

Sebastian (Saj) Thachenkary

VP Marketing and Community Engagement, Milwaukee School of Engineering
Member Since March 2019

Saj Thachenkary's family presumed he would become an MD—and he did. Just not the kind they had envisioned.

"Often in the Indian culture, it's not whether you'll be a doctor, but what kind. Although my mother was a doctor, I always had a creative bent. I loved words. I loved images. I was always interested in telling a story. So for me, MD meant marketing director," said Saj, who was born and spent the first two years of his life in India.

And based on a nearly 35-year career that has included the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Johnson Financial Group in Racine, Alverno College and his current role at MSOE, it's clear Saj made the right choice.

"I love what I do. I love that it requires using both sides of the brain. You have to be creative, you have to be intuitive about how people think and feel, and then there's the scientific side of analyzing numbers and results."

For Saj, marketing has been an ideal career and MSOE is the perfect place to pursue it.

"I can't think of a greater responsibility than being entrusted with finishing the work that parents have started and supporting students through their college experience. I'm so impressed by our students. I'm amazed at their maturity and how hard they work. I draw so much energy from them and I feel so passionate about telling the MSOE story to all the prospective students and families out there and help expand MSOE's reach—from Milwaukee to around the world."

Saj, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, oversees MSOE's Marketing and Community Engagement team, which includes Marketing Communication, the Grohmann Museum, WMSE 91.7FM, the university's independent, non-profit and listener-supported radio station, and MSOE's Raider Shop. In this role, he directs the brand and marketing strategy including web, social media, print, video, digital and media relations.

The eldest of three, Saj credits his success, in part, to his mom, a retired pathologist, and his dad, who worked in the credit industry for most of his career. He inherited traits from both of them—his mom's work ethic and his dad's outgoing personality.



"I also had so many great mentors throughout my life and career—teachers, coaches and professionals. I'm inspired every day by the people around me including our students, my colleagues, my professional network, Rotarians and my family."

One person in particular, Jerry Cohen, owner of Major Goolsby's, where Saj worked while in college, taught him how to deal with people and to trust his gut.

"Jerry is a Milwaukee icon and almost like a second dad to me. I often ask myself, 'What would Jerry do in this situation?'"





In 2018, Saj was named a *Milwaukee Business Journal* Chief Marketing Officer of the Year, recognized for amplifying MSOE's national recognition, supporting record enrollment growth in partnership with MSOE Admissions, improving and expanding the university's brand recognition, enhancing its website and forging important community relationships.

He brushes the accolade aside.

"That's not really about me. That's all about having a great team. I'm so lucky to be surrounded by really intelligent, really talented people who are committed to the mission of this university."

Currently, Saj's team is zeroed in on cementing the university's position in the artificial intelligence realm.

"AI is a huge opportunity for us. Our AI-focused curriculum is teaching students to be leaders in that space right now using super computers in Diercks Computational Science Hall. It's exciting because AI is going to impact every facet of our society—from computing to health care."

Outside of work, Saj does a lot of volunteer work and serves on the Wisconsin Sports Hall of Fame Advisory Board and the University Club Board of Directors. He and his wife Jaqueline have a daughter, Amanda, 35, and son, Luke, 19. The couple reside in Mequon where they enjoy gardening together. When they lived in Shorewood, Saj served on the Shorewood Foundation board for nine years including a term as president. He also likes to golf and family time is key.

"Our happy place is Door County. It's just a short drive away but it feels like you've left everything behind when you're there."

One thing that might cut into his free time a bit is his new role as Rotary president. He feels honored to be selected but it almost seemed like destiny. Rotary made a positive impression on Saj from an early age as his dad was a member and president of the Kenosha Rotary Club and still proudly wears his Rotary pin when he's out and about. Both parents are two-time Paul Harris Fellows.

In his president's message, Saj focuses on two goals: membership engagement and sharing the Rotary story.

"It's not solely about increasing our numbers but enriching our club through increased engagement. Secondly, we need to tell our story. We need members to get the story out to their networks, to share the impact Rotary has on them and the world around them. These stories go a long way in building our brand."

It involves a little work and effort, but it's so worth it, Saj said.

"I think this gets lost sometimes, but we can achieve great things with amazing people and have fun doing it. It's rare for me to leave a Rotary meeting where there wasn't laughter involved with the work we do."



Editor's Note: *Rotary People of Action* is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.