

IT'S NEO, IT'S NOW!

While many seasoned sports television channels had their stumps uprooted in the bygone cricket tournaments, Neo Cricket still swears by its willows... Will the innings last long? PALLAVI SRIVASTAVA wonders...



At a time when *pundits* were busy predicting the slow but sure death of India's cricketing frenzy (*both in stadia and on TV sets*), the team at Neo Sports was quietly sniggering. After all, they were happily adding to their ad revenue coffers throughout August, September and October, even as advertisers were fleeing from rival ESPN Star Sports' Champions Trophy and Champions League for lack of any TRPs. Champions Trophy (*the ODI tournament with eight international teams where India made an early exit*) got an average of 1.1 and Champions League, which was betting big on the T20 format, got an average of just 1.7 TRPs. Even ESPN's Rs.100 crore marketing buzz failed to give a push to the tournament ratings.

The enthusiasm and quiet sniggers at Neo Sports however were not entirely unwarranted. Advertisers have teamed up in hordes and Neo's strategy to buy up rights of all cricket extravaganzas in India has seemingly paid off. So how did Neo Sports try to liven up the damp mood of both the viewers and advertisers and give a boost to its six month-long cricketing season (*which started just after the champions*

league)? Verma replies, "We had a burst of ad and marketing activities just before the beginning of the Hero Honda Cup to light up the mood and promote the event." Neo has spent Rs.5 crore on the marketing of Hero Honda Cup. The company's advertising kitty focussed largely on print and television (*a 60:40 ratio*). It also roped-in controversial yet popular cricketer Harbhajan Singh as the brand ambassador to promote the tournament... And it was not just advertising! Neo has activated a lot of PR activities. "We organised lots of media interactions with players and other key people. This generated extra interest amongst the audience and boosted their confidence in cricket."

And the good start of the ODI tournament reflects that the channel's efforts have worked. As per aMap, the fourth India-Australia ODI got a TRP of 2. Neo Sports' Marketing Head Abhishek Verma, says, "We are very happy with the initial response to the tournament. And these are aMap ratings... The TAM ratings for cricket matches are generally double of that of aMap. Moreover, as it is becoming a close fight for the series we are expecting an average TAM ratings of 8-9 points for the entire tournament. The advertisers' response to the tournament has also been good. Neo Sports got eight



Abhishek Verma,
Head, Marketing,
Neo Sports

sponsors on board, including brands like Hero Honda, Tata DoCoMo, Gillete *et al.* In fact, DoCoMo has joined in as a sponsor for the entire six month season on Neo cricket. The ad rates are Rs.3.5 lakh for a 10-second slot for bulk buyers and for usual buyers, it is Rs.4 lakh. This is at-par with the much hyped IPL 2 ad-rates. When quizzed about the warm response from advertisers for the Hero Honda Cup despite the recent bad

performance of cricketing events on TV, a media planner said, "Any India playing cricket attracts eyeballs. That's why bilateral tournaments with India get a very high rating and wider reach, compared to a tournament or a Twenty20 cricket (*excluding IPL*). This is because there is no fear of India getting knocked out. And that's why advertisers are excited about the India-Australia series." Neo cricket is expecting Rs.150 crore revenues from the ongoing HH Cup alone. For the six month long season the channel expects ad revenues approximating to Rs.500-600 crore. This figure is close to 40% of the entire advertising spend on cricket in a year (*Rs.1300-1500 crore*).

But the question is with channels like ESPN (*seasoned in sports broadcasting globally*) and SETMAX (*that has some of the hottest cricket properties*), will a two year-old channel like Neo cricket be able to make a space for itself? On the face of it, this may look

like a herculean task, but Neo has been doing well on the back of the telecast rights for all international and domestic cricket played in India. In fact, the channel became the most watched sports channel in 2008, with a market share of almost 28%.

And keeping in mind India's fascination for cricket (*at least when the Men in Blue are around*), Neo is sitting on a gold mine... at least till it owns those telecast rights! **RS**

One days are still in vogue!

TRPs of India-Australia ODI matches on Neo Sports and DD1

Date	Channel	Rat-ings	Net Reach('000's)	Channel	Rat-ings	Net Reach('000's)
25/10/09	Neo Cricket	1.2	14374	DD1	2.5	29001
28/10/09	Neo Cricket	1.7	16516	DD1	3.0	29714
31/10/09	Neo Cricket	1.9	16832	DD1	3.4	31118
02/11/09	Neo Cricket	2.0	15828	DD1	3.9	35147

Source: aMap ratings