

# In the 'purple' of health

This start-up says it helps **patients and healthcare providers** to get their priorities right.

## K BHARAT KUMAR

Visiting a relative at a hospital gave Narayanan Ram the idea for his new start-up.

A second-time entrepreneur, Ram says of the patient, "She was barely able to swallow anything and ironically, she was asked to swallow this huge capsule at regular intervals." If she did not do it or was unwilling to, she needed reminding and coaxing. And what better way to do it with than an SMS alert on a very personal device, the mobile phone? If messaging the patient did not help, get the closest relative to do it. And that is the business model for Purple Teal of which Ram is CEO.

PurpleTeal currently helps patients of hospitals (and customers of insurance and pharmaceutical companies) get healthcare priorities right. PurpleTeal sends subscribers SMS alerts on when to take their medicines and reminders about doctor appointments.

The clarity behind the business model is this, he explains: "we ensure that people are aware of their vulnerabilities; this should lead to treatment and diagnosis, if required; and should end with the patient following up with the doctor." The last, he feels is as critical as any of the goals, since most patients give up on treatment after the first 30 days.

But aren't potential customers of PurpleTeal its own stumbling blocks? After all, if someone does not want to go to the doctor or refuses to take medicines, then what's the point in reminding him/her? Says Ram, "We cannot change those who don't want to take care of themselves. But, even if I get a small percentage of converts, that is great return on investment."

## THE USER

Both Dr Kalkunte Suresh, director at Jain Institute of Vascular Sciences (JIVAS) in Bangalore and his patient S Pratap Kumar vouch for the utility value of this service.

Dr Suresh says that his institution JIVAS has tried out PurpleTeal's offering for about

three months now, across 200 patients. "Our hospital focuses on vascular diseases." So, a patient not returning for a review could be disastrous.

He confirms that many patients do not take medicines on time, either. "With this service, we only seek to remind them, not hound them."

An example he says, is a patient who needs to come back within 10 days after a discharge following a surgery. "We check the blood during the review and would change the blood-thinning medicine, typically." In other words, patients don't realise the importance of these visits. There are others, he says, who don't come for regular dressings as they need to.

The software from PurpleTeal is customised for the hospital. For instance, some tests may require the patient to report on an empty stomach. Those seeking to quit a smoking habit may need periodic alerts. So, the hospital keys such reminders for patients into the software. Integrated with an SMS dispatching system, it sends out alerts as required.

Are there areas where this reminder service is more critical than in others? Dr Suresh gives an example, "After a by-pass surgery, patients are required to return for scans. About a third or fourth of patients do not return. Once in a while this could become a big problem for them."

How about those who get the message and still may forget or play truant? PurpleTeal also offers to send reminders to the care-giver nearest the patient, such as the spouse or children.

The hospital has about 80 admissions a month and treats about 2,000 out-patients a month. Interestingly, there is zero investment for the hospital, he says, since the patient is billed Rs 100 a month for three months (on behalf of PurpleTeal)."

## THE BENEFICIARY

S Pratap Kumar, an agriculturist who underwent treatment at the Institute, says, "I get a couple of messages in the morning on my phone, to check my BP and Sugar. I get



Narayanan Ram. Bijoy Ghosh



'Have you popped that pill?' K. ANANTHAN

►PurpleTeal offers to send reminders to the care-giver nearest the patient, such as the spouse or children.

another in the evening as well to remind me about a medicine I need to take."

His admission is candid. "Earlier, I saw these messages as intrusive. I thought I didn't need them. But later, I realised that I forgot to take these medicines or delayed them by an hour or so. These reminders are useful."

One feedback that he would give to the solution provider: "When I am in hospital, my mind is only on recovery and medicines. So, I may not need this service then."

## FOCUS

This service currently helps patients across six disease categories, including those such

as Hypertension and Diabetes. So, how did PurpleTeal decide on these? Says Ram, "As we did our research, we discovered that there are 1.3 million diseases!"

So, his team applied the 80:20 rule. Most people are afflicted with a set of few diseases or conditions. "Focussing on these few diseases, we can cover a relatively large mass."

So, does his service coax people into complying or would only threats bring people scurrying in?

"We start off in a positive way. We deteriorate the tone of the message only later," says Ram ominously.

Currently, his company services the India, American and South African markets,

with a presence to follow in West Asia, Singapore and Malaysia.

PurpleTeal is also eyeing Insurance companies as clients. Explains Ram, "A good patient is like a good driver for the auto insurance industry." That is, if you comply with all the rules, chances are that your claims will be limited.

The statistics are alluring. "Hospitalisation due to non-adherence by patients, costs the US insurance industry about \$400 billion annually."

And, by logical extension, pharmaceuticals is another target market. After all, if reminders can encourage pill-poppers to remain loyal to a pharma company, upward is the one way that sales would go.

## BEHIND THE SCENE

PurpleTeal had its software developed in a matter of 10 months.

"Our architecture is such that the device is immaterial — we can service end-users over the phone or the PC."

Ram first built SeeItFirst, a video software tools company before selling out in 2001. He continued as CEO there till 2004. When he started off on Purple Teal, wasn't it tempting for him to attempt a lot where the risk of doing very little in the end was high?

Once he decided on the healthcare space, he went back home to the US, from India and spent about 10 days with co-founder Dr Anand Subra (a 20-year IBM-er). "We spent about 17 to 18 hours a day jotting down everything that came to mind. We did not reject any idea."

The result was that the walls of the entire second floor of his house were filled with charts containing ideas. The process of distillation followed.

So, how does he decide if a business idea is good or not? "If it's a tough problem and seems too big to solve, it's ideal for a start-up idea."

With that kind of common sense, it's difficult to miss even an obscure business opportunity!