

Going places with an idea that clicked

Deep Kalra, 38
Founder-CEO, MakeMyTrip.com
Page views per month: 3.5 million

When the dotcom fever struck Deep Kalra in 2000, his friends were convinced he had "totally lost it". But he knew he was on track, for he had read somewhere that Expedia.com, the online travel world's lodestar, had raked in a profit of \$10 million in 1999, the year of the American dotcom bust. After successful stints at GE Capital, AMF Bowling and ABN-Amro Bank, he could have settled for the comfort of a business executive's life, but he chose to plough the lonely furrow. And his faith has paid off, for MakeMytrip.com today has 700 people on its payroll and recorded sales of US\$ 250 million (over Rs 1,000 crore) in fiscal 2007-08, with upwards of 40 per cent share in what is now a crowded market.

"I realised the travel sector had tremendous potential because of the vast gap between what was promised and the service that was eventually delivered," recalls the IIM-Ahmedabad and St Stephen's economics alumnus. He couldn't have opted for a more difficult business. When he launched in 2000, the domestic travel market went downhill because of the combined blow of 9/11, Afghan and Iraq wars, and fears of an Indo-Pak face-off after the attack on Parliament House. On top of it, Kalra figured Indians were apprehensive about using credit cards online. To cut the losses, he started focusing entirely on the NRI market, and his gamble paid off.

"The demand for 'discretionary' travel plummeted at home, but the NRI market proved to be inelastic and reliable, mainly because the drivers for these trips were different," Kalra recalls. "Having empowered NRIs with the unmatched convenience of a 24x7 online travel portal, we managed to survive." But there was not end to Kalra's woes.

As a result of the dotcom meltdown, MakeMyTrip.com's investor, eVentures, withdrew from the country. "Saddled with a young business still in the red, the choice was either to wind down the company, or to raise more money for what I viewed as a potentially viable business. I chose to back my instinct and invested all my personal savings in the business. Working on a bootstrap model for the next 18 months, the company turned in its first profit in 2003.

There's been no looking back since then, and with three rounds of venture capital funding behind him, Kalra can now breathe easy and spend more time with his two children. He can also afford to say with conviction, "I like to reach home before my children go to bed, and I encourage my team to do the same. Happy employees work better."

