

Prime Focus
(www.primefocusworld.com)
India, United Kingdom,
United States, Canada

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—Derek Moore
Creative Director
Prime Focus

Prime Focus goes global with Autodesk



Lotte 'Coffy Bite' - Rediffusion Y&R. Image courtesy of Prime Focus.

In 1995, 18-year-old Namit Malhotra set up a one-room editing studio in a garage in a suburb of Mumbai, India. Today, Prime Focus is one of the world's largest visual entertainment services groups, employing more than 1250 people across the world.

Having quickly grown into India's largest post-production facility, in 2006 Prime Focus raised money to fund a series of acquisitions in the UK, USA and Canada. This funding provides the company access to cutting edge technology and an international talent pool including names such as renowned colourist Tareq Kubaisi, award-winning VFX specialist Merzin Tavarria in India and award winning VFX Supervisor Michael Fink. Today, Prime Focus has 15 studios spanning cities such as Mumbai, Chennai, Hyderabad, London, Los Angeles, New York, Winnipeg and Vancouver.

One of the keys to Prime Focus' success is Malhotra's passion for technology which has ensured that the company is always ahead of the curve. Never averse to taking risks or re-writing the rules, Malhotra has pushed the boundaries by using new technologies and changing the way existing technologies are used. The company has been a ground-breaking user of certain Autodesk products, and since its acquisitions outside of India, has become one of the world's largest Autodesk software users.

From Royal Palms to Winnipeg

Prime Focus' feature film VFX facility at Royal Palms in the north of Mumbai boasts more than a total of 200 seats of Autodesk® Maya® software and Autodesk® Softimage® 3D modelling and animation software. Just down the road is Prime Focus' digital intermediate (DI) facility at Film City which, having pioneered the use of DI in the Indian film market with its three seats

of Autodesk® Lustre® digital grading software, works on a significant proportion of the Bollywood movies released each year. Prime Focus is also the single largest user of Autodesk® Smoke® editing and finishing software with more than 40 seats of Smoke worldwide.

Its Parel facility, located in southern Mumbai, serves the area's large advertising agency community, while its corporate headquarters in Khar focuses on broadcast and music video work. It also has facilities in Hyderabad and Chennai, serving the regional feature film visual effects (VFX) and DI markets, as well as a restoration facility in Goa and a technology centre in Bangalore.

Prime Focus' UK facilities provide visual effects, CGI, DI and telecine services for the feature film, commercials, broadcast and music video industries. Its 14 visual effects suites are all equipped with Smoke or Autodesk® Flame® visual effects software, while the CG team uses Maya and Softimage. Its North American facilities specialise in feature film visual effects and post production, relying on Autodesk® Inferno® visual effects software and Autodesk® 3ds Max® 3D modelling and animation software.

The global digital pipeline

In 2009 Prime Focus set up a global pipeline to facilitate collaboration between all its studios. At the heart of this global pipeline is Autodesk visual effects, editing, finishing, digital grading and 3D animation software. Prime Focus' John Harvey explains: "We've streamlined our workflow and set up an international VFX pipeline. Pipelines have to be set up consistently around the world. This allows us to expand our teams for large-scale projects so that we can deliver them on time and on budget."

Autodesk®

The majority of CG work for commercials and broadcast projects is created in London and Mumbai while film visual effects are done in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Chennai, London, Los Angeles, Vancouver and Winnipeg. This means Prime Focus' worldwide VFX pipeline includes 3ds Max, Maya and Softimage software.

"We tend to use Maya for film and broadcast VFX in India and London. There's a lot of industry experience with Maya and it has a large user base," he says. "We use 3ds Max in the US and Canada for film VFX. We have a big R&D department which has created a lot of proprietary plug-ins for 3ds Max such as Krakatoa particle simulation software and Flood for water simulation. It's very fast, takes plug-ins easily and is simple to pick up."

Prime Focus usually uses Softimage for commercials because of its speed: "The integrated particle system ICE has a fast set-up time. The Softimage render manager is excellent and you can render straight from the GUI. We use mental ray for rendering from Maya and Softimage, and V-Ray for 3ds Max. We use OpenEXR for rendering commercials and broadcast work as it gives us more flexibility."

Seamless integration

Autodesk® FBX® technology and Autodesk® Crosswalk are used to help transfer files between Autodesk tools and, according to Harvey, "It's all about workflow and making things more efficient."

Harvey's thoughts are echoed by creative director Derek Moore, who says that closer interoperability between Flame and Smoke means artists can now switch between the systems: "Smoke artists can take their projects into Flame because the Smoke timeline is now in Flame as well. Similarly, Flame artists are becoming more comfortable using Smoke because Batch, the creative toolset of Flame, is now in Smoke Advanced. Flame and Smoke also work well with our Lustre systems for DI work."

Moore also points out the benefits of interoperability between Autodesk systems and animation software products: "We'd usually camera track in Maya for Flame but we can even do it the other way round which shows just how flexible the workflow is. We use FBX to import 3D models, camera data, and lights, into our Autodesk visual effects and finishing tools so we can tweak and composite them in an interactive environment with the client behind us."

According to Moore: "The great thing about Autodesk Flame and Smoke is that the things you need to do on a project are integrated into one product. You don't need to save files out to use in other software. This makes the workflow much quicker which allows us to be more creative. If we can work more quickly, we can get more done in a day, which means we can put more creativity into a project. This gives us an edge over the competition."

Economies of scale

With its global presence, Prime Focus can set up bespoke crews for film, broadcast and commercials projects. "You can't facilitate projects entirely in the UK with the correct crew allocation," says Harvey. "But by drawing on our resources in India, we can have 30 people on a project instead of 10. We can expand as much as we need to and put a lot more people on projects."

"We set up a global pipeline so we don't have to be specific about where jobs can be done. We can pretty much provide anything from basic tasks to finished jobs anywhere you like. Whether it's VFX, DI or restoration, you can choose which location you want it finished, approved and distributed in. A global customer can see something in London, LA or India easily and consistently, and we can deliver whatever their delivery requirements may be," explains Malhotra.

"This means we can engage our clients through better creative solutions and better value for money without compromising the creative process. Wherever you



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Image courtesy of Prime Focus.

are, you get the same service and quality. We're offering clients the flexibility over where to source creativity, and we can achieve efficiencies by breaking down the job depending on the core skill set that fits the facility. For example, London has high-quality design and aesthetics, the US has huge R&D capabilities, and India offers the breadth to work on 300-400 shots at one time. It's the best of what each destination can offer, plus scale, which gives us a competitive edge," continues Malhotra.

Commenting on the huge undertaking of setting up and implementing a global visual effects pipeline, Moore says: "It's a new business model and a big operation. We've had to sort out communication issues and push people more creatively, but things are changing now and we're starting to see things come to fruition."

But rest assured that Prime Focus' ambitions won't stop here. Malhotra is already eyeing up other regions to further expand the company's international reach and shake up the post production business model. And wherever the pioneering company expands, Autodesk will be at the heart of its technical and creative innovation.



McDonald's 'No Fry Left Behind' - DDB Chicago.
Image courtesy of Prime Focus.

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