

Fashion & Charity

a Contradiction?

■ Cover story by Gagan Sethi

In this feature story, Lifeline examines the rationale behind the RRF Founder Robin Raina's efforts to marry charity and glamour. Lifeline spoke to him about the apparent contradiction in the message of blending fashion with charity.



Robin Raina walking down the ramp with supermodel Anupama Varma, for charity.

Most people would mock at the idea of thinking about Charity and fashion together. Some would call it “the sport of the rich and the famous”. Some would contest the thought of charity itself. They would say that - people tend to give when they are feeling guilty. After a large crisis, when any aid is given by the rich and famous, they want the whole world to know just how generous they were. People wear different color bracelets to show their support for a cause or put a magnetic sticker on their luxury car to show their support for a good cause. The act of giving becomes less about helping those in need and more about the "who's more generous competition." It is all about us, not the beneficiaries of aid. To these with this cynical thought process, you talk about charity and fashion in the same breath and they are likely to think that you have lost your balance.

Normally most would read the above and nod their head in agreement. Not the Robin Raina Foundation Founder Robin Raina. With his characteristic conviction and élan, he set out to do just the opposite – marry charity and glamour.

Lifeline Editor recently met him briefly for a chat, at his swanky penthouse office on the 32nd floor of Concourse building in Atlanta, and asked him specific questions about the same.

Lifeline: Firstly, let me congratulate you on behalf of our readers for leading your company Ebix into Fortune magazines’ recently declared list of 100 Fastest Growing Companies in the US, with a market capitalization of less than \$200 million. Your company Ebix ranked 19th on this coveted Fortune list. What do you attribute this success to?

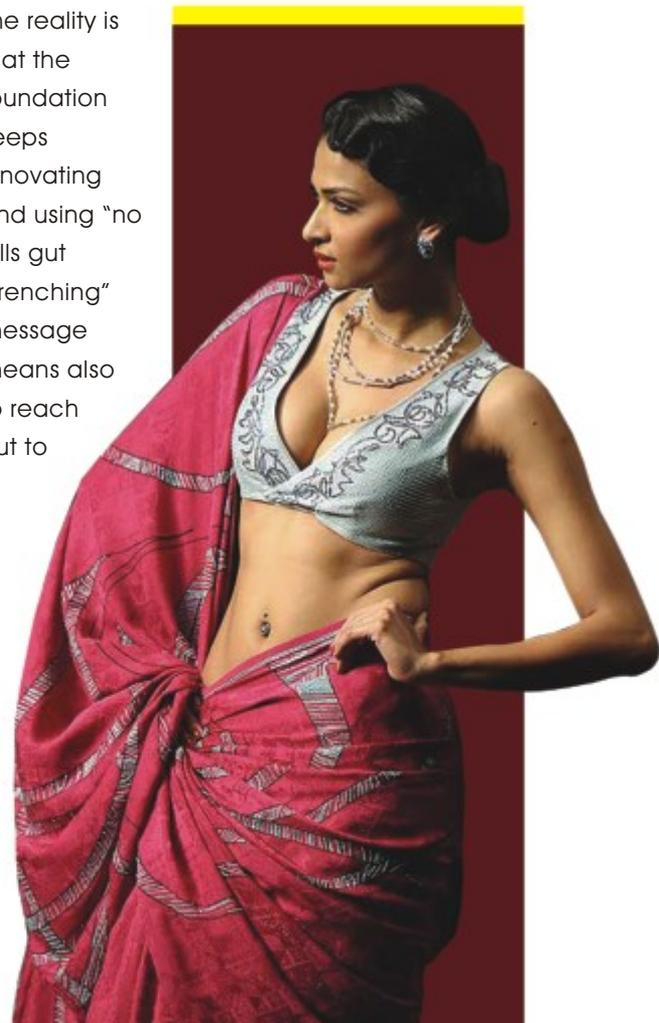
Robin: I would prefer if we kept the focus of this interview on

charity rather than my business exploits.

Lifeline: Okay, let’s talk about charity. What would you say to those who would call the foundation’s efforts a bit too glamour and celebrity driven? Would you agree that the foundation tends to put too much emphasis on the support of celebrities to get its point across?

Robin: I do not disagree with the notion that the foundation uses every means at its disposal to get the message of charity across to the people. Finally, we are living in a world where people’s attention span is very low. You are unlikely to get their attention if you are going to use traditional means to reach out to them. You have to grab their attention and what better means can one have than to get a so called “celebrity” to do that for you.

The reality is that the foundation keeps innovating and using “no frills gut wrenching” message means also to reach out to



our audience and rather successfully at that.

Lifeline: What is the connection between charity and fashion? Some would mockingly call charity – a fashion statement by itself?

Robin: To those who call charity a fashion statement by itself, I would say - thank you for the compliment, as that is precisely what I am aiming at. I want to make charity fashionable and cool!

Lifeline: Why would you want charity to become a fashion?

Robin: If charity was considered fashionable and cool by a large proportion of humanity worldwide, a lot of our world problems would be solved. I am still waiting for the day when it becomes a fashion statement for a Non Resident Asian for example to support the downtrodden folks in the Indian subcontinent and people start showing off this fashion sense of theirs. The

fact remains that we are living in a world where it is fashionable to accumulate wealth rather than give away wealth. As many children die every month from malaria as died in the tsunami, and malaria is a preventable and treatable disease. This gets back to the spending priorities bit. If people start realizing the fun of “giving away”, and turn it into a fashion statement, then the world is likely to become a much better place.

Lifeline: What would you say to those who might say that glamorizing charity will take away the focus from the cause that charity is supposed to support in the first place?

Robin: I would humbly disagree with them. The fact remains that finally it took a Christopher Reeves to bring the world’s attention to the need of finding a cure to paralysis caused by spinal cord injury. It takes a Lance Armstrong to highlight the cause of cancer research. It



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- Robin Raina



takes Nancy Reagan to get the attention of the entire United States people to the cause of stem cell research. I can give you many more examples to prove my point. People tend to listen to folks who they consider “celebrities”.

This is even more relevant in the younger generation, who tends to emulate everything that a Hillary Duff or a Paris Hilton is likely to do. If these icons for the younger generation espoused the cause of charity, the younger generation is likely to focus this creative energy of theirs on charity also, since it would make them as cool as their icons.

Lifeline: Do you think that celebrities are doing enough to support the cause of charity today?

Robin: I think that there is definitely more desire and awareness amongst celebrities to “give back” to the under-privileged as also a desire to use their celebrity status to get the message across. However, I do not

believe that enough is being done by most still in terms of making charity one of their key priorities. Most are still caught up in the rut of accumulating as if they will live forever.

Lifeline: The foundation’s Pinky television ad has almost acquired a celebrity status in the United States Indian community? Has it helped the foundation in getting its message across?

Robin: Pinky is a celebrity in most Indian homes that watch television today. The message that the ad set out to convey could not have come out more clearly without this Ad. In terms of raw results, today there are 200 parents across the length and breadth of United States who saw this ad and made the immediate decision of sponsoring one or more child’s education, food and shelter needs. We are rather proud of that.

Lifeline: Thank you for speaking to us.

