

# Woman of the Web

**Rashmi Sinha's SlideShare enables users to store and share presentations on the Web**

Think of *Playboy* and you visualise skimpy swimsuits, busty bunnies, how-to-do-it DVDs and the softcore photography. So, when the 'bare-it-all' magazine recently unveiled its list of America's 10 Sexiest CEOs – women with good looks and savvy business acumen – it was expected to be a celebration of second sex in the predictable businesses, adult films, wines, lingerie and lifestyles. But sharing the 'honours' was an Indian techie, the Allahabad-born Rashmi Sinha, CEO and co-founder, SlideShare, a well-visited Website, which enables users to store and share presentations on the Web.

So, how did Sinha feature on the *Playboy* ranking? "Some time back, they e-mailed me asking for a photo, and just I sent it to them," says Sinha. "I did not spend much time thinking about it." And how does she feel now? "It's not important to me," Sinha says candidly. "If there is anything I would like to be known for, it is for SlideShare and the way it opened up communication in the business world."

Educated in Kolkata and Allahabad, Sinha, who is in her mid-30s, came to the US to pursue higher studies, earning a doctorate in Cognitive Psychology from the Ivy League Brown University. After her PhD, Sinha worked as a researcher at the School of Information, UC Berkeley, focussing on how to optimise search engines and recommender systems (the 'books/films recommendations' that pop-up on sites like Amazon, while searching for a book or a DVD). "I realised that many of the problems that computer scientists wrestle with are the problems of psychology, of how to help people find information and design user-friendly systems," explains Sinha.

The transition from psychology to computers encouraged Sinha to set up her independent consulting in 2001, which metamorphosed into Uzanto, a user-experience consultancy. The company's product, MindCanvas, a



*Sinha: itching to do something big*

game-like customer research software, did well and was used by eBay, Yahoo and Microsoft. But Sinha, itching to do something bigger, teamed up with her software engineer husband Jon Boutelle and engineer-MBA brother Amit Ranjan to build SlideShare in late 2006, funded by the cash she had earned from MindCanvas. "Right from day one, it was clear that SlideShare resonated with users," says Sinha. "We did not spend a single dollar marketing SlideShare".

## Growing fast

Dollars, however, were needed to grow the site, and, hence, in 2008, the team sought VC funding, raising \$3 million from Venrock, originally set up as the venture capital arm of the Rockefeller family. Sinha also terminated MindCanvas as "we wanted to give SlideShare our entire focus", a move that has paid off. SlideShare has subsequently grown quickly by pushing the presentations beyond the confines of

educational or office space. Ranked among the top 500 sites on the Net according to Quantcast, an agency that tracks Web usage, it receives over 14 million unique visitors viewing more than 45 million Web pages a month. So far, people from 165 countries have posted over 3,00,000 presentations in 55 languages.

Often called the 'YouTube for presentations', the site enables users to upload their presentations, share ideas and generate leads for their businesses. They can also tag, download or embed presentations into their own blogs, Websites, or social networks. Slideshows can be shared publicly or privately and can be combined with audio to make 'slidecasts'. "SlideShare fundamentally changes the way people share their presentations and ideas in a professional setting," says Sinha.

More significantly, due to its social-networking stance, the site has built a thriving community of professionals around it. Currently, SlideShare employs 21 persons between its San Francisco and New Delhi offices and generates revenues mainly through the corporate advertisements targeted at the professional audience that it has aggregated. Sinha does not reveal the numbers but says the operation is profitable. "We are launching several premium services soon as an alternative stream of revenue," she discloses, adding that she "likes to make money by helping others make money."

That seems plausible. Both the traffic and the revenues are growing at SlideShare despite the current downturn. "We are well-positioned to weather this economic storm and are using the downturn to consolidate," asserts Sinha. What about the general environment in Silicon Valley? Sinha likens it to the dotcom bust of 2001, albeit with a difference. According to her, though the US economy is down, the start-ups are not suffering from the type of bloat that they were in 2001, having learnt to operate in a leaner environment. "In some ways, I like that kind of discipline, which financially tough times bring to a company," affirms Sinha. No wonder, Web 2.0 is growing to be the right *adda* for the tech-savvy and thrifty women.

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