'The US and India corporate problems are same'

Thomas Friedman in 2005 drew attention to the new shape of the world—flat. And **Sanjay Bansal,** *chairman and managing director of Gurgaon-headquartered Business Octane, is bent on showing how. In an interview with FE's* **Chanpreet Khurana,** *Bansal says that the immersive telepresence solutions company wants to shrink distances, and also is focused on developing solutions that can be applied not just in India but across geographies. Edited excerpts:*

You are currently implementing immersive telepresence solutions for Vedanta. What is it you're doing for them exactly?

Our biggest customer right now is Vedanta. It is an order for 12 (immersive telepresence) rooms, and they are going to be using these for their monthly and quarterly business reviews and routine point-to-point calls.

These are 12 rooms set up across different locations?

Five have been built and handed over. These are Tuticorin, Jharsuguda in Orissa, Sesa Goa in Goa, Vedanta House in Mumbai and Hindustan Zinc headquarters in Udaipur. Work is still going on for seven others, including its London and Zambia offices.

What benefits does the company see from implementing this solution—cost savings, ease of use, etc?

You don't even need IT support staff to make the call for you. You just select who you want to speak with from a roll down directory, and include them in the call with the touch of a button. And you can even connect some of your legacy videoconferencing rooms. Overall, if I were to give an analogy, immersive telepresence is like a very high level of system engineered car. The first car that came out resembled a rickshaw with an engine on top of it. Videoconferencing is like that—the moment there is a bump on the road, I feel it. And the cars of today address hundreds of objectives that were not taken care of in the first go. Immersive telepresence, if you were to quantify what the customer gets compared with videoconferencing, you can safely say that the experience is 8-10 times better.

Is the costing for immersive telepresence also proportionately higher?

Typically immersive telepresence would cost two-and-a-half to three times more than a videoconferencing implementation. It is a very strong business case that when you put in a videoconferencing facility, your rooms don't get utilised more than 10 hours a month. This was a study done in the US for pharmaceutical companies—they are the biggest users of videoconferencing technology there. According to the study, when these companies use immersive telepresence, the usage goes up to 60-80 hours. So maybe you have paid three times more, but your usage is at least six times higher—your return on investment is faster.

But it happens in a country like India where connectivity is not as widespread as may be desired, or connections as fast? How do you translate those aspirations in the Indian market?

One of the most important bandwidth providers in the world is Tata Communications, and it is headquartered in India. Also, bandwidth cost has come down dramatically over the last three or four years. We often have chief information officers coming to our office, and I tell them I have 45 Mbps bandwidth any-to-any here. I ask them what they think it costs me. Their typical estimate of bandwidth cost is three to four times what we are actually paying. And they get amazed that the bandwidth is available.

Let's take the example of Vedanta. Vedanta locations are in the jungles, actually. To go to Jharsuguda in Orissa you need to take a train to Kolkata, then a bus – it takes 36 hours to reach. The bandwidth is there, and the cost is not what most would imagine. The other thing is, the bandwidth requirement for immersive telepresence has come down by half in the last three month.

Bandwidth requirement for immersive telepresence has come down? How's that?

Earlier, we required 15 Mbps (megabits per second) for a room where 15 people would be able to talk to 15 on the other side. Now, that same room requires 7.5-8 Mbps bandwidth. That is because new advancements have been made in the codec technology. We use Polycom codecs inside our telepresence cards. Now, Polycom is the first company in the world to have implemented high profile in all their codecs. High profile is an International Telecommunication Union body Standard, which has come out from the research that we wanted to slash the bandwidth by half.

How do you compete with these cloud services that are available for free or next to nothing? Take the example of Skype.

It is all in the degree of experience. And when we say Skype, it is one-to-one communication not a group of people here talking to multiple groups of people at multiple locations. With our solution, up to 600 people across 40 different locations can join in the same call. They can also exchange data, expect that when they get up to explain something on a white board, they are audible at all times and their writing is legible across centres —this is known as media-rich immersive telepresence.

What would you estimate the telepresence market at in India currently?

The market is at a very initial stage where it is being created. Though there have been some studies done which predict that by 2012 there will be a $20 million telepresence market in India, there has been no study done on what is the size of the market today. Since last year, we have done 500 presentations of immersive telepresence in India. There are orders coming in, but putting a number on it is a challenge because everything is in the realm of possibilities. It has not yet become a mature market that you can say it is going to grow like this. For example, one of our orders is of the size of $3 million, and that is also to complete a partial requirement of the client.

How do you see Business Octane growing through this phase?

Business Octane has five executive experience centres at Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai and Hyderabad. We have a team of 40-plus salespeople who are knocking on every single opportunity. Business Octane is creating the need, making people aware of what this technology is all about.

Business Octane wants to be best not only in India but in the world. Going forward, we would like to set up these executive experience centres across the world. Because the problems of collaboration and learning are not unique to India—the problems of corporates in the US, Japan, China are the same as corporates face here in India.

Who are some of your other clients?

Our customers are essentially either Fortune 500 companies or large Indian corporates—Vedanta is one, Citrix is another. Then we have DuPont, Agrotech, a Fortune 500 company, TVS Capital, a body under the ministry of earth sciences and Air India. The ministry of earth sciences has an institute called the Institute of Tropical Metrology in Pune. It has implemented immersive telepresence distance learning solution. Sheraton hotel has chosen Business Octane for its telepresence. This has just happened, so it will take another three or four months to deliver.