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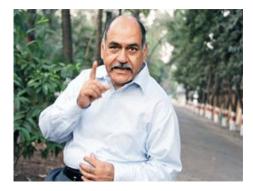# Ex-army officer Sushil Bhasin capitalises experience to set up camping for corporates

BY **AMIT SHANBAUG**, ET BUREAU | UPDATED: MAR 11, 2013, 08.48 AM IST

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Most retired army officers look forward to rest, relaxation, golf, family time and travel. But Brigadier (retd) Sushil Bhasin had other things on his mind. After serving in the army for 37 years, Bhasin decided to take voluntary retirement in October 2004 and shift focus to an old dream: making a difference in others' lives.

A weak back had meant that Bhasin had to join the Army Service Corps instead of the Indian Military Academy, and since this organisation provides logistics and training to defence personnel, Bhasin had spent a large part of his career offering this training. He went on to become an instructor and, eventually, a commandant of a training institute in Bangalore. So, Bhasin's first thought was to provide quality education to children. "However, my research, which started as early as 2003, revealed that setting up a school anywhere in the country would be very expensive," says the 62-year-old Bhasin.

Then, he was struck by another idea, triggered by a plot of land that he co-owned with three cousins. "In 1994, the four of us had purchased nearly 50 acre at Kolad, 120 km from Mumbai, as an investment. We had put in Rs 25 lakh to buy the property, but it was lying idle," says Bhasin, adding, "As none of my cousins was interested in using this land, I decided to develop it and hold recreational training camps for schoolchildren." The idea was to help the students have fun while building their character and personality. This is how Empower Activity Camps finally came into being, with Bhasin as its chairman and managing director.

With the business idea in place, his next job was to get the funding to make the place habitable. "Our property was in one of the most remote places of Maharashtra, where there was no road or electricity. We even had to figure out how to get a potable water connection," he reminisces. Bhasin had thought of taking a business loan to bankroll his dreams, but since it was taking too long to materialise, he took matters into his own hands. "My cousins and I mortgaged our houses and raised around Rs 1 crore as seed capital," he says. Bhasin and his cousins are equal shareholders in the company. In addition, he hired five employees.

When he was not wooing bankers, Bhasin met school representatives in order to sell his concept. Unfortunately, he found no takers. "The schools were not ready to pay the cost of training as it would have been costly for them. So, in an attempt to make lemonade from the lemons we were landing, we figured that we would use our camp for outbound training of corporate and company officials," he adds.

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1 Stick to what you know
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2 Leverage every resource
Find out which of your assets can come in handy. Can you also get family or friends to volunteer for the business in the initial stages?

3 Be flexible and adaptable
Things may not always work out as you plan them, so prepare for contingencies.

4 Innovate to grow
Ensure your business does not stagnate by coming up with new ideas to evolve.

Within a month of hanging up his uniform, Bhasin bagged his first deal through a cousin, who was a senior official in a private telecom company. As the Kolad camp was still under construction, Empower Activity Camps decided to conduct the training session at one of the resorts in Alibag. "The camp was on team building. We designed several games and activities, which would help the 40-member team achieve the objective, and pocketed Rs 40,000 for our efforts," he says. More clients followed, courtesy the word-of-mouth publicity.

In July 2006, the Kolad training camp became operational and gave the business a shot in the arm. It boasts air-conditioned and non-AC cottages, 12 tents and two 10-bed dormitories. The recession that hit two years later compelled Bhasin to look at other avenues to keep the revenue stream flowing, and this proved to be a blessing in disguise. "When corporate spending declined, our business took a hit and we decided to open the camp to the general public too, tweaking the activity list accordingly," he explains.

Today, the camp offers activities such as horse riding, hot air balloon rides, white water rafting, river crossing, rock climbing, rappelling, para-sailing and more, to keep the weekend adrenaline junkies happy. Then there are corporate training sessions. "After we meet a client, we sit with him and understand his requirements. For instance, a company may want to improve employee communication skills, while another firm may want its staff to bond better. So we design the activities accordingly and, after the session, we conduct follow-ups with the client," he says.

More recently, the company has started a unique 'college to corporate' initiative, wherein undergraduates are trained in skills that are designed to help them in their corporate careers later. So far, the company has tied up with the Bandra-based IES and Symbiosis, Pune, for the same. On an average, a stay at the camp costs around Rs 4,000-5,000 per person per day. Till date, the company has organised more than 500 camps.

Last year, Empower Activities clocked a turnover of nearly Rs 2 crore, with Bhasin taking home a monthly salary of Rs 1 lakh. "In this financial year, we are confidently eyeing a turnover of Rs 3 crore," he adds.

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