

**NAME**  
Nandita Lakshmanan

**PROFILE**  
Founder, The PRactice

**HER BIGGEST LEARNING**

The words of Infosys co-founder Narayana Murthy: "A clear conscience is the softest pillow and when in doubt, disclose."

by Subroto Bagchi



## THE THIN LINE

Nandita Lakshmanan, founder of The PRactice, says that when 'lobbying' becomes 'fixing', it is no longer PR

She is not your giggly, middle-aged, power broking, public relations (PR) woman who wants to wear a designer black gown. Nandita Lakshmanan was the fourth employee at Genesis when it started. She worked her way up and in 2000, she started her own company. She called it, The PRactice.

"It was not restlessness that made me move on. It was [the question] — what am I going to do next with the great exposure and grooming at Genesis? The PR business had stagnated in the sense that there was no value addi-

tion given the opportunities that existed. So there was an innate need to raise the bar and go beyond what large firms were doing," says Lakshmanan.

The nascent organisation drew attention when she won the Infosys account at a time when The PRactice was just a four-woman team and there was little to show except the professional reputation the founder brought from her earlier organisation. What's incredible is the fact that in a world in which everything changes at the drop of a hat, her company has retained that account for 10 years now.

I am here to know from her, why businesses must know about PR. I also want her to tell me where the line must be drawn between PR and deal fixing.

"Every company should treat public relations seriously. A conscious corporation puts its reputation among its stakeholders above all else. It may not necessarily be the most visible in the media, nor [does] its recall need to be high in the larger community. Ironically, I have come across many successful companies, with greater market-share, stronger balance sheet than their competition, but they feel weak in public

relations because their competitors are more visible in the media. Good PR need not mean constant, high visibility in the media," she says.

"But people think PR is all about managing the media," I say.

"Media engagement is critical, but it is merely one aspect of PR and it must be used judiciously. PR can enhance your relationship with the financial community, help become a part of the local community, highlight issues to help change policy or behaviour. It can assist in managing and enhancing employee relations, pre-empting and preparing for crises and therefore mitigating their impact on your business.

"PR cannot completely subvert a negative impact — if you've done something wrong, you have to suffer the consequences like in any relationship. And remember, a relationship is two-ways. You build it irrespective of

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Subroto Bagchi

**PROFILE**  
Co-founder & Gardener, MindTree Ltd., best-selling author

**FORBES INDIA BRIEF**

Every fortnight, exchange tales of the road with successful entrepreneurs

whether times ahead are going to be good or bad. Sometimes, you need a relationship particularly when times are bad."

"Give me an example," I ask her.

"We worked on the Bangalore International Airport [BIAL] project. Now, here was a project where the government was involved and of course, local communities were against it. We started with advising the client on how it should communicate with the government, the corporate sector, the media, and the public. 'Face the ire and the wrath,' was our advice, 'but make sure you put your point across', and they had very valid points. We engaged with the editors of leading newspapers and ran a 'busting myths' campaign through which we presented facts against every allegation.

"We made Albert Brunner, CEO of BIAL, participate in public forums

organised by citizens, something BIAL folks were initially very reluctant about. No, the bad publicity did not stop, but what we managed to do was to even out the bad and the good. Media coverage became balanced. The media started to turn to us each time it was fed a negative story," she says.

"Where do we draw the line between PR and deal fixing?" I want her to tell me because that is what is on top of my reader's mind.

"When lobbying becomes 'fixing', it ceases to be in the domain of public relations," she says. "Many PR firms do cross the line; they hire former bureaucrats in the telecom or the retail sector — people who know the 'right people', who know how the 'system' works. PR can secure meetings with ministries, advise the client what to say, follow up, but there is a line. In India, as in many parts of the world, that fine line between influencing, advocacy and deal making is often trespassed."

She adds, "It is all about understanding the true meaning of PR and that understanding must flow from the top. PR professionals need to be seen as trusted advisors and not merely as implementers. Also, CEOs must be open to training. What to say, what not to say, when to say it. It is about delivering your story well. I have seen reluctance on the part of CEOs and senior management on being told how to deliver their story. It is wonderful to work with people who acknowledge you as experts and agree to follow your advice."

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Photographer Mallik Katakol has another assignment and I must head to my day-job. Before we pack up, I ask her to tell me the most significant learning she ever had from among all her clients in all these years.

"Narayana Murthy," she says. There is a pause. Mallik and I wait. Slowly she repeats his words. "A clear conscience is the softest pillow and when in doubt, disclose." ■