UTV Toons

Header: The front-runner
Intro: This is the only company in India to work for Disney. It has already switched gears to 3D animation and is zipping ahead on the toon highway

UTV likes to think of itself as the company that started the animation BPO industry in India. UTV Software Communications general manager (animation) Jyotiromoy Saha says that all animation companies have people who have worked with UTV at some point of time. Not that this bothers him as a competition. Indeed he is happy that there are lots of animation companies in India. This will only build brand name of India as an animation destination and thus allow selling of animation services from India.

Incorporated in 1990, the UTV Group – which also includes UTV Software Communications – has emerged as a powerful pan-Asian Media and Entertainment company. What once started as a television production house has now diversified into in-flight entertainment, events, dubbing, ad films, motion pictures, broadcasting, post production and animation. Not only has the Group built successful related businesses, but it has also excelled to become the leader in each of the above.

UTV got into animation by acquiring Rammohan Biographics, an animation company operating from Mumbai in 1996. Rammohan was one of the few animation gurus operating out of India. The purpose of acquisition was to produce animation content for domestic segments. However, the domestic market was only so big and the growth could come only from exports. This prompted UTV to start exporting animation work as early as 1996.

Though the work is done as part of UTV Software Communications, the brand for marketing purposes is UTV Toons. The work force employed is variable, depending on projects at hand, and could vary from 100 to 800. However, UTV does not seem to be too keen to increase the numbers, focussing rather on getting high quality work. The IT and BPO businesses may operate differently – almost focussed on numbers game. But it is a different ball game in animation. For instance, work for a D grade product may fetch US$ 30,000 for a 22-minute film. But if you were to do high quality work you could get US$ 300,000 for a 22-minute film. And needless to say the margins would be much higher in the high quality work. UTV aims to improve efficiency in earning revenues rather than just increase revenues by increasing the staffing and costs.
And the quality positioning is paying off. UTV is the only company in India which works for Disney. It is also getting into co-productions with animation majors. The company is positioning itself as a premium player and would like to hold its own as an equal in the international animation industry.
Technologically also, UTV is getting more and more into 3D animation rather than the laborious and inefficient 2D animation. Mr Saha says that UTV was the first to introduce 2D animation, the first to enter 3D animation and the first to introduce flash animation. Almost 70% of the work is done through 3D animation. 3D animation is at least three times, possibly more, efficient than 2D animation. But wait, doesn’t 3D animation offer an inferior quality of animation compared to 2D animation. No, replies Mr Saha. Technology is changing very rapidly and something could be developed using 3D technology, but later be sold as 2D product. The belief that 3D animation does not offer emotional expressions of 2D animation is no longer true. Internationally, 3D is catching up in a big way and UTV has already jumped on the bandwagon.
Though earlier, UTV used to hire fine arts graduates and provide long training, this has changed with the focus now on hiring partially trained animators and then grooming them with shorter training that is project-specific. Isn’t the hiring for the project on a contractual basis rather detrimental to the employee’s financial well being. Not really. Projects are usually long – nine to 12 months. Moreover, there are other animation companies with projects, where the staff could find work.

Start-Up Year: 1990, Animation began in 1996
Area of Operations: Animation
Location: Mumbai
CEO: Ronnie Screwvala
Ownership and Funding Details: Part of UTV Group
Approximate Headcount: Varies between 100 to 800, depending upon projects
Approximate Revenues: N.A.