

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

Episode 18: Naveen Rajdev

Naveen: Hi. My name is [Naveen Rajdev](#), and I'm the Chief Marketing Officer of [Wipro Limited](#).

Whitney: Will you tell me, as if I were a ten-year old, what exactly Wipro does?

N: Sure. You know it's kind of interesting because sometimes I find it hard to explain to my kids, what we do. So from in simple terms, you know, we take our clients big technology problems and solve them both through disruptive and designed way, as well as operational way. So think of us from perspective that, you know, we can help you come up with a new solution which can be solved using technology or we can help you enter into a new market, leveraging technology....

W: So give me a specific example.

N: Sure. And just to finish on that...and extend it globally. So, uh, I'll give you—there are plenty of examples—when you look at it...We have a client who is a telecom company in Europe. In some countries, they are a telecom company and in some countries they are a bank. Now how do you...how can a technology partner come across and help them build a platform which can enable them, you know, to be a bank and some other organization? That's one simple example, you know, it sounds simple, but, yeah, if you try....

W: So a telecom company in Europe that needs to act, function, as a bank...

N: Bank.

W: ...in some certain markets...

N: Yes.

W: ...because people are going to text the money, etc.

N: Many ways. Many different ways.

W: Ok.

N: I mean, it's multi-channeled platform. They have kiosks, ATMs, so whichever way, just bring everything together, integrate everything together. One of the sports clubs we are working with—[Chelsea](#)—we talked about it in the media, quite a bit about it, in terms of completely reimagining their fan experience.

And the way the methodology works is we try to live the life of a fan in 24 hours, you know, like, okay, what it means to be a fan of Chelsea 24 hours before the game. So you imagine, you think more disruptive, you think more from a design standpoint. You help them go ahead and build that experience for the fan and then integrate...so imagining the experience, reimagining the experience, building it, is the design aspect of it, but when you extend it globally, and make it happen for 500 million followers on social media across the globe. And when you try to enable those platforms, to that scale, yes it requires....

W: This is the...this is [Chelsea, the soccer team in the UK?](#)

N: Yes, the soccer team.

W: Ok. 500 million.

N: Yeah. They have 500 million fans. So when you work with that, with those kind...at that scale, it becomes a very different kind of thing to deal with.

W: How would you describe your role as a CMO? What does, exactly...what does it involve to be a Chief Marketing Officer.

N: In simple terms, the way I see my role as, who is going to be buying our services and technology from us, two years down the line. And every single day I worry about that. So it's about forward-positioning the company so that, you know, the customers...the people who are going to be our customers two years down the line—they see us as relevant. I worry about that. I mean, that is the fundamental point I have taken up. And the second point I look at is our brand; we have a very, very iconic brand, both globally and as in India, and of course, many interests outside of technology services, although I look at the technology business from a CMO standpoint. But yes, you have to really worry about, uh, the brand. Brand is like, you know, our, our war cry. Like, you know, it's the war cry of 170,000 people in Wipro, every single....

W: Your war...

N: War cry.

W: ...war cry. Oh.

N: Yeah. So how do I want to build that? What we stand for; how we every morning when we wake up and then think about Wipro is what goes through my mind every single day. Uh, I have had times in the campus, you know, as I walk in, I see somebody getting a very, you know, a different bag from a conference which has a competitor logo. I've had times when I have bought the bag, a Wipro bag for the person and said, "No, you cannot." You know, it's not

about the competitor part, but I think, you know, understand what our war cry is. Do you understand who we are and what we stand for and what we do for our customers? And those are the fundamental things, in very simple terms, for my...you know. Who's going to buy from us two years down the line and what is our war cry and am I able to...can I hold the war cry for the 170,000 workforce we have?

W: When you said this to your son, what did he say?

N: He did not get the war cry part.

W: Maybe he needs to go climb a mango tree.

N: Yes. You know, but, uh, but I think everybody gets that part. That, you know, who you are in the future, who are you going to be developing for. And I think that part they get it; that part they get it. Um, over the last 20 months, 21 months I've been in this role, I think one thing which we have really driven inside the team is trend thinking, and not just our team but, you know, across Wipro. That trend thinking, you know, who...what is going to be the next thing, but not five years down the line....

W: So, trend thinking....

N: Yeah, trend thinking. What is going to be...what is going to be the trend two years from now? So worry about that so that you're always ahead of the customer because....And then there's a, there's a, there's a intuitive math to, you know, two year period. I don't want to be thinking so far out that, oh yeah, I'm going to use my iPhone to transplant my lever. But it is something—what is going to be more relevant for our customers—rich technology. Or I see the growth of IOT sensors growing, so yeah, let's talk more about that. Let's make sure we have the service offering which caters to that.

W: And [IOT is internet of things](#)?

N: Internet of things, yes, yes.

W: You've just mentioned that one aspect of your job is to represent your company's brand, to, to...

N: Yes.

W: ...sound the war cry. How have you been able to be disruptive in this role?

N: You know, first of all, when I tell people that, you know, we need to be relevant for our customers, or people who are going to be our customers two years down the line, I think that in itself doesn't...I mean, people take time to

really think about, “Oh yeah, ok I get it, what you’re talking about.” Um, I took over this role, Whitney, at a point in time when I think I dealt with a phenomenal amount of disruption, you know. Our customers are completely getting disrupted. I’ll come to the point in terms of what we did to be disruptive. Our customers are getting disrupted. They’re busy, they, you know, many of the companies have no idea. 52% of the Fortune 500 companies are hardly making any profit. Our customers are completely busy in terms of, you know, oh, who is going to disrupt them; what is going to happen? When we look at our traditional services, technology services, uh, business process services, they are getting fundamentally disrupted as the models are shifting more towards digital. Uh, we invested in four companies in the last 18 months, you know; we bought four companies, we made four acquisitions. We invested in eight other companies, eight start-ups through our venture fund. I had a new CEO, you know, taking over. What more disruption anyone would want in the span of 21 months.... But the fundamental belief of let’s be relevant; let’s try to constantly improve our brand promise. So first thing I took was trend-thinking; that was quite disruptive. I don’t think anyone agreed from that standpoint—is this what we need to do?—but once everybody saw that what it could mean; how we can...how the whole organization can start to think more forward, um, I think that was one of the things that started to....The second thing we did was we started to all wear jeans—my team. Against the company dress code. But the idea was that, you know, if we are a technology firm, let’s be a cool technology firm. Let’s be...let’s see if we can try that. Uh, to almost a year and a half later our CEO announced that, “Ok, I think everybody should be walking into the jeans, into the company.” So, yeah, we wear country club jeans, they’re not faded or anything like that. And, uh, because we are not going to be in a formal meeting, but, uh....

W: So that’s trend thinking. You set the trend

N: Yes, we set the trend. On that. The third thing we did was...which was really against everyone...I [launched a magazine called Wool](#). And there was really no reason behind calling it *Wool*—you know, W stands for Wipro, L stands for Limited; Wipro Limited. Somewhere, you know I wore that kind of cognitive hat and thought about it We wanted to name it...let’s build something cool. Um, and behind that cool it just became *Wool*. I was, I was drying my hands in a bathroom where a piece of wool was just flying out, you know, underneath, and the name came to my mind, “Oh, yeah, let’s name it *Wool*.” And we named the magazine *Wool*, and it turned out to be...it’s a trend magazine. Contrary to everyone’s belief, we did not launch the digital version of it. Given the fact that we are the purveyors of digital, we are the ones who hold it. Because I had read on other trends that, you know, the physical book sales, on Amazon, they were going up. The second thing is, the printing has become more precious. You know, we take 2000 pictures in a month, but we print only two, those which are....So, why don’t work hard to make something very, very precious and print

and give it to our customers and, you know, they're going to like it. And just make sure it's controlled in a way on who it goes to, and what we feature in there. So taking complete liberty of the magazine, you know, to make it more independent. I got really beaten up on that; that....

W: You did?

N: I did, I did. From very, very senior executive team. Beaten up, as in, like in a good way. They had all the right to ask all the contrarian questions. That, you know, I get so many magazines and we put them all aside and why would you print? And then I give them that status thing that the print precious is a trend we observe. Today it is one of the things, the kind of people we have featured in the magazine, uh, the way our customers are liking it; I think that was fundamentally very, very constructive.

W: So the feedback has been positive?

N: Feedback has been very, very positive, um, we are building it, um, building that as a very, very strong property. Our entire competition stack is looking at us, "What did they do?" Uh, and, you know, the good part was the team started thinking more disruptive. That was the most fundamental thing which I achieved behind that; think more trends, think more disruptive, be ready to take risks; stand by it and have conviction of doing it.

W: So there was something meta going on here; so the magazine itself was almost became and emblem or talisman of your focus on doing things differently. Changing the status quo and so it gave people a physical manifestation of that.

N: Yes, absolutely. And then many, many steps we took after that, in terms of how we, how we represent our brand. How we go after influencers, how we connect, you know, with our customers. There are...there are lot of things we are doing which are very different from...which anyone can challenge...for last...this is what we are used to doing and how come you're not participating in this event or how come you're not doing this. But no, we're not doing it because we can see forward, where, where...I mean, it's always about where the buck is going. And I think, uh, we got some pulse of it.

W: In many ways, it sounds like your job is really to be the embodiment of your brand, of the Wipro brand. How far does that responsibility extend into your life, into other aspects of your life?

N: Everywhere. You know, everywhere. If you talk to my kids, they'll tell you, um, sometimes, um...I mean, right now, what my nine year old is flipping through, uh, is [Best American Infographics, 2015](#). [Maria Popova](#), you know, she has some role in that, in creating that book. As he's going through that,

there's another book called [Listomania](#), you know which lists out all the cool facts, you know, around that. Does he need to really, you know, go through that? Probably not...yeah...so. I mean, I...but I...I think this role has given...that's why my two children say... love the...love being the CMO of Wipro and the most disruptive digital leader disruptive times. I really love it; I'm really loving that part where I get to wake up in the morning, absorb disruption and pass it on somewhere which right from climbing that mango tree existed in me. That how I could disrupt, you know, and then play it on with different things. So, it's very, it's very deeper. I mean, anyone I meet, you will hear from them that, 'Oh yeah, I mean, you know....

W: This is who Naveen is.

N: This is who I am and it's not conforming to the norms doesn't appear to be very normal. In fact, I'll give you one thing. In my, in my college, you know, the last year of college when I stayed at home. I mean, of course, day scholar, as a day scholar. My entire room—I did not have posters on my room—but I took crayons and wrote graffiti, and drew graffiti on my walls.

W: You did.

N: I only have one picture surviving of that. Yes, right from the floor to top. Anyone, anyone who looked at my room said, "If my kids would do it, we'll throw them out of the home." One, my parents were very tolerant about that, but I think, even as of now, you know, I have not seen anyone do that. And I have great memories of that room, hand drawn every single inch of the wall.

W: I would love it if you would send a copy of that photo and we could put it up with this...

N: I'll try to.

W: ...if you can find it.

N: Yeah, if

W: Yeah, that would be fantastic. I have all these imaginings about what it looks like. Why did you decide to draw that...do graffiti on your wall?

N: So, a little bit of restlessness. Here's one thing, given a choice, I would have become a designer of some sort, or stayed with a creative field. I couldn't, um, you know, or I didn't, whatever. I didn't work on that or whatever, whichever way. So I did not get any professional education. But that's the beauty of creativity; you can be creative in anything you do. So when the time came to, you know, I'm a...I'm now in college and I need to express myself, you know, when everyone is putting up posters, you know what? Somewhere, I drew

something with a crayon on the wall and the texture looked just absolutely amazing. And then I went ahead and drew a small broken wall on it. And then, 'oh, cut it out.'

W: You were off.

N: You know, whatever...until every single inch of the wall was with the crayon, you know, had graffiti on it. Um, you know, I drew Fido, 'normal is boring,' which was 7-Up emblem at that point in time; yeah, I mean, lot of stuff, lot of stuff.

W: So here you were, a physics major...

N: Yes.

W: ...and you're doing graffiti on your, on your wall of your bedroom.

N: Yes.

W: Fantastic. Fantastic.

N: And I can talk about Theory of Relativity with the same ease.

W: Yes, okay. Cities.

N: Yes.

W: It's one of your passion projects. You're concerned that second tier cities in the United States are becoming irrelevant; they're being disrupted. Will you talk about what that is, where that came from, which cities you consider to be second tier cities?

N: Sure. Um, yeah, I mean, you know, over the last many, many years that is becoming my more and more pet, side thought. And becoming more and more mainstream. You know, I think, I look at it in multiple ways. One, we all have seen how the manufacturing has become very, very global; technology services has become global. And then I saw that, you know, how cities in some states, or in some countries, they're commanding the major share of GDP—I mean, more than 50% in some countries. And then you look at our American cities like, you know, I live in Atlanta, or you look at Kansas City and Cleveland; there are a bunch...a ton of American cities...when you look at Pittsburgh, you know. Sadly now people call them, you know, now part of the rust belt. But when you look at it, there was a point in time there was some great talent; these cities thrived because of the great talent. And these cities thrived because they kind of concentrated some sort of talent, one way or the other. And that gave cities some kind of a brand name, you know, when Detroit was called

Motown, or City of Light. I mean, you know, City of Light. What's wrong? You know, everything starts to look exactly similar and the talent starts to, you know, they go to high school in one city, or they go to college, and all of them you see a flight into whatever they can find. And you know, the major towns are really concentrating a lot of talent, which is not bad, but you know, it puts a lot of pressure on them. And you start to see these cities, you know, what we saw at the time of rust belt. In this digital era, you know, this could happen much faster. So unless some cities start to create some programs, where citizens take some pride in it...I mean the good part about digital is you can work from anywhere. I mean you can design a studio...you can put up a studio anywhere. I mean we ourselves have a lot of studios; we ourselves have developments and dozens of different cities are doing. So, it just struck me that, you know, are we...are we doing enough in these cities or are we going to see, you know, another sort of a rust belt or I don't know what the metaphor for the silicon....

W: I think rust belt works.

N: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, that's where it started. You know, in another 15, 20 years, you know, the world, the majority of the GDP is going to come from 65 odd cities and I want my city, if some citizens really get up and say, "I want my city to be part of that 65," there's going to be good competition; there are going to be good trade deals. You know, why are trade deals between the countries, why not between the cities? I mean, what's wrong with that, right? You know, how some brands can be attracted into those cities so that the talent can start to concentrate. And, I mean, there was a point in time when Murano, Italy was famous for glass. Why can't we go out and create another Murano?

W: Where did this come from? You said your wife is the controller for the City of Atlanta, and it's interesting because if your company does its job well, it accelerates the disruption—potentially—of these small cities. So those are two potential reasons why this could matter to you, but there's something very deep and I'm wondering what it is?

N: I think about it when I look at kids. You know, not just my kids, but you know in general. I definitely think from that perspective of what will be the opportunities for them? You know, um, there were many, many years I wanted to move to New Jersey as part of KPMG and, you know, I asked my boss—his name was Jules—I'm like, "Jules, can I move to New Jersey?" He's like, "Yeah, no problem." I mean, you know, I was living in Chicago and you know I was traveling and I said, "You know it could bring it down." But then he called me into his room and said, "Close the door." He says, "Is this the place you want your kids to grow?" And I'm like, "I don't know." He says, "No, you want to think about that. Is this the community, the kind of exposure...if this is the place then definitely move." I did not move to New Jersey. I continued to live in

Chicago and we moved to Atlanta. But that is where I think there is some deep-seated thought from those fifteen years back which, which, which is in my mind, that are we really letting...I mean, you know, there was a place we chose to live. You know, can we...if my kids start to feel...anyone start... "No I want to live in Atlanta. I have my family here, extended family here. Um, but I don't...I just see jobs evaporating. I think cities can start to stand up and create those opportunities. Why not? I think that's the obligation of every citizen of that city, to really feel pride. I mean, don't we take pride in our teams? You know, football teams? So what's wrong with taking pride, I mean, you know, I live...I may live in New York, but I'll still wear Falcons jersey because I take so much pride. So why can't I do the same thing when I'm in Atlanta, right, do something for it? That's just....

W: All right so let's put your...with your CMO hat on, let's say you're sitting down with the mayor of Cleveland—what's one or two things they can do, or he or she can do in order to, to not get disrupted?

N: Sure. One, really identify...I mean, there are two things which go hand in hand. The biggest driver becomes the education, you know, in terms of what your school system is, what you're teaching, how you're building...how they're building the school. Are they looking forward as a city? Their vision of the city 10 years from now, 15 years from now. Then there are certain elements you start to really pull up from the city and say "I think this is one area where we can start to concentrate talent. We can really go out, reach out to companies and tell them that we really supply...we really have this kind of talent; come and work with us and we'll make it happen." Um, so education becomes one of the fundamental things. They need to be thinking forward. That's why trend thinking is very important. You know, from my company's standpoint right now I might be thinking three, but then somebody has to think five, somebody has to think 15. Because when you are looking at changing the school system or working through the curriculum, you know, it does take time, I mean, you know? And, um, so yeah, one from that. Pick up the best aspects of the citizenry, build the pride, uh, you know, build the pride of citizenry. Let them go out, invite the companies, you know. We always talk about, "Ok, you know, here's the start up in my community which is coming out and rightly so, when it comes to internet of things and lots of stuff. There is going to be lots of stuff that comes out from DIY garages. You know, there's a lot of potential out there. But when you look at fundamentally these things, you know, from the city's standpoint as they start to build up, yeah, they can reach out to these bigger companies and say, "Guys, come over." You know? "Hey, Google. Hey Facebook, hey Wipro, come to my city. This is what I have to offer you, um, you know, we are next digital pod. You've created one London, you've created one in San Francisco, because for us talent is more important. We promise you. You know, here are our universities. We will work with you to build that talent. We will work...we'll ensure that the talent stays." Like, you know, Whitney look at it this way. No client would give me work if I take up a project and, you know,

deal with the attrition and the people are leaving the project. I mean, they give us because they fundamentally believe that we can accomplish.

W: Right.

N: So when I look at investing in a city as the company, to build my next digital pod, talent becomes the most important thing.

W: Right. So education drives talent...

N: Talent.

W: ...and then what is the distinctive strength of that city.

N: City, yeah.

W: So if talent that's in this city that may not be anywhere else.

N: Oh, absolutely. You know, when you look at it, Atlanta was promoting itself, "oh you know, after Hollywood we are the next production, big production house." You know, a lot of movies...Hidden Figures was shot in Atlanta. A lot of famous movies...but you know there was a small thing which many people actually ignored. When you look at the payment processing – First Data, NCR, Elavon, Global Payments - they all have concentrated their headquarters in Atlanta.

W: Interesting.

N: I mean, yeah. So, why aren't we....

W: So it's a payment capital.

N: ...why aren't we continuing to bring more companies than them and start to concentrate talent in that?

W: Interesting. How do you think about risk?

N: I see this more as a disruption element. I don't see this as an operational element. Um, containing risk is an operational element but I see today, it's more disruption risk.

W: Risk that you will...an entity or person...

N: Yes.

W: ...will be disrupted.

N: Yes. So you need to really work from that paranoia.

W: Interesting.

N: It's not fear as much, you know, as I may be....you know, because I think the opportunity...

W: And awareness.

N: Awareness, yeah.

W: Ok. Alright, What will you do to disrupt yourself in 2017?

N: So, um, I think if I can, if I can do something for the cities. If I can, uh...so Whitney when I met you and since the time I've been pursuing it. So I'm really meeting a lot of influential people in the cities. If I can get that voice out—I'm not looking for anything from that from a commercial standpoint—but generally, if it can really help some cities to really put that plan in place, I think I will be...I will feel disrupted. You know, because that city...because the whole citizenry of the city will disrupt themselves. And you know, in a large system it becomes a very, very tough task. I mean, you know, when you look at it.

W: So you will evangelize...

N: Yes.

W: ...and continue to reach out to people...

N: Every single day.

W: ...and have those conversations.

N: Every single day. Every single day, I don't shy away. In fact I'm meeting some influential people in the city of New York this month. I've met a lot of people in Atlanta, and many other cities. So we'll continue on that journey.

W: Terrific. So we will follow up with you in six to nine months' time and see how it's going.

N: Absolutely.

W: Naveen, thank you so much for taking this time to talk to me. I really appreciate it.

N: Thank you. Thank you for having me Whitney. It was amazing, yeah.