

# Getting Brands to Tune In



## 'Sonic fits right in with our digital journey'

**A** quick chat with Kartik Jain, Executive Vice President, Head Marketing at HDFC Bank who has spearheaded the bank's sonic branding initiative

**At which point did you start thinking of a sonic marketing strategy?**

We are on a journey of digital transformation. In the last year, we've transformed all our products and services to be available to our customers on all our electronic channels—the mobile banking app, net banking, on the phone and such.

As we moved from a traditional high-touch branch environment to a high-tech digital environment, we realised we have to have a high-touch element as well. At that point, [we thought of] sonic branding and a sound pneumatic, which would be omnipresent across all our channels. We needed our customers to experience that and it came out as a strong solution.



**A relationship with a bank is different. You just come and withdraw or deposit money. Does sonic branding and stuff like that really matter?**

Just as you described, it's a very transactional image. But we are looking beyond that. There is a caring that we stand for, as a bank, along with customer reliability, progressive change and constant evolution. How do you communicate that? We found that if we add a layer of sound, it goes to your ears, to your brain and into your heart. That builds a conscious linkage and recall for the brand. Wherever you go, interact with HDFC bank; you'll see, feel and hear us as well.

**How much time did the logo developing process take?**

About three months.

**How many iterations did you go through?**

We had four workshops and had three options at the end of the final one [on] logos and mogos. We researched them and checked which one is most aligned to what our brand stood for, ie a brand which is caring, provides stability, dependability and trust, along with innovation and dynamism. It came across very clearly that the selected logo had a very strong resonance with what we as a brand stood for.

**Marketing purists say that sonic branding becomes more popular through multiple insertions, advertising and a great amount of airtime. Are you looking to increase your ad spends, post this?**

The point is not about increasing adspends which we will, in any case. What we need to understand is that a logo is not a jingle. It permeates all touch points with interactions. What that means is all our channels will have the logo: With three-and-a-half crore customers across thousands of ATMs, through net banking, phone banking, the website etc. We will build up the logo as a customer experience...

**S**onic branding, or creating recall and association for your product through a piece of music, is the next big 'connect mantra'. Rajeev Raja, soundsmith and founder-co creator of BrandMusiq, who left advertising after 25 years in the profession to combine his two passions of music and brands, tells Pradyuman Maheshwari how a simple tune can bring alive the values and persona of a brand. And seals the argument by playing a few notes on the flute.

**There has been an amazing response to this logo or musical logo of HDFC Bank. You had the entire staff humming it at the launch, including Managing Director Aditya Puri. Walk us through the process of how it came about...**

Music is a holistic way for brands to look at sound. But in my 25 years of experience in advertising, I've found that music is used in an ad hoc manner. You use it for a jingle but often don't put in the 'brand filters' that you would normally put when you create, say, a visual ad. So we wondered if there was a space to look at a robust brand process which leads to the creation of sonic scope for a brand that is unique to its values and persona. And that really was the beginning of our entire thinking. Luckily for me, it brought together my two passions, brands and music. I have also been a musician for 25 years, so I guess I'm blessed in many ways that I had both these options for an alternate career even a bit later in my life.

**So the HDFC Bank work was done in three months?**

Yes. We didn't compromise at all on the process, and I think Mr Puri, Kartik [Jain, the CMO] and the HDFC team need to be complimented on having the vision to [say yes to] sonic branding.

**One has a great relationship with banks, but it's generally an impersonal one. You go to the bank, withdraw your money, deposit a cheque, get your statements and such. Why would they need sonic branding?**

I think every bank on the planet needs sonic branding, and that is the market we're looking at. Today the bank is much more than a place where you keep your money. It touches your life in many, many ways, whether it is with investments or financial advice and relationship management.

HDFC is already moving into the digital space with new innovations, but when it comes to emotion and engagement, music can play a big role. We believe that for a brand like HDFC, contemporary branding ideas are crucial and reflect the brand's forward-thinking process.

**You have dealt with so many brands in this last 25 years. Why haven't others opted for sonic branding?**

Because there has not been a process till now. We've worked out one out that understands the brand as if it were a human being. It is a way that brings the personality of the brand alive, in sonic terms. For instance, I am known by my friends to be a bit of a jester and a creative person at the same time. So if you want to translate [my personality] into a sound, what would it be? What kind of sounds give you a feeling of creativity and

what kind of sounds denote humour? Music creates moods and emotions. If you take any piece of music, it will trigger emotions like no other medium. If you use this powerful force strategically to convey the values and persona of your brand, what emerges is sonic branding.

**Brands pay a lot of attention to music in the form of jingles and signature tunes, but you're taking it to the next level...**

Absolutely. We are looking at all branding parameters. Fundamental research shows music affects human beings and their behavior, but how does it affect consumption? We are going to engage a psychologist, an academic, a social scientist and musicians to create an archive. For example, we know that Indian ragas have certain [associated] emotions and that there is a morning, an afternoon or an evening raga, and we know that a raga will make you feel in a certain way but nobody has codified it. So one of the things that we are going to do, which is going to be like a treasury for us, is to start codifying Indian music and also Western scales.

**How do you convince a marketer that this is good ROI?**

We do a simple thing in our presentation. We ask everybody to close their eyes [while we play some music] and tell them to just let the music allow certain images to flit across the mind and trigger some emotions and memories.

**[Plays a short piece on the flute]**

So did you see any images? Did it give you a feeling of calmness, of being transformed to a different plane? You didn't feel this by accident. This is an early morning raga, and when we played it [at other places in the world, like] a summit in Moscow, people say they saw greenery, rivers, children playing. That they felt calm. This is how we begin to say that if music is thought of strategically, you can almost guarantee [a certain kind of] emotion and feeling.

**In specific terms, does that mean the HDFC piece will bring more customers to the bank?**

In the long run, yes. But I don't think we should look at it in such a, shall I say, businesslike manner. More importantly, in today's world, brands are no longer about being seen, but being experienced.

**And a better relationship with clients?**

Of course. If we hear a piece of music that is interesting, nice and makes you feel good, you start associating that mood with the bank. So over time, whenever that music is heard, you go into that mood. As far as sonic branding goes – and this holds true of any communication or branding exercise – if the pudding is not great, then it doesn't matter whatever dressing you add to it. I think HDFC is a fantastic bank and it's proven this through action. HDFC Bank has not, if you have seen, spent millions of bucks on advertising campaigns. It's an experienced brand with a historic legacy, and every Indian today is embracing it.

**Ever since you moved out of DDB Mudra, you've immersed yourself in this BrandSonic. How has the business worked out for you?**

We've been in it for three years, and while the first year was encouraging, the second was disastrous. We wondered whether we had taken the right decision. But the third year has been amazing. It's like suddenly the ball has started rolling, and in the last 12 months, we have finished about six big projects of blue-chip brands.

**So no regrets or possibility of going back?**

No, this is my new passion. And no regrets, only joy.

— The Rajeev Raja & Kartik Jain interview appeared in BrandStand on Zee Business. Catch them at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Vne\\_zv\\_5K4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Vne_zv_5K4)

**Q & A**  
**Rajeev Raja,**  
soundsmith & founder  
BrandMusiq