**Q&A with Shripad Ashtekar, Founder & Managing Director, Signpost India Ltd.**

*The son of an ex-serviceman, Shripad Ashtekar is a first-generation Indian entrepreneur, the founder & managing director of Signpost India Ltd., one of India's top independent and vertically integrated AdTech media enterprise. A self-taught enterprising go-getter, he turned his vision into reality by making a dent in the advertising industry and did not let his humble background and small-town beginnings to be counted as an obstacle. He is the only entrepreneur in the industry, who never envisaged the organization to be family-owned which is the prevalent organisation structure followed within this industry.*

*Emulating the proverb into action "one has to take a few steps back before taking a bigger leap," Shripad Ashtekar has astutely worked with smaller canvas of various formats of advertising opportunities, right from transit, conventional, and street furniture, by executing projects with a carefully engineered vertically integrated strategy to understand the nuances of trade that directly affects business matrices but have an underplaying role.*

*With a decade of learning, he has led exponential growth at Signpost within a short span of 5-6 years, powering Signpost India into one of the top three Indian companies in the domain.*

*Innovation and creativity come naturally to Shripad and it drives most of his day-to-day key decisions. Recognising that new ideas take shape in fresh efforts; he has made it a policy at Signpost to make investments in start-ups that are strategically aligned to the vision of Signpost. Growth has naturally steered acquisitions and mergers at Signpost at his behest. He is very well read and has first-hand experience is driving programmatic strategies in advertising completely convinced that smart devices that drive data assimilation and analysis as the future. Today all key decisions at Signpost are data driven with investment in ecosystems that generate credible business intelligence. Data has played a key role in client servicing as well under his aegis with pioneering proprietary ROI mapping of campaigns for the clients of Signpost for unparalleled transparency in client servicing which starts with data driven campaign planning assistance. Beyond advertising, he leverages his vision in infotainment, mobility & data with strategic investments – both in form of advisory and capital which is bringing differentiation within the trade.*

**How did you get started in Out of Home (OOH) advertising?**

The inception of Signpost was done by essentially looking at the changing infrastructures of bigger cities. We looked at the great opportunity in unlocking the void that existed in these cities in terms of public convenience facilities, information channels and amenities. We have taken up various PPP model projects which not only provide a delightful experience to the citizens but also create revenue for the Government and have been successful in adding these new dimensions to various cities in recent times. The scope is really vast and we have just touched the tip of the iceberg.

**Tell me about your company.**

Signpost is an independent ISO certified digital out of home (DOOH) enterprise. We have wide experience in implementing large scale public oriented projects including street furniture, transit, public bicycle sharing and an internet traffic monitoring system with over 32 government authorities across the country. We also serve more than 100 corporates, PSUs, tourism and MSME brands through our own network of 11 offices. We have earned recognition in national and international forums with 57 gold, 43 silver and 28 bronze awards like ABBYS, EMVIES, KYOORIUS, Dragon of Asia, etc.

**How was the experience?**

We pioneered the concept of 'hyperlocal programmatic advertising' to evolve individualistic character to media assets to bring about the demographic creativity unmatched even by print, smartphone or radio and set OOH in a parallel league. We created the largest digital billboard network in India in Mumbai showcasing hyperlocal programmatic content driven by defining first party real time data analytics, besides developed app-based electric bicycle share mobility solutions operating in three cities with continued sustenance – a rare quality demonstrated in a difficult business vertical. We have been a pioneer in DOOH advertising as well as in several areas of emerging technologies.

Signpost has blazed new trails in Out of Home (OOH) advertising and specialises in OOH media and digital innovations. It has leveraged digital technologies to initiate a trend of innovation in the OOH industry. It has a string of pioneering projects that include large format digital billboards and a traffic measurement system for digital media formats at Mumbai International Airport as well as a digital analytics project for coverage of traffic in the entire city of Bengaluru.

**Do you believe that Out of Home (OOH) is rapidly transforming into Digital Out of Home (DOOH)?**

Undoubtedly. We have succeeded so well with our Dynamic Digital Out of Home and Audience Measurement (Signpost's in-house technology platform) which is on par with international standards and provides the unique opportunity of upselling and optimising revenues with hygiene and monitoring without human intervention. We are confident that there will be many such projects in the future as DOOH formats can be targeted to reach specific audiences based on real metrics. Digital has a positive impact on the landscape and has a host of social benefits, like one click content broadcast in all cities along with social messages in between commercials (real time stock/ traffic/ weather updates).

It offers seamless integration of the advertising media with the environment, enhanced aesthetics and further provides complete holistic experience to citizens at large and adds value by sharing audience statistics and attributes. This is a step towards sustainable advertising and further enables integration of campaign for various cities. Leveraging audience measurement provided by DOOH campaigns enable calculative spends and control such as flexibility of time metrics of particular slots (rush/flexi hours) and subsequently towards programmatic advertising.

**Tell us about your subsidiaries**

In fact, Signpost's subsidiary **EFlag Analytics Pvt Ltd**, has developed a computer vision-based Artificial Intelligence-Machine Learning (AI-ML) platform to measure each exposure of traffic through image analysis, which has been validated by IISC Sustainable Transportation Lab of Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru. We have implemented digital analytics for Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagar Pallika (BBMP) and Bengaluru Police for the Government of Karnataka with coverage of the entire city of Bengaluru.

**Has Signpost made investments in related businesses?**

Yes, we have. Signpost has a strategic investment in MojoBoxx, a smart device-based wireless solution that enables the delivery of in-flight services including multimedia content and engagement services. MojoBoxx comes empowered with AI-ML algorithms and is the future of travel entertainment and travel commerce on the go. It is the only Indian company to be approved by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), USA; Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA), USA and Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA), India. MojoBoxx is currently live across 102 SpiceJet aircrafts, and 1,400 rail coaches serving several million passengers annually.

**Any other initiatives you would like to talk about?**

Yes, a couple of them.  Signpost is building on initiatives like **Livebytes** (a vehicle that reaches out to rural areas and offers real time interactivity) and **Hinterland H2H**, a learning and skill development programme run through secured portable high speed wireless media in the remotest villages in the country.

**What has been the key to Signpost's growth?**

Technology and People.  I have already talked about our pioneering technology initiatives. At the same time, we have also been successful in bringing together a passionate and highly motivated and driven team with vast domain experience. They have helped the company in achieving the stiff targets that we set for ourselves. With the pandemic now behind us, we are back on track to set our sights sky high and work relentlessly to achieve our goals.

**How do you see the future?**

I am so bullish on our future. We have recently bagged some large and prestigious contracts from Delhi Aerocity, Mumbai Metro and Chennai airport. We expect to win quite a few more. Being long term contracts, these will give a big fillip to our growth.

More importantly, we have signed a definitive Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to merge with the listed entity, Pressman Advertising Ltd. and the combined entity, with its innovative offerings, will be well placed to grow at a rapid pace. According to the MoU, Signpost and Pressman propose to merge the two companies to create a larger and stronger entity, subject to statutory, regulatory and other approvals including relevant third-party consents and we have joined hands to pool our resources, which will be mutually beneficial to all the stakeholders.

The proposed merger will help pool in the experience, expertise, resources and client base of the two companies; offer a larger bouquet of services in the areas of advertising and promotion with focus on digital media and emerging technologies, result in streamlining of operations and cost-efficiency and together with the combined clientele of both the companies, should result in accelerated business growth.

Pressman Advertising is one of India's leading independent advertising agencies engaged largely in print advertising, public relations and digital advertising with a particularly strong presence in financial and compliance advertising. It has a very vibrant public relations division and a digital advertising division. It has built a strong reputation over five decades and has a large number of blue-chip companies among its regular clients.

With the proposed merger, Signpost India Ltd. would get listed on the Stock Exchanges subject to statutory, regulatory and other approvals.