser press conference was held at Kochi two days before the conclave, and its extensive coverage set the tone for the summit. A day before the event, all the Kerala newspapers came out with a special feature (half-page to one page) incorporating the contents we had issued, besides columns highlighting the digital future of the state. We prepared these columns for some eminent participants of the conclave on the basis of a questionnaire given to them and disseminated to the media houses for their news package on #FUTURE. We even secured an OPED article on the event by the Kerala IT Secretary in all editions of Hindustan Times on March 21, a day before the conclave was to commence.

Another strategy was to ensure contents with quality and lucidity as not many newspapers in Kerala have tech writers. Our 20-member team comprised seven content writers and two editors, and we issued 7-8 press releases each

on both days in English and Malayalam. Thus, all the newspapers reserved one-two pages for the # FUTURE. Our press releases constituted 50 to 75 per cent of the content that was published in all the state-level newspapers and formed part of the coverage in national dailies. Some leading newspapers gave a full-page coverage to the event even after it was over!

Our strategy of making the speakers interact with the national and regional media after a particular session yielded several in-depth stories. It was these interactions which helped the 20 journalists brought by us from metropolitan cities to file insightful reports for their newspapers, magazines and television channels. The Telegraph published two full page articles on the basis of these interactions, while the Financial Express commented on it editorially! Additionally, we managed publicity for the existing technology facilities in Kerala like hardware incubator Maker Village, leveraging the presence of visiting mediapersons.

A strategy that paid us handsome dividends was the moderation of all sessions by top names from the digital, broadcast and print media. Getting consent of top shots of the media, and that too for a state-level event, was not easy. But we persuaded them to join by emphasizing the seriousness and magnitude of the conclave. It was unprecedented for any such event in the country.

Thus, we could secure the presence of Sagarika Ghose, a prime time news anchor, political commentator on ET NOW and consulting editor of The Times of India; Shereen Bhan, Managing Editor with India's leading business news channel CNBC TV-18; Zakka Jacob, anchor and Deputy Executive Editor at CNN-News18; Swati Khandelwal, National Editor and Anchor of BTVI, a premium English business news TV channel; Nandagopal Rajan, Tech Editor of IndianExpress.com; and Darlington Hector, Editor with Yourstory.com, a reputed online tech portal.

There was a conscious strategy behind selecting these media gurus. One, they would bring celebrity quotient to the event and offer their insights into discussions as moderators. Secondly, they are big social influencers because of their huge following on the social media platform. The strategy paid off; they constantly tweeted or sent messages on Facebook, giving the event a huge impetus.

When the conclave concluded, the metrics for the campaign had exceeded our client's expectations way beyond, removing all creases of doubts and anxieties from their face.

The tangibles of the event are working well: E&Y, NISSAN, Tech Mahindra, BYJU's, Mapmygenome have all shown interest in setting up shops in Kerala

which has many 'digital' stories to tell to the outside world and how great incubation is brewing in the backwaters of this tiny coastal state.