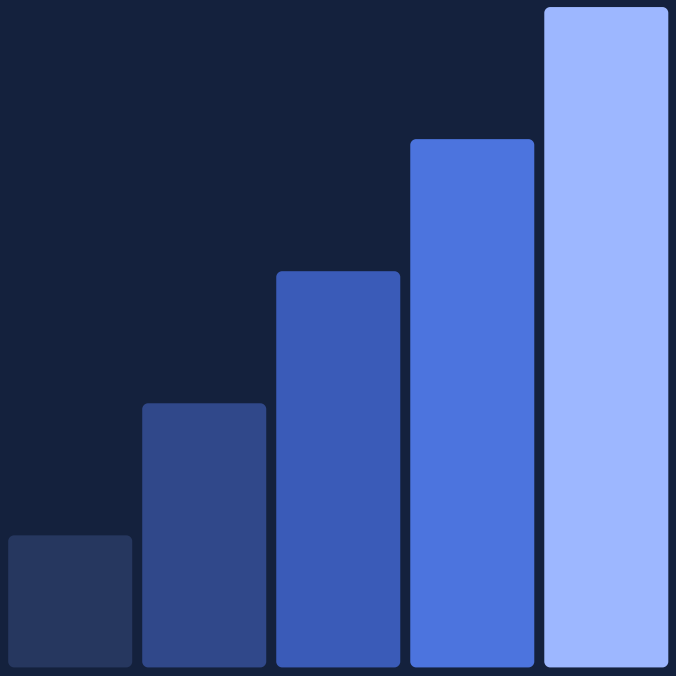
Karan Gandhi



Head of Marketing - Airtel Xstream Play

13 years across Airtel, Vodafone Idea, Travel Triangle, DishTV and Samsung

I grow consumer businesses: the model first, then the marketing.

Strategy, product, pricing, marketing and data, used together to build businesses that pay for themselves.

At Airtel Xstream Play, 2021 to now

Before Airtel

~₹1,000 Cr
annual revenue, built from zero in 5 years

15 Mn
paid subscribers, and 30 Mn monthly active users

57% lower
cost to win a paying subscriber, in 8 months

15% to 70%
of D2C subscribers renewing each month

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Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

- Scoreboard
- The ladder
- Strategy
- Business
- Profit and loss
- AI and data
- Operations
- How I lead

Four businesses, one page

The same four questions, asked of every business I have worked in.

	Scale	Growth	Profit and retention	The call that mattered
Xstream Play Head of Marketing, 2021 to now	**~₹1,000 Cr** annual revenue, from zero in 5 years. 15 Mn paid subscribers, 30 Mn monthly active users.	**18 months** to become India's No. 1 OTT aggregator by paid subscribers, at 5 Mn. Subscriptions +50% from one connected lifecycle system.	**₹560 to ₹240** cost per paying subscriber, 57% lower. Monthly D2C renewals 15% to 70%.	**Free to paid** Chose subscription over ads, and gave up most of ~40 Mn free users for a base that pays.
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021	**₹200 Cr GMV** domestic business, owned end to end. Also ~₹200 Cr GMV across South East Asia and the Middle East.	**+30%** visitor-to-lead conversion. High-value sales doubled. The international business grew 10%.	**7% to 10%** take rate in six months. Profit after tax up 30% a quarter, twice.	**Restart after COVID** with the founder. The online model I redesigned brought 40% of revenue recovery.
Vodafone Idea Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019	**~₹1,200 Cr** year-on-year revenue for the Delhi circle, on 2.5 Mn subscribers.	**0.25 Mn** incremental acquisitions. Two IMAD Awards, and the Megastar Award for base mix.	**98.4%** base retention and 1.6% churn through the Jio price war. 85% non-telco product penetration.	**No price match** Competed with Jio on network and service, and launched the industry-first 100 GB pack.
DishTV Deputy Manager, 2014 to 2016	**DishFlix** India's first home PVoD service. Led it from product development to launch.		**4 phases** An acquisition plan to capture the cable TV digitisation market.	

No. 1 OTT aggregator. Ranked by paid subscribers. Sources: data.ai, industry sources and competitors' published data.

GMV. The total value of bookings sold. **Take rate.** The marketplace's commission on that value.

Periods. Each number is for the role dates shown, unless a shorter period is given next to it.

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Each job built the next one

Every move added one piece I needed to run a digital business end to end.

13 years

of work since my MBA in 2013, in strategy, marketing and business roles. Before the MBA I was a software engineer, from 2008.

Aricent, Samsung
2008 to 2014

Software engineer, then an MBA

QA lead for cloud projects at Samsung: cloud gaming and enterprise. MBA at Great Lakes, 2012 to 2013.

Carried up
How products are built

DishTV
2014 to 2016

Business strategy and new products

Launched DishFlix, India's first home PVoD service. Planned the cable digitisation market in 4 phases.

Carried up
Strategy and launching a product

Vodafone Idea
2016 to 2019

Marketing Manager

~₹1,200 Cr year-on-year revenue on 2.5 Mn subscribers. 98.4% retention through the Jio price war.

Carried up
Marketing and retention at scale

Travel Triangle
2019 to 2021

Category Manager

Owned a ₹200 Cr GMV business in India and handled ~₹200 Cr across South East Asia and the Middle East. Take rate 7% to 10%.

Carried up
A full P&L and a sales floor

Xstream Play
2021 to now

Head of Marketing

~₹1,000 Cr annual revenue from zero. 15 Mn paid subscribers, 30 Mn monthly active users.

All of it, used together
Growth and monetisation, end to end

Video on demand. DishFlix at DishTV, then Xstream Play at Airtel.

Keeping customers. 98.4% retention at Vodafone Idea, then renewals from 15% to 70% at Airtel.

Pricing. Take rate 7% to 10% at Travel Triangle, then pricing tests that doubled the D2C paying base at Airtel.

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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From a free app to a ~₹1,000 Cr subscription business

I was hired to turn around a free streaming app with zero revenue. The first decisions were about the business, not the marketing.

Airtel Xstream Play
Head of Marketing, 2021 to now

Annual revenue, built from zero

~₹1,000 Cr

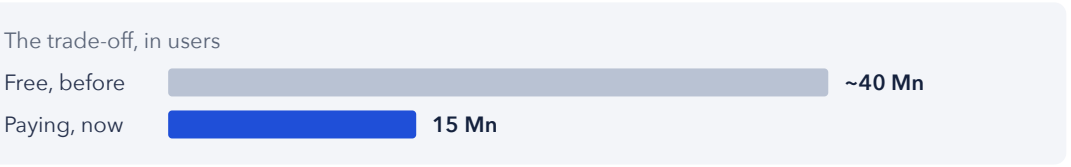
in 5 years

Run in four phases

1. Find the right product
2. Scale and prove fit
3. A year making the whole P&L positive
4. Hold scale

What I did

1. Chose subscription over ads. Ad rates were low and advertisers did not yet trust the brand.
2. Got the model right before the marketing. Partner contracts moved from a fixed minimum guarantee to a fee per subscriber, so cost follows revenue. The supply team led the talks; I gave the revenue forecast behind each contract.
3. Owned the trade-off. Most free users left at the paywall, in exchange for a base that pays.



18 months
to India's No. 1 OTT aggregator, at 5 Mn paid subscribers

15 Mn
paid subscribers today

30 Mn
monthly active users

Vodafone Idea
Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019

98.4%

base retention through the Jio price war. Chose not to match price and competed on network and service.

Travel Triangle
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

40%

of revenue recovery after COVID came from the online model I redesigned when restarting the business with the founder.

DishTV
Deputy Manager, 2014 to 2016

4 phases

An acquisition plan to capture the cable TV digitisation market.

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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Products people pay for

The plan that confused customers was replaced by one that needed no explaining. It also made Airtel's own customers stay longer.

Airtel Xstream Play
Head of Marketing, 2021 to now

Paid subscribers

15 Mn

and 30 Mn monthly active users

Before: pick one streaming app out of five



After: a simple journey

What I did

1. Replaced "pick one out of five" with a single pack for every streaming app. That became the product-market fit.
2. Found customers who already had Xstream Play in their Airtel plan, and activated them through Airtel Thanks, Wynk and in-app journeys.
3. Let consumer research shape new propositions, the positioning and new product concepts.

What it did for Airtel's own business: lower churn among customers who use Xstream Play



How the brand was built

22+ OTTs
the positioning, taken from consumer research

7 Mn
reach from regional creators, in under six months

10 Mn+
reel views from the same programme

IPL, Asia Cup
campaigns, and tie-ups with PVR, MyGate and Uber

Vodafone Idea
Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019

100 GB pack

An industry first that I conceived and launched: 40% better retention and 25% higher engagement.

DishTV
Deputy Manager, 2014 to 2016

DishFlix

India's first home PVoD service. Led it from product development to launch.

TRAVEL TRIANGLE
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

20%

of stable bookings from new land, activity and combo packages. Staycations and book-now-pay-later followed after COVID.

"Content made it worth paying for; my team made people pay and stay."

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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Growth that pays for itself

Spend moves only when it has proven it pays back. The same rule in three businesses.

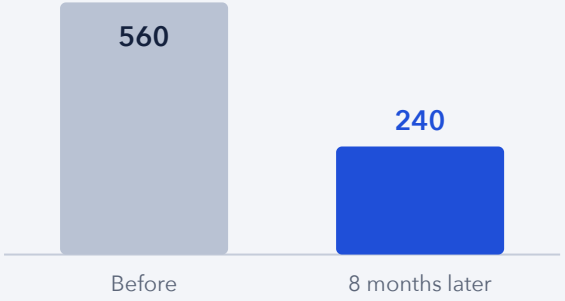
Airtel Xstream Play

Head of Marketing, 2021 to now

Cost to win one paying subscriber

₹560 to ₹240

57% lower, in 8 months



What I did

1. Pulled Meta spend that was not paying back.
2. Moved it to Google app campaigns and affiliates.
3. Tested pricing until the paying base was a profitable mix.

~~Meta~~ spend moved to **Google app campaigns** **Affiliates**

1 to 2.5
return on ad spend for acquisition

2x
D2C paying base, grown profitably through pricing tests

20% to 40%
profit margin in FY26, from a mass-scale, high-margin pack

₹80 Cr
annual marketing budget owned, ₹12 Cr of it paid marketing built from scratch

TRAVEL TRIANGLE

Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

7% to 10%
take rate in six months, on a ₹200 Cr GMV India business owned end to end.

+30%
profit after tax, quarter on quarter, twice. Lead-to-booking 10% to 11.5%.

~₹200 Cr
GMV handled across South East Asia and the Middle East, and grown 10%.

Vodafone Idea

Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019

~₹1,200 Cr
year-on-year revenue for the Delhi circle, on 2.5 Mn subscribers.

"Don't give me more budget until I've proven it."

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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An AI-led growth engine

Three marketing tools worked in silos. I designed one connected system, so the offer each customer sees comes from models and not from manual rules.

Airtel Xstream Play
Head of Marketing, 2021 to now

More subscriptions from the connected system

+50%

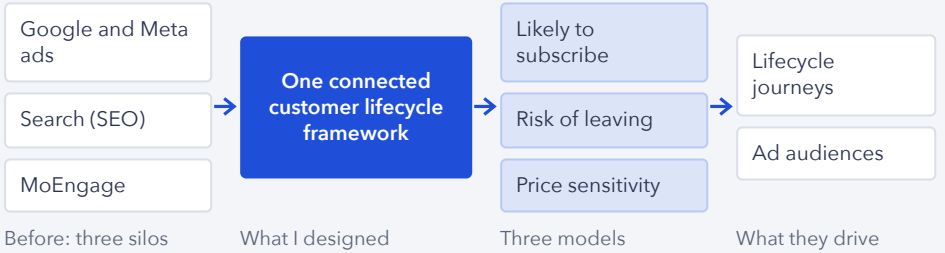
1 to 2.5
return on ad spend for acquisition

3 models
driving journeys and ad audiences

3 into 1
silos replaced by one framework

What I did

1. Mapped three silos: Google and Meta ads, search, and MoEngage.
2. Designed one connected customer lifecycle framework and prototyped it with AI tools.
3. Worked with Airtel's data team, who built it inside the firewall.



Who did what. Mine: the design and the prototype. Airtel's data team: the build that runs in production.

Travel Triangle
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

+30%

visitor-to-lead conversion from data-led growth pods, with 10K+ extra leads. Lead cost tuned by channel, season, destination and content.

Vodafone Idea
Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019

2.5 Mn

subscribers whose base mix I improved. It won the Megastar Award.

Samsung
Engineer, 2011 to 2014

Engineer first

QA lead for cloud projects, cloud gaming and enterprise solutions.

"Offer levels are decided by the system, not by people."

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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Getting customers to stay

Winning a subscriber once is the easy part. The work is in getting them to stay, month after month.

Airtel Xstream Play
Head of Marketing, 2021 to now

D2C subscribers renewing each month

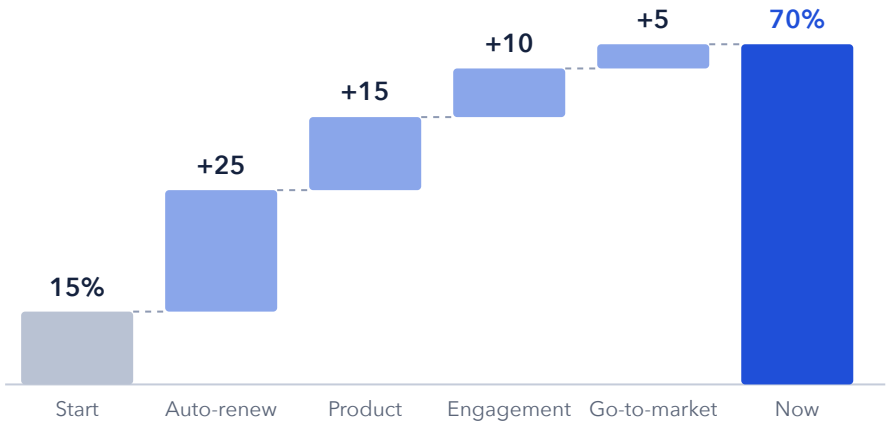
15% to **70%**

over three years

Where the 55 points came from, as measured

+25	Auto-renew
+15	Product: renewal journey 10, growth hacks 5
+10	Engagement
+5	Go-to-market

What added to it



+30%
acquisitions from WhatsApp and RCS

+25%
revenue from the same channels

3.6 to 4.2
app store rating, FY25

Vodafone Idea
Marketing Manager, 2016 to 2019

1.6%
churn, held through the Jio price war. 85% of the base took a non-telco product. Run through stores, franchisees and call centres.

TRAVEL TRIANGLE
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

~₹17 Cr
monthly targets delivered consistently, after reworking how leads were chosen and shared across a 50+ seat sales floor.

TRAVEL TRIANGLE
Category Manager, 2019 to 2021

+10%
high-quality suppliers and +5% suppliers overall, in my first six months.

Karan Gandhi
Head of Marketing
Airtel Xstream Play

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How I build teams and lead

Four things I answer for as a leader, each with what I have done.

Building teams

Airtel. Lead 5 marketing managers across acquisition, base, retention, operations and analytics.

Travel Triangle. Led 7 direct reports and a sales floor of 50+ people, delivering ~₹17 Cr monthly targets.

Airtel. Set up paid marketing from scratch and grew it to a ₹12 Cr annual budget.

Working across functions

Data. I designed the lifecycle framework; Airtel's data team built it inside the firewall.

Content supply. Reset partner contracts with the supply team, giving the revenue forecast behind each one.

Product and sales. Separate propositions for postpaid, broadband, prepaid and B2B, each with its own go-to-market.

Field. Store promotions and sales-force contests with Airtel circles for IPL, Asia Cup and content launches.

Answering for the money

Airtel. An ₹80 Cr annual marketing budget. Profit margin rose from 20% to 40% in FY26, through product mix and spend optimisation.

Travel Triangle. A ₹200 Cr GMV business, with its annual operating, manpower and profitability plans.

Vodafone Idea. ~₹1,200 Cr year-on-year revenue for the Delhi circle.

Leading change

Airtel. Took a free app to paid, and accepted losing most of ~40 Mn free users.

Travel Triangle. Restarted the business with the founder after COVID, and rebuilt trust between marketing and a sales floor that doubted its leads.

Vodafone Idea. Held 98.4% of the base through the Jio price war without matching price.

Contact

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Now

Head of Marketing - Airtel Xstream Play
Gurugram, since 2021

Decisions I own
Marketing budget, pricing tests and channel mix

Education

Advanced leadership programme
ISB Hyderabad, 2025

MBA, Marketing and Strategy
Great Lakes Institute of Management, 2013

B.Tech, Electrical and Electronics Engineering
Bharati Vidyapeeth's College of Engineering, 2008

"Design follows data, not the other way round."

Where I have worked

airtel · Xstream Play · TRAVEL TRIANGLE · Vi · dishtv · SAMSUNG