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RAMZY ABDUL-MAJED AND
MARKUS THESLEFF

The co-founders of
Whistle Hospitality Group
are all set to take their
enterprise to the next level

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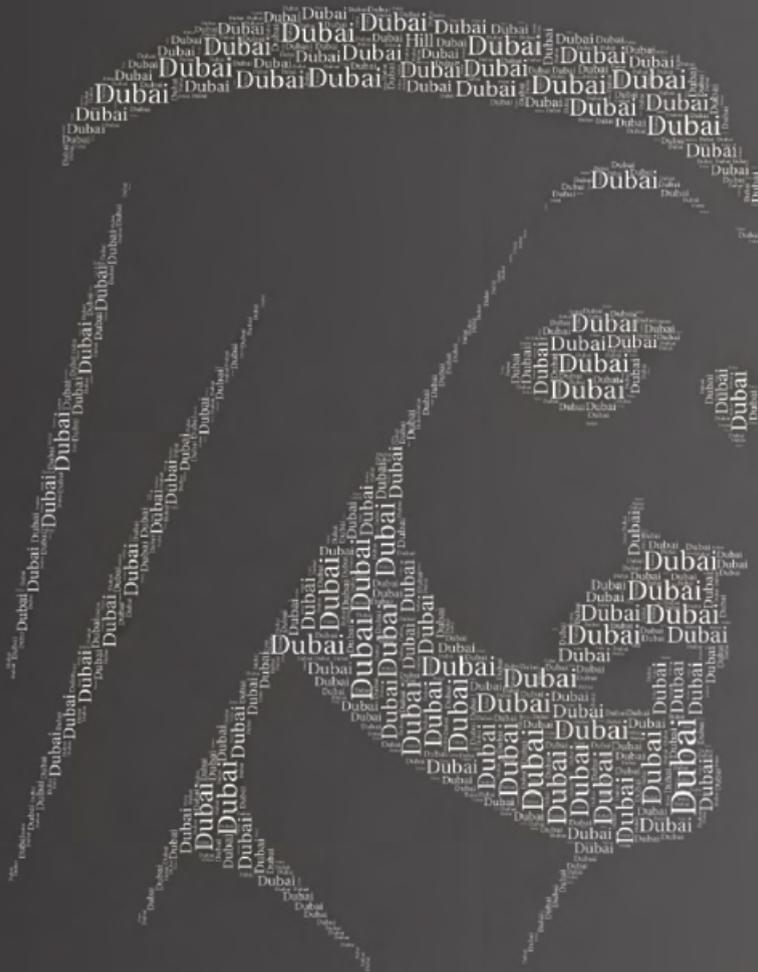


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Andy Meikle,
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Nooruldeen Agha,
founder and CEO,
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60 YEARS OF ADVENTURE
AND DISCOVERY



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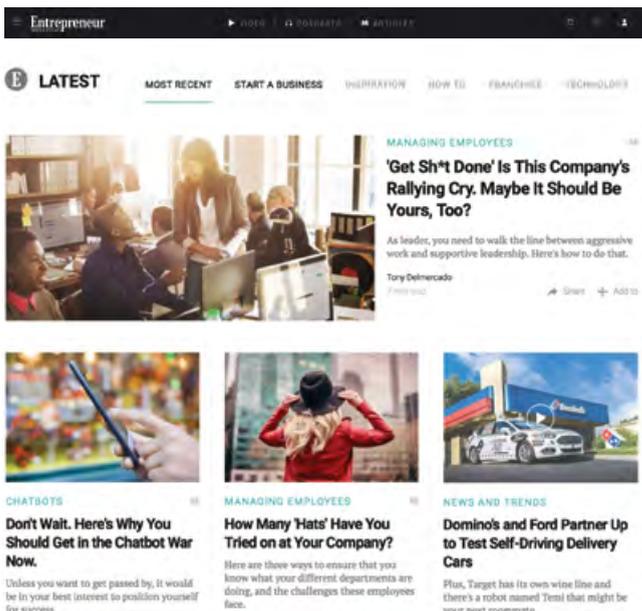


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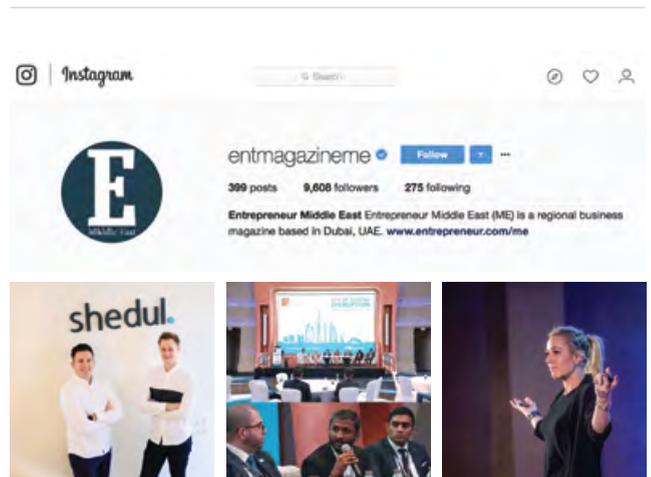
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Finding common ground

Conflicts are to be expected at startups and, as an entrepreneur, you need to know how to tackle them

In an ideal world, the office shouldn't be a setting for any kind of conflict, but let's be real, such situations are to be expected when people work with each other in close proximity, day in and day out. Be it among employees, or among co-founders even, there are plenty of avenues for strife to occur within an organization, and as the entrepreneur running the business, it'd serve you well if you are prepared to handle and manage these kinds of eventualities. Rest assured that avoiding or ignoring such issues isn't going to be in your company's best interest- unresolved conflict can lead to anything from staff turnover, to, well, bigger problems- Harvard Business School professor Noam Wasserman, when researching for his book *The Founder's Dilemma*, found that 65% of startups fail as a result of co-founder conflict.

So, if conflicts are to be expected in your business, how do you, as the entrepreneur running the show, go about tackling them? With the disclaimer that I am not at all an expert in this arena, and that I am simply looking back at my own experiences and things that I have seen, heard and read, here's my take on what you need to do to resolve a conflict:

1. Start by listening to both sides

Regardless of how you became aware of a crisis within the workplace, make it a point to talk to

(and understand the perspectives of) people on either end of the conflict. It is absolutely imperative that you do not -do not- have a go at one of the parties in the conflict after having heard just the other's point of view. Startups are emotional places, yes, but when managing these kinds of situations, it's important to remember to stay as objective as you can, look out for the facts, and, well, just be wiser about things- though that's easier said than done.

2. You now know the story- interpret it in your company's best interests

I equate this part of my conflict resolution process with the way I react to "inspiring" quotes that I see on Instagram: all of that's great and all, but how does that affect me? From a managerial point of view, this is when you need to consider what you have learned about the conflict, and figure out how it relates to your company- it's not really about choosing one side over the other; your role is to get the issue resolved in a way that is good for your business in the long term.

3. Make a decision (and then stick to it)

Conflict resolution shouldn't take on the form of a never-ending debate- after all, you don't want these situations to fester, as letting things go without finding a solution will almost certainly lead to feelings of resentment within the workplace. A positive company



culture is something that's vital for your business' success, and so, you don't want to have a workforce on-board that's low on morale. Make an informed decision with respect to solving the conflict- your focus should essentially be on preventing it from happening again.

When it comes to resolving conflicts, getting it done may take some time- but doing it right will serve you and your company well in the long run. Don't shy away from such situations- it's always better to tackle them head on at the first instance.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Aby Sam Thomas'. The signature is stylized and includes a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

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GLOBAL AMBITIONS

GCC startup PayTabs looks to expand internationally with a **US\$20 million** funding



Abdulaziz F. Al Jouf, founder and CEO, PayTabs

MENA-based payment processing startup PayTabs has announced a US\$20 million investment raise in a Series A round from undisclosed private investors. Starting out of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) in 2014 and growing their base there, PayTabs subsequently entered Bahrain, and its current fundraising is directed towards further expansion in the MENA region, Southeast Asia, India, Africa, and Europe in the next two years. Not just that, the fintech startup also counts product development as a key priority, and seeks to “engage in key strategic acquisitions to further expand our portfolio of products and services.”

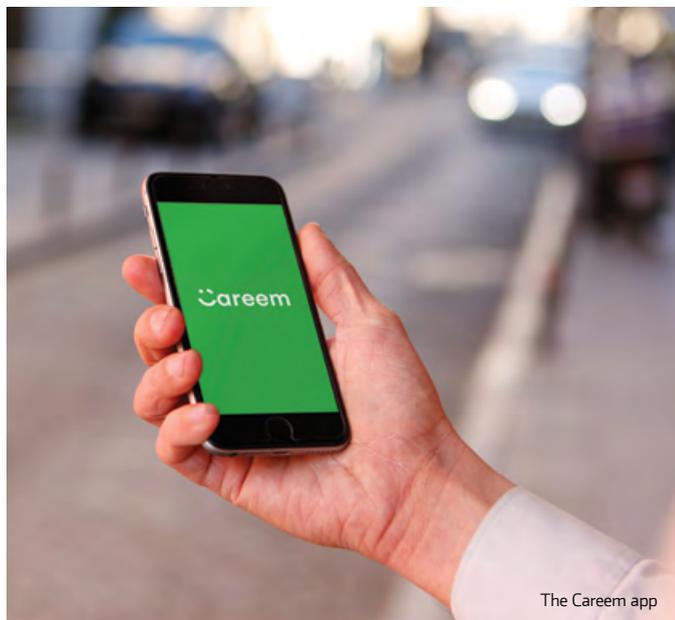
As a B2B payment solution provider, PayTabs enables businesses to execute their online payment capabilities, thus empowering small and medium enterprises, and e-commerce ventures in the region. The company believes that its “unique technology and exclusive partnerships with fraud prevention systems” sets them apart from other electronic payment companies in this part of the world.

Explaining PayTabs’ differentiation amid a cluttered MENA fintech market, Abdulaziz F. Al Jouf, founder and CEO, PayTabs says, “When you talk about global scale, we offer 160+ currencies alternative payment methods. We are in the process of building a better checkout flow, which will offer a seamless experience. Security is very critical at PayTabs, hence we have an advanced fraud management system in place, with the highest level of PCI-DSS compliance. Apart from systems, we have a dedicated dispute resolution team along with 24-hour customer support.”

Al Jouf refers to the fundraising process as “fairly long drawn and time consuming,” and says the challenge was to convince investors that a fintech startup operating out of the GCC can not just aspire to be a global player, but also achieve it. “Through the proposed expansion plan, we aim to create over 4000 direct and indirect jobs in the next two years, across the world,” he adds.



PayTabs online payment



The Careem app

Driving growth

CHINESE RIDE-HAILING GIANT DIDI CHUXING INVESTS IN CAREEM

The Middle East (and global) ride-hailing technology space has taken an exciting turn as the Dubai-headquartered Careem announced a strategic partnership with Chinese ride-hailing giant Didi Chuxing, with the latter making an undisclosed investment in the company as well. According to a statement on the deal, this marks Didi’s first collaboration in the MENA region, and Careem expects the endorsement to “strengthen its leading market position, and further enhance its reliable transportation offerings across the region.”

“Didi Chuxing brings leading edge AI capabilities, insight and expertise to our organization as we enter our next phase of growth” says Mudassir Sheikh, co-founder and CEO, Careem, in the statement. “This evolution in our long relationship will enable Careem to more effectively pursue growth opportunities through continued innovation and sustainability. Didi’s investment is yet another endorsement of the significant regional opportunity

to leapfrog traditional infrastructure, and improve the lives of people in our communities.” “Careem is the region’s technology and market leader,” noted Cheng Wei, founder and CEO, Didi Chuxing. “Through technology exchange and co-development, we look to support continued growth and transformation of the region’s transportation industry, tap into the significant potential of the local internet economy and foster more innovative services for a broader network of communities around the world.”

As reported by *Techcrunch*, the Careem–Didi partnership is an extension of Didi’s current global empire, as well as its continuing push against its biggest rival in the business, Uber, with it having recently made an undisclosed investment in Taxify, another Uber-like service operating in Europe and Africa. Not just that, Didi also holds stake in Lyft in the US, in India’s Ola Cabs, 99 in Latin America, and Southeast Asia’s Grab, besides owning equity in Uber itself, through the acquisition of Uber’s China business in 2016.

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A person wearing a white short-sleeved shirt is leaning their arm on a dark table. In the background, a chalkboard is visible with handwritten text in yellow and blue chalk. The text on the chalkboard includes "SESSION", "CUSTOMER SERVICE", "SESSION", "GMT", "KS", "DOTEN", "FR", "A PL", "RATIN", and "OD".

RISING TO THE OCCASION

Lachlan Jackson

FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR, ECOCAST

THE MARINE INDUSTRY MAY NOT BE THE MOST POPULAR OF INDUSTRIES FOR ENTREPRENEURS TO GET INTO—BUT ECOCAST FOUNDER LACHLAN JACKSON MANAGED HIS WAY INTO IT (AND IS NOW THERE TO STAY)

By Tamara Pupic

Lachlan Jackson, founder and Managing Director of Ecocast, a Dubai-based specialist marine contracting and coastal protection services company, wasn't at the company's headquarters at Dubai Investment Park when I arrived there, as I was (obviously) a bit too early for our interview. In those extra minutes, I looked around the bright meeting room I had been seated in: besides a table and about six or eight chairs, the room contained a shelf with books (which were mostly entrepreneurship-themed), and the wall behind it was plastered with posters. Next to that, there was a whiteboard stocked with dry erase markers, and yellow and pink colored sticky notes scattered all over it, indicating that spontaneous brainstorming sessions often happen here to encourage frequent, efficient, and concise knowledge-sharing. Perhaps the most eye-catching element of all in the room was a wall decked in black chalkboard paint, allowing the team to

write down ideas and plans in different vivacious colors. If you want to understand how the Ecocast team functions, just consider that one wall—it is a simple, practical, and not-very-expensive DIY solution, but even scribbling on it with a dusty chalk is a way of making the team members more deeply attached to and aligned with the commitments they have taken on. As another testament to this, later on in our conversation, Jackson would tell me that there are two executive coaches who work with the team, himself included, on a regular basis to hold them accountable for their goals. "Everything we do, every product or service that we start doing, we approach them like we are pioneers," says Jackson, remaining valid and succinct throughout the interview. "We are either the first to bring it to the region, or we take an existing idea and make it better. We have a very narrow focus with what we do, but we dive deep back into the value chain, and we control the supply of our materials, the manufacturing, the project execution, and the engineering behind it."



Lachlan Jackson,
founder and
Managing Director,
Ecocoast at the
Marine & Coastal
Engineering
Conference in 2016

Launched in 2009, Ecocoast Contracting provides specialist marine contracting and coastal protection services -covering the full lifecycle of a marine or coastal project from development and protection, marine infrastructure, to operation and maintenance- to developers, contractors, operators and governments, primarily in the UAE. These services encompass two main areas -coastal protection and marine infrastructure- mainly focusing on the installation of marinas, marine piling, beach cleaning and maintenance. Since 2014, Ecocoast has cleaned over 2,800,000 square meters of area and removed over 2,240 cubic meters of debris from beaches and golf courses,

“I THINK THERE IS ENOUGH SUPPORT, VC FUNDING, AND BACKING FOR TECH COMPANIES, WHEREAS THE SUPPORT TO TRADITIONAL INDUSTRIES IS STILL LACKING.”

equating to over 5,180 tons or 50 trailer loads. Today, Ecocoast Contracting is a parent company to Ecobarrier Manufacturing, a marine manufacturing firm Jackson set up in 2012, that designs, manufactures and distributes a range of marine protection and demarcation barriers under the brand Ecobarrier. Not too long into our conversation, it is clear why Jackson's plans for the company require a large vertical surface to be devised onto. Over the last five years, the company has installed over 165,000 meters of marine protection barriers to protect GCC coastlines and waterways in construction projects that are valued at over US\$100 billion. Since inception, it has also constructed berthing installations for over 40 marinas and marine service stations throughout the UAE.

In one corner of the meeting room, there is a nearly flipchart-sized poster on the wall showcasing Ecocoast's vision summary, including its core values (integrity, pride, curiosity, solutions, and transparency), core purpose (to innovate), and brand promises (100% delivery guarantee). In itself, the poster serves as

a great visual to answer why Jackson started the company- exactly a decade ago, the then 24-year-old Australian moved to Dubai to launch a branch office of his father's coastal engineering consultancy, but quickly realized that only few products which his father used to offer in their home market were manufactured or available here. “At that time [2008/2009], the market definitely was not advanced in this sector, in terms of a lot of the solutions; it was maybe 10 to 15 years behind Australia or even Europe,” he says. “There were a lot of big companies, but due to licensing restrictions and capital requirements, there weren't any small companies, so a lot of the structures that were being built were simply a copy and paste version of large-scale structures. There wasn't anyone to come in, move quickly and take the risk on smaller structures.” Jackson spotted a gap of a fairly decent size between mega projects worth more than \$10 million and smaller size projects of up to that sum, which were of no interest to large companies. “That gave us the first step up,” he remembers. “We were fortunate in a way that we started exactly when the downturn hit in 2009, the market fell out completely, and that took out a lot of big projects, but there were still a lot of requests from developers, hotels, and so on, for small size projects. In a way, we were lucky that in the first three years, we survived largely on the work from private developers and the hotels which hadn't fallen out.”

Before long, he was able to again marshal the necessary focus to spot another market inefficiency- no one was locally manufacturing environmental protection barriers, such as silt screens. Starting the manufacturing unit in 2012, despite



Geobags coastal protection
by Ecocoast

being challenged by a limited access to key components and raw materials in the region, explains Jackson's approach to not only innovation but the company's competitors. "We are not the cheapest option, we don't compete on price, and we don't work on a product or a service unless we can be number one whether immediately, the minute we start, or in the next one to two years," he says. "If we cannot be number one, it is of no interest to us. We never compete when it just comes down to price, because I believe that the race to the bottom destroys value. The minute products or services commoditize and it all becomes about price, innovation is dead. The race to the bottom kills it for the client, for the manufacturer, and for the industry. There are better ways to compete. Take silt screens for example. There wasn't a high uptake of silt screens in the region, they were made of poor quality materials, they weren't engineered properly, they weren't made well. So, the companies used to buy and the municipality said they had to use them, but the contractors didn't want to use them as they knew they would fail. So, we started working with the concerned companies to build something that is basically fit for purpose and that increased the acceptance of products. They then supported the product, and that helped them start working with the municipality."

Ecocoast operates in 14 countries around the world: UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, KSA, Oman, Kuwait, Jordan, Gabon, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mauritius, Hong Kong, Maldives, Mexico. "For services, we are primarily focused on the UAE, but we do supervision works outside the east coast of Africa and throughout the Gulf," Jackson

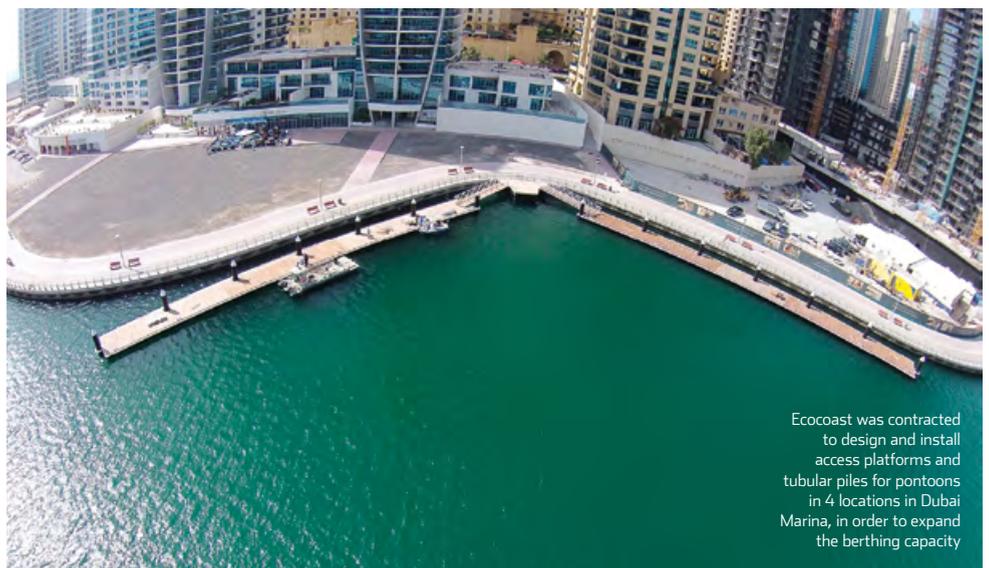
"WE HAVE A VERY NARROW FOCUS WITH WHAT WE DO, BUT WE DIVE DEEP BACK INTO THE VALUE CHAIN, AND WE CONTROL THE SUPPLY OF OUR MATERIALS, THE MANUFACTURING, THE PROJECT EXECUTION, AND THE ENGINEERING BEHIND IT."

says. "Products-wise, we ship all through the GCC, Africa, as well as to Hong Kong, Mexico, and so on. Primarily, we focus on emerging markets. We don't have an interest of moving into Europe or too far into Asia or America, because there is already market saturation to some degree, whereas this region is still underserved. The other reason is the shipping and transport of products, so we use the UAE as our manufacturing and shipping base, and anywhere

within a two-week shipping radius is our core focus. The challenges of expanding into other markets relate to the acceptance of the products. We are fortunate that a lot of our clients are multinationals, and they pull us into new markets. So, we analyze where our clients are going, which is usually a good indication of where the projects are. We come in quite early in the project, and when it is awarded, we generally come in quickly afterwards. But we still do need to do the hard work with consultants, municipalities and governments to help them understand the quality of the product and what problem we are solving. Once we have done one or two projects, we decide whether that market has more opportunities to explore further."

Ecocoast has grown at a CAGR of 56%, counting eight of the top 10 dredging companies among its more than 90 clients across the Middle East, Africa and Asia. No single client makes up more than 20% of the company's revenue, and 60% of revenue this year

has come from repeat clients, Jackson states. "The market at the moment is not great, but there are still so many opportunities here compared to other places in the world, and you really can build something here," he adds. "It is not easy, but that is half the thrill and half the challenge of it. Now, you mustn't slow down. When people start comparing price on price, you need to find other ways to compete, and no matter what they say, having a profitable business is a mission behind every business. If you are not profitable, you can't reinvest, you can't grow and innovate, and that is where the market stagnates. I think that it is very easy to start cutting prices to compete, but it is not the right thing to do. The best thing to do is to double down and reinvest everything you have and do things differently. For example, if this area starts to commoditize and the competition starts to build up, maybe we can focus on another area or do things in a different way. The competition does catch up quickly. In many products and services that >>>



Ecocoast was contracted to design and install access platforms and tubular piles for pontoons in 4 locations in Dubai Marina, in order to expand the berthing capacity

we do, there are copycats right behind us. At a certain point, you have to work out that you are not doing anything any different than the rest of the competition, so that's when we take a step back and look at what we are doing now- Is it pioneering? Is it changing things? Is it improving the industry? If the answer is no, we take another shot at it." However, regardless of running a thriving company today, Jackson still remembers the struggle of its first days. Therefore, he'll be keeping an eye on the local startup scene, particularly on those non-tech entrepreneurs bound for greater things than their possibly challenging beginnings in business dictate. "I would look to invest in startups but outside the [marine] industry, yet still in more traditional industries," he says. "I think there is enough support, VC funding, and backing for tech companies, whereas the support to traditional industries is still lacking."

From a personal perspective though, to ensure that his future plans are not fits of irrational grandiosity, Jackson makes it a point to regularly advise with his peers- he is an Endeavor Entrepreneur, a global accolade awarded to high-impact entrepreneurs with the greatest potential for economic and social impact in their respective regions, as well as an active member of

Entrepreneurs' Organization. From his more experienced peers, he is mainly seeking advice on talent acquisition and retention as it is a pressing issue he is currently trying to solve. "It's about managing 70 staff," he says. "You do need someone to be in a full-time role just for that. A larger company can afford that. It is also about talent acquisition and talent retention, like for everyone else, because it is a big issue in the region. Six months ago, we assembled a team of six, myself included. That was extremely challenging. Finding people in the region with the experience in the industry is extremely difficult, particularly at what we do. People come from other larger companies or

"THE CHALLENGES OF EXPANDING INTO OTHER MARKETS RELATE TO THE ACCEPTANCE OF THE PRODUCTS. WE ARE FORTUNATE THAT A LOT OF OUR CLIENTS ARE MULTINATIONALS, AND THEY PULL US INTO NEW MARKETS."

other industries, so we don't hire based on experience, but on value and personality. Then our training comes in in terms of how quickly we can skill them up. But, finding them through the network of contacts wasn't a great success. It was mainly through LinkedIn and external head hunters. We relied on that a lot and then we had an extremely long vetting process. We would take three to six months to fill a role."

When it comes to entrepreneurship, Jackson is now on his second (successful) attempt. Prior to starting Eco-coast, as a fresh international finance graduate, he co-founded an Australian fashion label in 2003 with a manufacturing facility in Vietnam. However, he notes that starting up in the capital- and resource-intensive marine industry was a particular challenge. He opted to bootstrap the business, and is still its sole shareholder. "That makes you appreciate the value of every single dollar and every single business decision that you make," he explains. "You have grown. If I could imagine myself here seven years ago, I think I would have been amazed with what I have achieved. I would love to say that when I started, I wanted to take over the world. But I really wasn't. I was very much focused on a problem, I knew I could solve that problem, and that was what drove me very much at the start. I was very involved in the product development and the service development, and that was what motivated me. Only after three to four years did I start to look outside and focus on the bigger picture and that sort of opened my horizons. Now, I don't want to build something for a fast exit, that is not the point. I am proud of what I do and what we have built. Building something just to profit and just to sell is not my approach." ■

'TREP TALK

ECOCAST FOUNDER AND CEO LACHLAN JACKSON'S TIPS FOR ENTREPRENEURS

1. IF IT WAS EASY, EVERYONE WOULD DO IT

"This is one of the key mantras we live by at EcoCoast. You need grit and determination as an entrepreneur, even more so when you are doing something new in a traditional industry. Nobody ever says it is easy, and if you're constantly pushing yourself it doesn't get easier, but the payoff is more than worth it."

2. KNOW YOUR WHY

"Before starting any business, in addition to having a crystal-clear purpose and vision for the business, it is important to know your personal reason for being and what you hope to achieve out of it. Are you building a legacy business that you will scale, or are you building it for an exit? I cannot stress how important this is for an entrepreneur, as it will influence how you structure your business and guide every decision you make. Know your why, and always keep it top of mind in any strategic business decision."

3. ESTABLISH A SUPPORT NETWORK

"Surround yourself with a solid community you can turn to for support, whether that be mentors or peers. There are some incredible organizations such as Entrepreneur's Organization and Endeavor, whose core purpose it is to support entrepreneurs like us. But it is not a one-way street, and you should be prepared to give back. One of the best things about being part of these networks is being able to reciprocate the support to your fellow entrepreneurs."



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SUCCESS SPEAKS FOR ITSELF

RAMZY ABDUL-MAJEED AND MARKUS THESLEFF

The co-founders of Whissle Hospitality Group
—the company behind F&B brands like Okku, Claw and more in Dubai—
are all set to take their enterprise to the next level

By Aby Sam Thomas

Ramzy Abdul-Majeed and Markus Thesleff set up Whissle Hospitality Group in Dubai in 2009 (with the vision for it starting in 2005); however, unless you are particularly familiar with the region's hospitality and F&B scene, there is a good chance that you probably haven't heard of the company before. But while other entrepreneurs with enterprises as old as Whissle may find this scenario a cause for concern, Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff don't seem to be really perturbed by it at all— their reasoning is that though you may have not heard of Whissle, you certainly couldn't have missed the many award-winning brands under this boutique hospitality group's portfolio.

For one, there's Okku, the homegrown Japanese restaurant, bar and lounge that started Whissle's story, which is today a Dubai institution with a slew of awards to its credit. Other concepts that fall under Whissle's purview include Claw, an American-style barbecue and seafood eatery, Sophie's Café, a gastro-café with a menu of wholesome home-style meals, Cielo Sky Lounge, a roof terrace destination, Casa de Tapas, a Spanish restaurant, Riva Beach Club, a Mediterranean cuisine-themed retreat, and—well, I could go on, but it should be clear by now that Whissle is behind some of the most popular F&B venues in Dubai. And given the success these concepts have seen, it's fair to say that Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff's strategy to let the world know of Whissle's brands on their own merit—with the company as such (and themselves too) taking a backseat in the process—has indeed been a winning one. "Our focus has been on our brands," Thesleff declares. "Let our brands speak for us—

Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff's strategy to let the world know of Whissle's brands on their own merit—with the company as such (and themselves too) taking a backseat in the process—has indeed been a winning one.

"WE SAID, LET'S CREATE A HOSPITALITY GROUP, AND LET'S DO IT BASED OUT OF DUBAI. LET'S CREATE OUR OWN BRANDS, AND THEN TAKE THEM OVERSEAS— WE WANTED TO ACTUALLY HAVE SOMETHING BORN AND BRED IN DUBAI."

because they don't need to know us, but [they should know] our brands and our people."

In a landscape where there is (arguably) a tendency for entrepreneurs to be shone on themselves as opposed to their businesses, such statements by Thesleff and Abdul-Majeed are a welcome departure from what is often the norm in this space. In terms of personalities, Abdul-Majeed is the one who seems calm and collected, while Thesleff looks to be the more emphatic, enthusiastic one of the two, and together, they make for a rather well-matched entrepreneurial duo, who were friends for a long while before they became business partners as well. While Abdul-Majeed comes from a finance background, Thesleff has had both family business and entrepreneurial experience, and the two had been talking about setting up a business together for a long while before they eventually did so with the launch of Okku in 2009. At the time, Dubai's F&B scene was quite unlike what it is today— the tendency then was to bring in



Ramzy Abdul-Majeed, co-founder, Whissle Hospitality Group

concepts from outside of the UAE and transplant it here, and the market was then more receptive to ideas brought forward by large, well-established players, as opposed to, well, people they hadn't really heard a lot about. But Thesleff and Abdul-Majeed weren't keen on being a part of the herd, so to speak— sure, they could have also imported existing concepts, but they had a different vision in mind. "We said, let's create a hospitality group, and let's do it based out of Dubai," Abdul-Majeed remembers. >>>



Markus Thesleff, co-founder, Whissle Hospitality Group



OKKU interior

“Let’s create our own brands, and then take them overseas- we wanted to actually have something born and bred in Dubai.”

And this was the principle that drove the creation of Okku (and Whissle, by default)- it was a singular ambition, and the co-founders readily admit that it was hard to get people to buy into them and their ideas. After all, a Japanese concept like Okku was completely new at the time in the market, but Thesleff and Abdul-Majeed were also using this fact to their benefit, as they were all set to be the first mover in this space in Dubai. However, this didn’t pan out as they hoped, and they had a whole other hurdle to face. Delays in construction caused them to postpone Okku’s launch date, and Zuma, a successful Japanese restaurant concept from London, unveiled its Dubai location in September 2008, five months before Okku was able to open its doors. “We were supposed to launch way before Zuma,” Abdul-Majeed says. “And then [when we opened], everyone was saying, oh, you just copied them. But you can’t do that in five months... So that was in itself a challenge, because suddenly, we were looked at, when we opened, as a copycat.” At around the same time, another global Japanese concept, Nobu, also opened here in Dubai, and this was a less than ideal scenario, to say the least, and one can imagine how frazzled the Whissle co-founders were. “Our whole concept was [about] being the first mover,” Thesleff recalls. “Our whole strategy was about being these two guys, [with a] homegrown idea, and being a first mover... And all of a sudden, [we were] getting leapfrogged by not just names, but, like, superpower names.” But there was a silver lining: Thesleff notes that the opening of Zuma and Nobu gave Okku a benchmark to challenge, and



they wholeheartedly embraced that opportunity. Fast forward a couple of years, and not only is the Okku brand now firmly on the same pedestal as both Zuma and Nobu, it has also garnered a slew of industry awards testifying to its excellence, which has in turn made Whissle a force to reckon with in the region’s F&B landscape. The manner in which the Whissle co-founders chose to tackle competition – and that too, at such an early stage of their business- should serve as an important lesson for other entrepreneurs. “Strategy-wise, the objective [we used] was to do what we wanted to do, create what we wanted to create, be who we are,” Abdul-Majeed says. “Don’t really care about the competition so much, because if you spend all your time worrying about them, you don’t do what’s right for you- that takes care of itself if you do a good enough job.” “You got to focus on yourself, because where focus goes, energy flows,” Thesleff adds. “You got to take care of yourself.” By following this principle, Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff man-

aged to successfully elevate the Okku brand, but doing so didn’t mean they were done with their dreams though- they had a bigger vision for Whissle. “Most people would have taken Okku, and focused on Okku, and only done Okku, and expanded it,” Abdul-Majeed says. “We just had this vision of- we wanted to change the hospitality industry in the region. It can’t be this big hotel, big franchise thing, and that’s it- there’s got to be creativity here. We wanted to be pioneers in that.” As per Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff, if Dubai were to realize the aspirational goals that the UAE’s leaders had set for the Emirate, then with respect to the hospitality industry, the city needed to have an indigenous pool of talent to tap into- there had to be creative concepts that were born here, ideas that originated from here that could be exported to other parts of the world.

To say this dream is an ambitious one would probably be an understatement- but this is what drove (and indeed, continues to drive) Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff forward

in building up the Whissle enterprise. Of course, their past experience does back them up well: the duo have previously seen success with Pangaea, the award-winning lounge and club concept in London, New York, and Marbella, and they’ve also had Aviva, a private members club in London at the Baglioni Hotel- this concept is set to open soon in Dubai as a roof terrace as well. Today, besides Okku, Whissle’s original concepts like Claw, Riva Beach Club, and others can be seen as Dubai institutions in their own right, with each of them having their own particular USPs that make them stand out from their peers in the market. However, this represents the realization of just one part of the Whissle vision. “We were doing two things,” Abdul-Majeed explains. “We were creating a bunch of brands here that we make successful in this market... Then, from that, the vision was, 8-9 years down the road, having created, roughly, a brand a year, then we start the expansion and franchising process aggressively.” And that is indeed

the plan that the Whissle co-founders are now working on- the company is getting set to take its best brands outside of Dubai and the UAE, and make their presence felt not just in the neighboring GCC market, but internationally as well. Okku, for instance, is set to open a new flagship, Okku at the Fairmont Hotel on The Palm later this year, with the new addition of Okku Beach, providing a refined luxury chic pool and beach experience to discerning guests. Okku Riyadh is under construction as well, with it slated to open its doors in early 2018. At the same time, a new Sophie's is set to open by the end of this year at Barsha Heights in Dubai, while three new Claw locations are slated for the GCC region in the next two years. Besides scouting for locations around the world that would be a good fit for their existing concepts, Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff reveal that they are also building new brands to add to these new markets as well as their own repertoire- one of these, they tell me, will be Nama, a Japanese bistro concept that's set to be an offshoot of Okku, which already has two locations in the pipeline- in fact, the Dubai Marina outlet is set to open mid-2018. As for long-term goals, Whissle hopes to be in the business of operating hotels someday- with the team having managed to excel as F&B operators, they believe that they are well-suited for delivering superior experiences as hoteliers as well. However, both Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff tell me that they are a long way away from realizing this particular dream- but it's an aspiration they have in mind for Whissle all the same.

It's interesting to note here how these two entrepreneurs, while dreaming big in whatever they set out to do, are willing to take their time in realizing their ambitions. Consider what they have done with Whissle so

Thesleff and Abdul-Majeed point out that one of the paradigms that Whissle works with is that "we don't hire staff, we recruit family," and it is this principle that essentially governs their management styles in the organization.

"DON'T REALLY CARE ABOUT THE COMPETITION SO MUCH, BECAUSE IF YOU SPEND ALL YOUR TIME WORRYING ABOUT THEM, YOU DON'T DO WHAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU- THAT TAKES CARE OF ITSELF IF YOU DO A GOOD ENOUGH JOB."

far, for instance- Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff were keen on having the company set up a strong base, a strong foundation with their brands here in Dubai first, from which their further growth could be engineered in a successful manner. Be it with the setting (and maintenance) of strong standards at all of their different outlets, or with the laying out of proper governance structures and legal frameworks that ensure the business' continuity and excellence, the Whissle co-founders have been (and continue to be) patient about building up their enterprise. But if there's one factor that these entrepreneurs make a point to consistently focus on throughout their business lifecycle, then that would be on the people they have at Whissle. As Thesleff and Abdul-Majeed point out, one of the paradigms that Whissle works with is that "we don't hire staff, we recruit family," and it is this principle that essentially governs their management styles in the organization. While they may be the ones with the grand visions and

ideas in their heads, Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff are quite emphatic about the fact that the people they have on board the company are the ones that will actually help them realize it, and so, they don't wish to cut corners when it comes to treating their staff well. "You won't hear people working for us," Thesleff says. "They work with us; we work with them. And that's what we are about." Given that they operate in a sector that's all about treating customers to great experiences, it's safe to say that Abdul-Majeed and Thesleff know a thing or two about treating people well, and this approach extends to their workforce as well. And if Whissle's current status and planned trajectory is any indication, then yes, their modus operandi does seem to be paying off- and their future looks promising as well. ■



OKKU



OKKU interior

Today, besides Okku, Whissle's original concepts like Claw, Riva Beach Club, and others can be seen as Dubai institutions in their own right, with each of them having their own particular USPs that make them stand out from their peers in the market.

Reinventing HEALTHCARE in the mena

IT'S IN ITS NASCENT STAGES, BUT THE REGION HAS THE POTENTIAL
TO BE A HUB FOR HEALTHCARE OF THE FUTURE

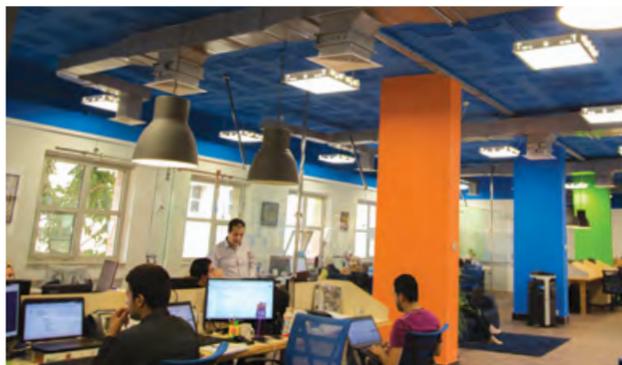
Access, quality, and cost— the three words the MENA region's healthcare policy makers often find too difficult to contemplate. Regional governments have been aiming to solve a not even seemingly simple equation for ensuring affordability and access to higher quality healthcare to all. There have been many attempts to work out the value of, let's say, X, when Y represents the currently lagging healthcare system characterized by different levels of state financial assistance and personal income, varying stages of rural and urban developments, and the shortage of quality healthcare

practitioners— just a few of the issues that are pertinent to the region. Increased healthcare spending has been laid on the table quite often— from US\$30.4 billion in 2003, government spending in healthcare across the region is expected to reach \$144 billion by 2020, according to Al Masah Capital. Yet, the problem still appears insurmountable. Instead of this less efficient expenditure, solving this equation might today be about rearranging the terms inside of it, or, to put it simply, allowing and encouraging new faster, better, cheaper models of delivering healthcare— a whole new X, if you will.

Due to the so-called “connected care” revolution spreading around the world over the last few years, technological advances have been shifting our focus from traditional asset-heavy hospital-related developments to pioneering medtech devices; to new sector niches, such as digital health, including its subcategories mobile health, wearable devices, telehealth and telemedicine, and personalized medicine; or more recently, to increased chatter about augmented reality and robotics applications in medicine. But for all of that to actually materialize, legal and regulatory constraints are the first to be cited as one of the key hurdles in fully implementing these innovations across the MENA region.

A case in point: telehealth. Often used interchangeably with the narrower term “telemedicine,” telehealth is, according to the World Health Organization, a description of the remote diagnosis and treatment of patients by means of ICT technology. Now, while the region does boast of great infrastructure in this area, telehealth, however, has not yet found a broader enabling environment. Although Saudi Arabia and the UAE did make it a central part of their healthcare policies, in the UAE, for example, Health Authority - Abu Dhabi (HAAD), Dubai Health Authority (DHA) and Dubai Healthcare City Authority (DHCCA) have made incomplete attempts to regulate telehealth practice in their jurisdictions- information security and medical liability are reportedly among the few issues that still need to be defined with more clarity and consistency.

“Unfortunately, there is no regulatory framework for telehealth,” says Jalil Allabadi, founder of Altibbi, a



Altibbi provides 1.5 million pages of comprehensive medical content in Arabic, in addition to a database of 12,000 registered doctors available for online consultations 24/7

Jordan-based digital health provider. “The only part of the Arab world that has a law regulating telehealth is in Abu Dhabi, and it is completely inadequate in its restrictiveness, not making it easy for any company to access the market. In other places, such as Dubai, the regulations are in the making and we only hope they don’t follow Abu Dhabi’s example, but be more flexible, for restrictiveness kills innovation and hinders new ideas.” The idea for Altibbi, which was launched in Amman in 2011, evolved from Allabadi’s intention to make an extensive Arabic-language medical dictionary written by his father, general surgeon Dr. Abdul Aziz Allabadi, available online for all Arabic speakers around the world. The company today provides 1.5 million pages of comprehensive medical content in Arabic, in addition to a database of 12,000 registered doctors available for online consultations 24/7. Altibbi’s 28-strong team covers 10 Arab countries from their offices in Amman, Dubai and Gaza, with a plan to open an office in Cairo and Riyadh in the near future. “In the rest of the Arab world, we operate in a grey area yet, but we are confident that with our policies and procedures, which follow the example of Ameri-



Jalil Allabadi, founder of Altibbi, a Jordan-based digital health provider

can laws, we are well placed to adhere to any forward-looking regulations,” Allabadi adds. “We operate in a very critical industry touching human lives directly, yet in the US and the UK, there have been examples of laws that encourage new models of delivering healthcare to more people and this is what we would need our governments to focus on.”

Despite operating in an ambiguous and restrictive regulatory framework across the region, Altibbi now boasts 350,000 unique visitors per day, of which 50,000 are subscribers to their premium service “Call A Doctor,” which allows patients to make an unlimited number of calls to doctors per month, with the

doctors’ average response rate being 40 seconds. This growth has been fueled by the capital injections from the founder’s family and friends and three external funding rounds, as well as advertising revenue. As with many other entrepreneurs trying to solve problems in their own local communities, raising funds has been one of Allabadi’s biggest challenges. “First of all, health tech is new everywhere, so there are not many past experiences to learn from which increases the risk for health tech start-ups,” he says. “Secondly, not many investors understand this field unlike e-commerce, for example, where VCs understand the drivers for success. Thirdly, it is again the regulatory environment, which is not yet clear, and increases the risk for anyone who wants to invest in this industry. On the other hand, one should not ignore the opportunities for health tech in our region, which is in dire need for better quality and better delivery of healthcare.” But one country in the region is trying to turn this situation around- and that is the UAE, with the 46-year-old nation attempting to leapfrog much more mature healthcare systems. The country’s singular focus on marching forward has included the 2014 launch of the UAE National Agenda outlining, among other targets, a specific blueprint to provide world-class healthcare by 2021 to coincide with the UAE’s 50th National Day; last year’s fast-paced implementation of the Dubai IOX initiative, urging the Government of Dubai to embrace >>>

“WE OPERATE IN A VERY CRITICAL INDUSTRY TOUCHING HUMAN LIVES DIRECTLY, YET IN THE US AND THE UK, THERE HAVE BEEN EXAMPLES OF LAWS THAT ENCOURAGE NEW MODELS OF DELIVERING HEALTHCARE TO MORE PEOPLE AND THIS IS WHAT WE WOULD NEED OUR GOVERNMENTS TO FOCUS ON.”

disruptive innovation for the city to become 10 years ahead of all other cities; as well as this year's announcement of the UAE Centennial 2071 plan, aimed at sustaining the country's development into its 100th anniversary. Alongside all of that, the country's drive towards innovation has gained immense momentum with last year's establishment of the Dubai Future Accelerators (DFA) program, a government-supported accelerator that pairs public and private entities with entrepreneurs in order to jointly build, test, and deploy futuristic innovations. Its first cycle saw the participation of 30 companies trying to solve global challenges set by seven government entities, which resulted in the signing of 19 memorandums of understanding (MoUs). The second cohort resulted in 28 MoUs being signed between some of the 12 public and private entities and 35 companies participating. The DHA has taken part in the DFA program from the outset.

Since enrolling in the accelerator's first cohort, Sam Amory, founder of Alpha Systems Group, a Dubai-based startup specializing in telehealth solutions, has worked with the DHA to develop an autonomous digital mobile booth which replicates a medical doctor's clinic, allowing physicians to perform live consultations. Despite working on a government-backed idea, Amory also cites inadequate regulations as the main impediment. "First and foremost, it's the law, that's the main issue," he says. "In general, there is no law around telemedicine yet, it is still being developed. Today, traditional medicine states that you must see a doctor first and have a face-to-face consultation where a physi-

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- Visual tests, Hearing tests
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cian must be able to touch you. The law today still states that your first consultation, not every consultation but the first one, must be with a doctor. Our booth has been designed in a way that there is the same length between you and the video screen as you have from a doctor sitting in front of you. We have made so much accuracy around it that it feels like you are sitting right next to the doctor. That law is what we are trying to change today." Amory's aim of creating a concept of a digitally connected health city in the UAE by establishing a broad network of those consult stations to satisfy the healthcare needs of the country's population is not far-fetched.

At the time of the interview, Alpha Systems Group's smart mobile booths were stationed in a number of government entities. "They just need to add the next phase [in the law]," he adds. "The way to do that is to have a project, and we are that project. We are crossing a new boundary and saying that this is actually a physical general practitioner's practice in a box

because everything inside this clinic is the same as you would regularly have. Everything is so similar, but it's digital. So, we will help facilitate the alterations of the law. We are going to be that proof of concept for them to say, 'This is why this works, and why we should do it.'" The consulting stations can be installed at multiple different locations, allowing all stakeholders involved to benefit from the shift to digital. "The public sector absolutely loves it, because they have 85% of people going into Accident and Emergency, and

leaving the same day, which means that it is unnecessary for them to go to there in the first place," Amory says. "That's a massive waste, and it's taking away from the doctors who should be allowed to spend more time doing the things that they should focus on. The private sector loves it because if they have one hospital and ten of those consult stations, all of a sudden, they actually have 10 hospitals. So, they are reaching their breadth- anybody walking into that station becomes their patient. The insurance companies like it even more because they are saying, 'I am getting charged AED1,000 every time someone goes to Accident and Emergency, if I could reduce those by 50%, I would be saving so much money.' Lastly, a lot of patients don't want to go



Sam Amory, founder of Alpha Systems, a Dubai-based startup specializing in telehealth solutions.

"WE ARE CROSSING A NEW BOUNDARY AND SAYING THAT THIS IS ACTUALLY A PHYSICAL GENERAL PRACTITIONER'S PRACTICE IN A BOX BECAUSE EVERYTHING INSIDE THIS CLINIC IS THE SAME AS YOU WOULD REGULARLY HAVE. EVERYTHING IS SO SIMILAR, BUT IT'S DIGITAL."



Stephane Richard, founder, Blaise Barrelet, CEO, and the team of CureMatch, a San Diego-based digital health startup developing a system to choose the best cancer treatment options for patients based on genomic data.

to hospital because they are afraid of catching something even worse. They want to go downstairs in their building, see the doctor, print out the prescription, go to the pharmacy, and it's done."

Farther afield, Morocco-based Zineb Drissi Kaitouni, co-founder of DabaDoc, a doctor-to-patient online platform, also had to build rapport with concerned stakeholders, but to reach a different target- to encourage a sustainable behavioral change in the market. Since its inception in 2014, the homegrown telehealth startup has enabled more than 3.5 million patients to connect with more than 4,000 doctors in 90 different specialties across 40 cities in three markets: Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria. "Our biggest challenge was to change mindsets because we came with a new technology that required them to change old habits," Kaitouni says. "Doctors were used to receiving phone calls from patients and having their assistants scribble the patient's name on notepads, and so on, and then we had to explain to them how technology was going to change all of that and actually help them better manage their appointments. Also, we had to educate both doctors and patients to respect the time of the appointments. Getting to the doctor's office sometimes

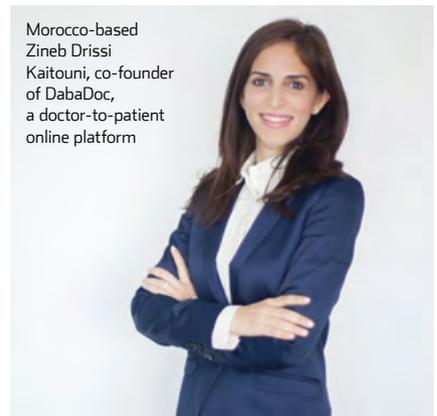
means that you have to wait for an hour or two, depending on the number of patients and the doctor you are visiting. With our online booking system, however, each doctor can set up their own agenda. It helps them reduce the no-show, or the patients being late through all the reminders that we send to them. So, it included explaining to both doctors and patients that they had to be punctual. Also, the tool enables patients to book appointments 24/7 versus calling during the office hours only, allowing them to see the availability of doctors in real time and in all transparency.

So, we transformed the way people book appointments and streamlined the patient-doctor relationship."

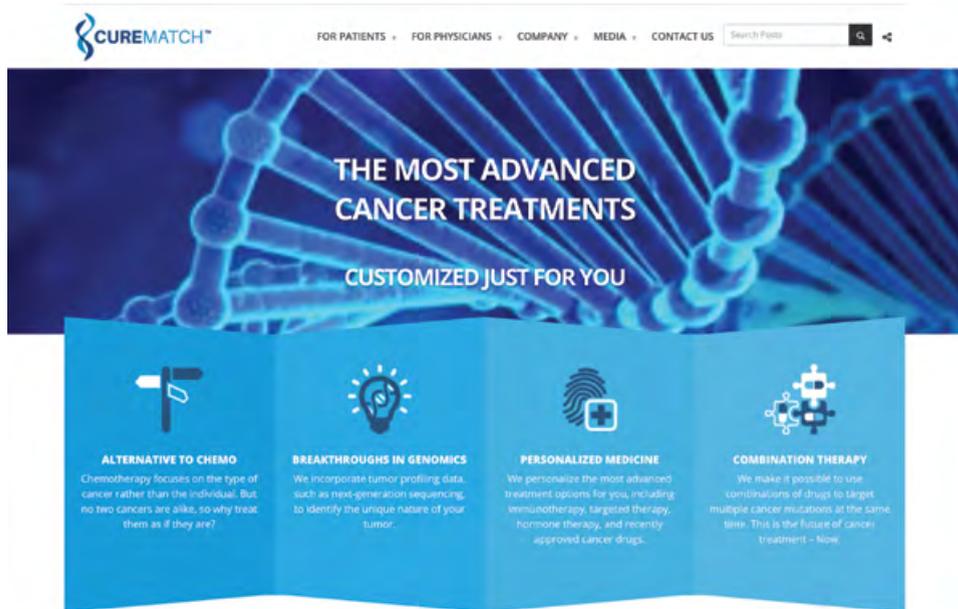
For some entrepreneurs, however, a lack of more intimate knowledge of an emerging market proved too big an obstacle or required them to adopt new approaches. Two examples come from the UAE. Part of the DFA's agenda is to look outward for big tech ideas. The concept includes sponsoring air tickets, accommodation, and office space for the selected international teams to enable them to work on their projects in Dubai. Yet, Stephane Richard and Blaise Barrelet of CureMatch, a San Diego-based digital health company that helps oncologists to select appropriate therapies, who took part in the accelerator's first cohort, didn't find the local conditions ripe for their business ideas to spring into life. "We started talking to

people in the medical sector to see whether they were routinely using these kind of information, and it seemed it was something very novel for them," Barrelet recalls. "They were kind of familiar with it but not necessarily incorporating it in their standards of care. That was making it difficult for us to analyze the data because there was no data. If we were to do it again, or set up a collaboration in the UAE, the important part would be to find partners on the ground that would be able to help us, meaning that previously we were limited to only collabo- >>>

Morocco-based Zineb Drissi Kaitouni, co-founder of DabaDoc, a doctor-to-patient online platform



The screenshot shows the DabaDoc website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with "Are you a health professional?", "My Account", and "Français". The main heading says "Find a doctor and book an appointment with a single click!". Below this is a search bar with fields for "Doctor, establishment...", "Choose a specialty", "Where? neighborhood", and a "Find a Doctor" button. The background features a stylized cityscape with a sun and various icons representing healthcare and technology. At the bottom, there's a section titled "Are you a five star doctor?" with a list of benefits: "Attract and engage new patients", "Build and strengthen your online reputation", and "Deliver a premium experience patients love". A button says "List your practice on DabaDoc". To the right, there's a profile for "Pr Chakib Ait Benhamou" with a photo, a star rating, and a "Waiting time" indicator.



rate with the DHA, whereas there were some private clinics which might be more advanced in their use of genomics. Had we been helped to cooperate with them, we would have started working with a private clinic and then extended our experience to the public sector. We ended up not being able to set up this relationship. It was a fantastic experience to go to Dubai, but it basically helped us focus on our priorities.”

Nathan Ramasarma, co-founder and CEO of ArcSecond, took a different approach. ArcSecond, his San Diego-based digital healthcare startup piloting the use of wireless, wearable motion sensors in physical therapy and rehabilitation participated in the DFA’s second cohort and became one the three startups awarded an MoU by the DHA at the end of the program. “The most important decision that I made was that since we knew our backyard, the US, very well, we should see what would happen if we went to a completely new place, what the reception of our technology would be from both the government side and the private sector

side,” Ramasarma says. “We went with a completely open mind and absolutely no expectations, but I did my homework by speaking with several startups from the first cohort and I got an idea on what they did and didn’t learn. More importantly, my approach was that when given an opportunity, I was to make the best use of it, as opposed to taking something back from it, I would give it all that I had. Also, I thought this would be a good opportunity for the team to work in a place they hadn’t been to before.”

And the challenges were instant, says Ramasarma. “Dubai is a completely different market when it comes to how customers perceive new technologies,” he explains. “We had to learn firsthand how to communicate the value of the technology really clearly. The US is a market that understands technology, but when we started working with the DHA and several of their hospitals, we had to communicate the value of our technology in terms of the language that they understood, which means focusing on their pain points first. Also, we had to

work with the government, which works in its own way, but we were open about it, we often worked with them in their own settings to understand their pain points. We understood that in the region personal face time is very important, so we started doing that. In the US or in Europe, emails and phone calls are fine, but in the Middle East you have to establish that personal relationship. Since I grew up in India, I was exposed to that early on, but the rest of the team didn’t understand that. For me, letting them be exposed to that was very important because we live in a



Nathan Ramasarma, co-founder and CEO of ArcSecond, a San Diego-based digital healthcare startup piloting the use of wireless, wearable motion sensors in physical therapy and rehabilitation.

global market today and we cannot just say that our solution doesn’t work somewhere else. If it’s valuable, it has to work everywhere. So, the value of the product has to be communicated in person in the Middle East for people to understand it. Thus, it was more of a learning experience than a challenge.”

Another inevitable part of the future of healthcare are AI and robotics. A recent report by PwC, *What Doctor? Why AI And Robotics Will Define New Health*, revealed that when questioned about receiving care from a non-human healthcare provider, the willingness of MENA consumers outpaced their Western counterparts. About 44% of respondents in the UAE and 45% in Saudi Arabia would undergo a major surgery performed by a robot, which is significantly higher than 27% in the UK. In the UAE, customized robotic solutions have been introduced in a number of sectors, from the country’s first Robocop joining Dubai Police last May, to developing the world’s first humanoid robot customs inspector, or exploring robotic applications in the education sector. However, Hamish Clark, Partner at PwC’s ME Health Industries, says that the capabilities and insights from AI and robotics still need to come more firmly into the region’s healthcare regulatory system in order to allow it to be ahead of disruption- not behind it. “The existing legal framework tends to focus on what we call old health,

“WHEN WE STARTED WORKING WITH THE DHA AND SEVERAL OF THEIR HOSPITALS, WE HAD TO COMMUNICATE THE VALUE OF OUR TECHNOLOGY IN TERMS OF THE LANGUAGE THAT THEY UNDERSTOOD, WHICH MEANS FOCUSING ON THEIR PAIN POINTS FIRST.”

which means that it is very focused on hospital-based systems,” he says. “There could be more pace to this disruption in the UAE, because if you drive along Sheikh Zayed Road, you will see many advertisements for what I call old health. There are not many references to anything that does not include coming to hospitals. I think that the implementation challenge is a mindset one, because where there is a will, there is a way. There are many hospitals being built at the moment, but healthcare is a knowledge-based business. The implementation now is about getting clinicians and leaders to think in a very different way about it, and then the regulation will catch up.”

With local entrepreneurs solving problems of their own, smaller communities across the MENA region, and with the increasing flows of know-how towards the region, particularly to the UAE, the big question now is whether the region will be just a transit point or it has the ability to influence and shape the future of the whole healthcare industry.

“We think that the UAE could become a world class center of excellence for AI and robotics,” says Clark. “All the conditions are here, you have an innovative economy,



Hamish Clark, Partner at ME Health Industries, PwC.

forward-thinking leadership, a digitally-savvy population, as well as the opportunities such as Expo 2020 coming up, to make the UAE really leapfrog the West. More established health systems, like Germany or the UK, are not that willing to embrace these new technologies [AI and robotics], there is a far more vested interest in what I call the old health system of bricks and mortar hospitals. The health systems here are not as mature because they haven’t been around for long as in other parts of the world, and they are more open-minded to having care through AI and robotics.” Ramasarma believes that Dubai and the whole Middle East

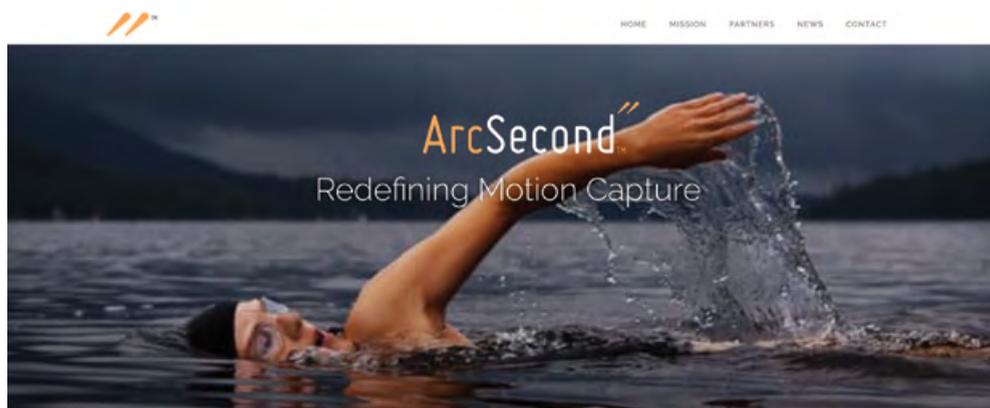
“WE THINK THAT THE UAE COULD BECOME A WORLD CLASS CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FOR AI AND ROBOTICS. ALL THE CONDITIONS ARE HERE, YOU HAVE AN INNOVATIVE ECONOMY, FORWARD-THINKING LEADERSHIP, A DIGITALLY-SAVVY POPULATION, AS WELL AS THE OPPORTUNITIES SUCH AS EXPO 2020 COMING UP, TO MAKE THE UAE REALLY LEAPFROG THE WEST.”

have a geographical advantage in exposing locally-based entrepreneurs to 1 billion people within just a four to six-hour reach. However, he says, the region’s main strength is its talent pool. “I was introduced to excellent gaming companies based in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria,” he explains. “All these countries have rich talent, but the problem is that they cannot enter the US or European market for political reasons. The GCC can solve that problem by becoming a hub where it can consolidate talent from parts of Asia, parts of Europe, parts of the Middle East, and become that hosting solution of technology.”

In addition, Ramasarma opines that the region should expand its currently limited knowledge base. “People come to the Middle East, do business, and then they disappear,” he says. “I think that the Middle East should invest research money, not just commercial money, so that the technologies

can stay in the region. For example, companies like us come to the Middle East, we see a huge market, we become successful, but what is the incentive for us to develop that technology further in that region? I would love to establish a research center in Dubai and get talent from Jordan or other countries, which, as a US company, I cannot do otherwise. So, the government and other entities in Dubai need to support a knowledge-based economy, not a commercial-based economy, which is happening today. If this is taken into account, the MENA region can become a larger knowledge hub or a technology player. The government is on the right path, but accelerators are just one part of it. There are many things that need to be done.”

So, how long will it take? According to Amory, introducing change is more feasible in this region, especially in the UAE, than in other parts of the world. “There is a reason why I started here [UAE],” he says. “There is a very quick path to getting things done. If I was to do that in the UK, it might take me 10 years. Here you have enthusiastic people who love innovation, they want to be the first, they want to do things that nobody else has done before. They want to be ahead of the curve, they want to be riding the wave. Other places have the ambition, but they don’t have that drive.” This kind of thinking often does not come easily to regulators and decision-makers across the MENA region, but in the UAE, government officials obviously do not lack the spark that is often so prevalent in entrepreneurs. Therefore, the country seems set to change the region’s healthcare equation- it seems to be only a matter of time. ■





MONEY TALKS

Determining your employees' salaries *By Suhail Al-Masri*

Salaries are one of the most critical aspects of talent management. Although employees care about a multitude of different attributes when selecting a job, such as the job responsibilities, management style, opportunities for career advancements, as well as training and development, money remains a very important factor in the equation of hiring and retaining talent.

Many companies find it quite challenging to come up with their salary decisions. There are so many different factors to be taken into consideration. What is the employee's career level? How much value will they add to the company? How profitable is the company? What is the state of the economy like? What are the laws and regulations? What is the cost of living?

You will quickly realize that the salary question takes into account much more than the amount companies afford to give away at the end of each pay period. With so many elements at stake, the decision becomes more and more complicated.

Although determining salaries and pay structures is a concern for all businesses and organizations, startups and infant businesses may have a bigger challenge in this matter. Having to make such critical decisions for the first time, they may be unaware of the many tools and strategies that companies can use to determine their salaries and pay structures.

One thing to keep in mind is that salaries aren't set in stone. Most often than not, job candidates and employers engage in a negotiation phase. This could start during the job interview.

PAY SCALES ARE TYPICALLY A FUNCTION OF HUMAN RESOURCES BUT ARE DETERMINED WITH THE INPUT AND APPROVAL OF MANAGEMENT.

Here are some of the most essential elements and tools that can be used to make salary decisions easily and much more accurately:

1. INTERNAL PAY SCALES Most established companies have a specific pay scale that they generally adhere to. The pay scale usually plots salary ranges for different positions in each unique department. It also indicates the salary progression as the employee accumulates more years of experience and tenure with the same employer. Using pay scales, the employer gains an idea of the cost of their employees' salaries over a longer period of time, which as a result enables them to make well-planned decisions regarding annual raises, bonuses, and such.

Pay scales are typically a function of human resources but are determined with the input and approval of management. At the end of the day, the manager of each department or team is the most involved in the inputs and outputs and has the most accurate idea on the appropriate compensation for the type of work the employees are accomplishing.

The point is: pay scales should recognize the level of knowledge, skills, education, years of experience, and any other competencies that are essential for a particular job. These elements come together to determine an appropriate salary at each career level, but also serve as a general framework for what a particular company or organization affords to pay its employees.

2. INDUSTRY AND MARKET BENCHMARKS

Without doubt, managers and HR professionals do not arbitrarily pick their salary ranges and pay rates. Even when constructing their own pay scales, they often need to look at labor laws, market averages, and industry benchmarks beforehand. This is to make sure that they do not under-compensate or over-compensate their employees for their work, that they stay in a competitive position among other employers, and that they do not violate any minimum wage or union laws.

But researching all of these different elements and coming up with a number that addresses the aforementioned concerns can still be very cumbersome and time-consuming. Employers are often too busy to dedicate the time for such a process and may not even have the expertise or the tools to conduct an in-depth compensation analysis.

Because companies truly need a tool to help them benchmark and gain in-depth salary information, Bayt.com introduced

the region's first Salary Search tool. Thousands of employers across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are using this tool to search salaries based on specific locations, industries, positions, career levels, and many more criteria. For example, an employer can request to view the average salaries for everyone who works in digital marketing in Dubai. Another employer may want to view the salary ranges for industrial engineers in Kuwait.

Such information is nowadays easily accessible and of great value. Using a tool like Bayt.com Salary Search, employers can benchmark against real-time industry data; analyze and compare employees, positions, or entire pay structures; and make confident decisions regarding their salaries.

3. PREVIOUS SALARIES Another tool that employers commonly rely on when determining their pay rates is knowing the candidates' previous salaries. On a job application or during the interview stage, an employer may ask the job candidate

how much they were paid in their previous position(s). The number given by the job seeker would be used as the benchmark and would help the employer determine how much to offer. Job seekers who use Bayt.com have the option of listing their previous salaries as well as their target salary, which helps employers screen candidates before conducting an interview or moving forward with a particular applicant.

Likewise, employers have the option of stating their salary on their job descriptions. However, at Bayt.com, we discourage employers from doing that. Studies suggest that the party who reveals the salary expectations first will have a weaker position during the negotiation process. Further, when you reveal salary information in a job posting, candidates might be swayed by the money and not even care about the type of role being offered. You don't want to hire employees who are money-minded. There are several more precautions that you may need to be aware of when it comes to revealing salaries that you can check out on Bayt.com.

Once a job offer is extended, negotiation often takes place in order to arrive at the most reasonable compensation. Some companies, however, are inflexible and do not negotiate their offers. It all depends on what you have budgeted for the position. However, it is advised that you begin by offering a smaller amount than what you can actually pay the employee and, if necessary, negotiate up.

5. THE FULL PACKAGE Another thing to remember is that compensation includes more than just the salary. Most compensation packages include benefits. Things like health insurance, transportation, housing, education allowances and such are to be considered when looking at and negotiating a salary. These benefits have monetary value that you could even list and explain for a potential employee.

Some companies prefer offering lucrative benefits in lieu of higher salaries. Others offer competitive salaries but little to no benefits. In either case, it is important to look at the value of the compensation package as a whole.

6. ADDED VALUE Finally, keep in mind that salary decisions can also be circumstantial. If a company is interviewing an outstanding candidate, who has a very impressive experience and skillset, yet an expensive salary expectation, it is not unwise to bend the salary ranges a little bit.

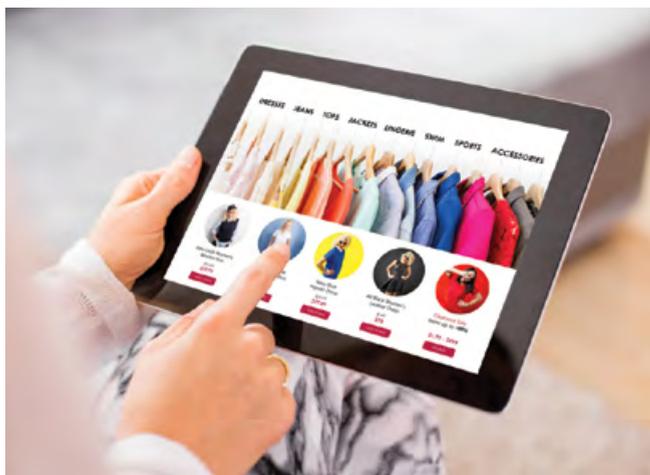
When employers are truly interested in hiring the best of the best, the chances are they will need to offer more in return. As a result, hiring managers need to evaluate the "added value" of a new hire in order to determine how much they should be compensated. Ask yourself questions like, "how much is their experience worth?", "Are their skills in demand?" What about their education? Their potential? These questions are often answered on a case-by-case basis to determine the right compensation package. ■

4. NEGOTIATION

One thing to keep in mind is that salaries aren't set in stone. Most often than not, job candidates and employers engage in a negotiation phase. This could start during the job interview. Employers often ask about salary expectations, which would let them know if the job candidate will fit or break their hiring budget. Job seekers are sometimes first to bring up the salary question during their interview.



Suhail Al-Masri is the VP of Employer Solutions at Bayt.com. Al-Masri has more than 20 years of experience in sales leadership, consultative sales, account management, marketing management, and operations management. His mission at Bayt.com goes in line with the company's mission to empower people with the tools and knowledge to build their lifestyles of choice.



PUT THE CONSUMER IN THE DRIVING SEAT

For luxury brands to thrive in the current market landscape, they must embrace digital

By Kunal Kapoor

The luxury sector is being shaken up like never before as it desperately fights to protect itself from fakes, with the anti-counterfeit market set to grow to US\$4.2 billion by 2020. And with many leading brands experiencing declining sales in key consumer markets such as the US, Europe and China, the business of luxury is at a crossroads.

It is still a hugely lucrative industry, but how can a sector that is traditionally associated with physical buying survive in this brave new digital world?

According to Bain & Company, the global luxury goods market is expected to grow by 2-4% to \$296-302 billion in 2017, driven by healthier local consumption in China and increased tourism and consumer confidence in Europe.

However, the gulf between the winners and the losers continues to widen. To win in the new consumer landscape, where Red Bull is as powerful a brand as Rolex or Louis Vuitton, brands must think much

more innovatively when it comes to how they engage with a changing consumer base.

The obvious starting point is the consumer. Even when the landscape is changing so dramatically, focusing on the consumer is always the way to stay anchored to what's important.

Let's take a look at Netflix, Airbnb and Spotify. These "disruptive" brands use a range of sophisticated algorithms to learn their customers' tastes and make ever-more personalized and relevant suggestions. By doing so, they offer their customers experiences that are enriching, rewarding, insightful and meaningful.

Of course, none of this would have been possible had it not been for the digitalization of their markets but what's important is that it's the consumer who's in the driving seat; they are more empowered and informed than ever before.

But the luxury sector is a special case, isn't it? Not necessarily so.

Leading luxury brands in the fashion world are built

on exclusivity, which until recently has meant a minimal online presence. But shoppers' dependence on the internet -and slowing luxury sales- has pushed even high-end retailers to embrace digital technology.

Digital can make a transformative difference in a brand's ability to connect with and keep their customers. Luxury goods and services are now pursued, tested and purchased in very different ways than they were in the past; consumers expect efficient e-commerce, engaging and exciting interactions on social media, and multiple channels through which to interact with brands.

Look at Net-a-Porter. By examining the ways in which their customers are interacting with brands as well as studying their changing consumption and purchasing habits, the company has created a seamless omni-channel presence across a variety of mediums in mobile, tablet and desktop.

Tapping into the changing attitudes and behaviors, expectations and aspirations, of existing and new consumers provides opportunities for luxury brands to innovate and grow. By embracing digital technology, luxury retailers can

reach their target consumers directly, and perhaps expand their audience to customers who would otherwise struggle to find them.

Consumers would enjoy more access to some of their favorite brands while for investors, a brand's online engagement with luxury shoppers could mean stronger sales and new avenues for growth.

Most luxury good sales are now digitally influenced-meaning shoppers either researched online and bought at the store, shopped in the store but bought online, or purchased entirely online.

With relatively low penetration of e-commerce and social media by many of the leading luxury brands, there is an opportunity to boost direct-to-consumer engagement, particularly as younger consumers, such as millennials, spend increasing amounts of time online.

Millennials view brands much more differently than previous generations. They're not as worried about brand names and will switch brands at a moment's notice. The exception is brands that they trust. Millennials will often stick with a brand through



Founder of The Luxury Closet, Kunal Kapoor is a serial entrepreneur with a background in luxury and fashion. He built a successful sportswear brand in India, and then received an MBA from INSEAD in France. Kunal subsequently landed in Dubai, working for the French fashion empire Louis Vuitton. In 2011, Kunal founded The Luxury Closet, the largest marketplace for luxury items in the Middle East. This successful and unique venture sees luxury products from Louis Vuitton, Chanel, Rolex, Cartier, Louboutin and 100 other top brands sold, for up to 70% off the original price.

hard times, if that brand has developed an authentic relationship with them. Similarly, trust is central to the relation-

MOST LUXURY GOOD SALES ARE NOW DIGITALLY INFLUENCED- MEANING SHOPPERS EITHER RE-SEARCHED ONLINE AND BOUGHT AT THE STORE, SHOPPED IN THE STORE BUT BOUGHT ONLINE, OR PURCHASED ENTIRELY ONLINE.

ship between GCC consumers and luxury brands. The culture in the Gulf is still highly anchored in passing down habits and customs; a notion that creates reassurance through long-term commitment. When purchasing luxury items, especially online, it is this sense of trust that is so vitally important.

So, while the future will undoubtedly bring many new and exciting things for brands,

it's the experiences that will increasingly drive sales by providing a sense of belonging, connection, authenticity and relatedness.

With this in mind, brands that succeed will be those that inspire and are able to deliver on their customers' needs. New consumers, digital disruption of channels and business models, and changing attitudes to the idea of luxury, are quickly transforming the

world of luxury brands. It's either evolve or die.

Every luxury brand needs to innovate, to seize the opportunities to reinvent and drive future growth. By nature, luxury brands create a distance between the brand and their customers, generating the elusive aura and scarcity that rationalizes the price tag. But now is the time to bring your consumers along on your journey. ■

| THE FIX |

What's your digital strategy?

PUTTING THIS TOGETHER EARLY ON WILL ENABLE YOUR STARTUP TO GROW EFFICIENTLY

Often, the concept of digital strategy is not paid enough attention to when building and launching a startup. It is important to understand that digital strategy, unlike digital marketing, is the foundation businesses must create in order to digitalize their brand, services, or product. It will define how a business is going to transform digitally, and reveal the general objectives of the business from a digital perspective.

With the surge in IoT and a rapidly growing use of technology and internet, digital strategy proves vital to this startup generation.

Digital strategy involves not only actual technology, but also user experience, marketing, mobile, customer service and all other parts of a business that require digital tools. When creating your digital strategy, it is important to get a clear understanding of where you are today, and where you want to be in the future.

As a startup, it is important to create a solid digital strategy at start in order to make the right decisions. It includes making the right technology decisions, such as selecting the right tools, software and services to run the business, all to ensure well-informed decisions to produce scalable results. This also helps the marketing perspective as digital strategy will help enable a startup to grow efficiently.

The setback in not having a digital

strategy in place can play a huge role in determining the brand's digital future. There are different issues that could come as a result, such as technical debt and the implementation of a vast number of tools that may create a defragmented offering of the business to customers.

In addition, many startups focus on ROI, but are missing critical plans on how to acquire actual customers. The days when startups were built around the concept of "we will figure out how to monetize the service later" are unfortunately over.

In short, by defining your digital strategy, you will manage your opportunities and risks effectively and prepare your company for successful digital presence.

It is also important to remember, to carry out a full-fledged digital strategy, processes must be managed by efficient team members, especially those most efficient with digital. Without setting a clear digital strategy, there is no chance to consolidate or optimize your digital activities.

So, what does digital strategy entail?

1. DEFINE CHALLENGES AND OBJECTIVES

The first step is to define the organization's challenges and objectives. These need not be just digital issues, but overall issues faced. Does the business need more sales or a boost in brand awareness, does customer support need to be enhanced or simplified? What are competitors do-

ing? Strategy should address all of these challenges. The same goes for objectives—does the brand want to transform digitally, become more customer-centric, and expand to new markets? Digital strategy must consider all of these objectives.

2. CREATE GUIDELINES

The next step is to create guidelines and sub strategies for each objective. What is the plan to increase brand awareness? How will the business increase sales? Guidelines, measurement plans, scope and road maps will guide the business towards effective execution of strategy. It will also help iterate and measure progress to achieve continuous improvement.

3. ROLL OUT IN ACHIEVABLE STEPS

Finally, it's time to execute strategy. This is vital. The worst thing that can happen is a business spending years working on a plan only for business direction to shift or experience damaging and costly delays. Iteration plays a crucial role here. Getting data, learning and improving is the only way to succeed. It is best advised to roll out projects in chunks so startups can test the next steps without losing out on time and money. At this stage, it should be clear that a digital strategist is the key player for this task.

These days, with the rapid rise in startups leading to competition, creating a digital strategy is a challenging job, especially when time is of the essence. However, it brings a lot of opportunities to the table, promotes efficient analysis of the brand, and promotes digital standing.

-By Alexander Rauser



Alexander Rauser is the founder and CEO of Prototype, a digital agency based in Dubai specialized in designing and developing interactive solutions. Since 2010, Prototype has continuously worked with leading brands from various industries across the region and contributed to shaping their digital presence. Talk to Alexander on Twitter at @ARauser.



MACHINE-POWERED MARKETING

How artificial intelligence can improve your marketing strategy

By Moustafa Mahmoud

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a hot topic at the moment, mainly due to the applications it can have in so many fields, and its ability to transform every industry. It has the potential to be the most revolutionary technology since computing itself.

Online marketing is the first in line for disruption, and it is a ripe field for automation and machine intelligence as well. When you think of any marketing campaign aimed at acquiring new customers to your online presence, there are five main components that would go into preparing for such a campaign.

Here's a look into those five components, and how artificial intelligence can provide significant opportunities for improvement in each:

1. MARKETING CHANNEL

Also known as your "traffic source," this is the platform where you plan to execute your marketing campaign such as Google, Facebook, Pinterest, etc. The choice for the marketing

channel will depend on the type of audience you are looking for, mainly their "intent." If someone is actively searching for your product on Google, their intent is completely different from someone simply browsing their Facebook feed with no active intent to look for your product. Artificial intelligence can automate the selection of the marketing channels for your campaign based on your objectives and the historical data from your previous campaigns. It also can continuously optimize the selection of these channels for future campaigns based on the results it achieves. The output of each campaign serves as an input to the learning algorithm to help the AI improve on its next run.

2. TARGETING

You can choose a great marketing channel for your business, but targeting is what enables you to reach the exact audience that is relevant to your business. In order to focus the delivery of your company on acquiring users relevant to your business, you need to first think of the targeting criteria you

will use on the marketing channel to zoom in on that audience. For example, if you are doing search advertising you will want to focus on people searching for keywords that could show they're interested in your product. If you are doing Facebook advertising, you might want to show your audience to a demographic you feel represents your typical customer. AI can help in this area by using your historical data to actually identify gaps in your targeting and run experiments with enhanced targeting parameters in order to reach a more refined audience.

3. PLACEMENTS

Each marketing channel provides you a selection of placements where you can show your message to users- for example, these can be right-hand side, in-feed, full page pop up, and more, depending on the channel. However, each placement will have different results even if it's running the same ad. AI can automatically identify the best performing placements for any campaign based on historical data, and by running multiple tests for each new campaign on multiple placements.

4. CREATIVES

The creative is ultimately what your audience sees. What are you going to show the prospects to incentivize them to click through and land on your website? This is usually a very design intensive process, with people often having to go great lengths to design a perfect creative that performs well. AI can actually dynamically generate creatives and banners for your campaign using the image and text that exist on your website, in a very unique process that often results in a majority choice of the marketing channel. But the ability to run tests on each of those creatives, and automatically select the winning ones is what makes this approach extremely attractive. We personally use this in our own product (instascaler.com), and we can create thousands of banners for any URL in under one minute- and it's all done automatically with no human intervention whatsoever.



Moustafa Mahmoud is the founder and CEO at Cogniteve, a technology company that creates marketing and advertising products powered by artificial intelligence. He is responsible for scaling up the business, establishing an experienced team and developing the brand's key products, AdRelated.com and Instascaler.com, in an effort to deliver a new approach to advertising using artificial intelligence and semantic technologies. Prior to setting up Cogniteve, Mahmoud was the CEO of ShopShopMe.com, the Middle East's first and only shopping search engine, which allowed consumers to search for products across a number of online and offline stores from one single platform. Mahmoud holds a Master's degree in

Computer Science from the University of California, Berkeley.

The future of manufacturing

INDUSTRY 4.0 IS TAKING SHAPE

5. PRICING

This is where you define how much you will pay for your campaign and the exact pricing model. AI can help tremendously in cost optimization. For example, if you are running a search campaign it can help by adjusting bids dynamically based on the quality of the traffic across multiple channels and the metrics you are monitoring which otherwise would need continuous human monitoring and tweaking. Artificial intelligence can help in each of the areas mentioned above in different ways, such as its ability to find patterns in massive amounts of data, infinite real-time testing, make suggestions for improvement, execute decisions automatically, as well as control spending, optimize budgets and reduce waste.

Artificial intelligence today isn't simply another buzzword; it absolutely has a place in marketing technology, and will yield substantial benefits. We've arrived at the inflection point where legitimate AI-powered marketing solutions align with marketers' readiness. To prepare for the future of marketing, brands just need to advance their understanding of AI, and start testing solutions today.

It must be noted here that AI will not replace marketers; they will just be able to skip the boring stuff, and let AI take care of it. Machines demonstrated that they're just much better than humans when it comes to leveraging massive amounts of data to guide billions of repetitive decisions that drive trillions of dollars in consumers spending.

We are at the very beginning of a really exciting future—when we look at the results we are generating using the automation technology we're working on, we can clearly see that we've barely scratched the surface of the possibilities ahead of us. ■

Industrial IoT is not a new concept; in fact, it has been around for decades. It is currently defined as a blend between cyber and physical systems that incorporate connected machinery that, with the help of software and big data, can not only analyze and make decisions but are also predictive, using sensor data that comes from a wide array of dispersed sources. For years, many factories have been relying on smart sensors to monitor and control their production lines. Part of Industry 3.0, car and food factories for example have already been configured to be monitored by such sensors. A few years ago, this was an expensive privilege reserved for the few, today, in industry 4.0 these sensors have not only become smarter, but cheaper. As a result, perfecting the processes in manufacturing has become easier than ever, and in turn the technology at our disposal also allows us to maximize production efficiency.

The technology itself is slowly moving towards self-sufficiency and reliance. Thinking of the inevitable emergence of artificial intelligence (AI), companies will no longer need to solely depend on the input of their employees, which will definitely contribute to reducing human error. Interestingly enough, companies are also looking to reduce machine downtime especially since we are approaching a point where everything is expected to be monitored by robots and where the sole purpose of the human resource would be to manufacture, but to manufacture more robots. With artificial intelligence, the robots, our very own creations, will thus be designed to do our jobs so much better than we can; an ironic fact of our day and age.

Industrial IoT will eventually produce an indiscernible amount of big data which can be utilized to make AI a reality. The possibilities are endless, and predictive self-sufficient machinery are only one example. Analyzing this sum of data however won't be easy, a task that even the

most brilliant of humans cannot possibly carry out. For that reason, it is detrimental that we enhance the speed and accuracy of big data analysis.

Moving on, Industry 4.0 is taking shape given three key characteristics. The first of those is interoperability which is defined as "the ability of computer systems or software to exchange and make use of information." In other words, interoperability refers to the ability to integrate different systems together and work smoothly without human intervention. While companies are adopting hybrid systems, buying from different suppliers/manufacturers/vendors to reduce cost, they are also going through a process of integration, to connect their equipment, and disintegration, to secure them.

The second characteristic is decentralization, getting rid of those bulky centralized data centers, and instead creating an IoT network of connected devices. These, of course, come with a set of security challenges that can and will be addressed with the rise of powerful digital and cybersecurity giants across the world. The third characteristic is operating in real time, or the ability of devices and systems to seamlessly connect, communicate and react in real time based on the data they share.

In a nutshell then, industrial IoT is all about creating "intelligent cyber-physical systems" that can think and act for themselves, reducing human error, cost, wasted time, and ultimately do the job that we, the masterminds behind it all, could only dream of doing ourselves. —By Wissam Youssef



Wissam Youssef is the co-founder and General Manager of CME, a technology consulting firm that provides end to end engineering solutions from consulting to design and development, across hardware and software. Wissam co-founded CME in 2003, and with nothing but a small office in Beirut, a few desks and \$100 worth of capital, Wissam's hard work and determination made CME flourish, earning a track record among top US Fortune 500 companies after just 13 years. Today, CME is a multi-national company with 300+ engineers located in Argentina, China, India, Lebanon and the United States, implementing groundbreaking industrial IoT solutions with unique engineering capabilities that place the company on top of the Lebanese technology sector.

#TAMTALKSTECH

GADGETS AND DOODADS THAT YOU MIGHT'VE MISSED OUT ON, SOURCED BY A TECH AFICIONADO.
YES, IT'S OKAY TO WANT THEM ALL... AND NO, IT'S NOT OUR FAULT.

A WORK OF ART

SAMSUNG THE FRAME TV

Samsung has successfully merged art and technology with the release of The Frame TV. The product is just what its name suggests- a television that looks like a framed piece of artwork. Here's how it works. With the help of technology, The Frame TV looks like a picture frame hanging on a wall when its "Art Mode" is on. Instead of fading to black

like a conventional television, The Frame TV displays custom-designed art pieces that you can select. With more than 100 art pieces in 10 different categories -including landscape, architecture, wildlife, action, drawing and more- to choose from, you're sure to find something you love. There are options for art layouts and colors, as well

as customizable accessory options like interchangeable bezels and an optional Studio Stand. The Frame TV is outfitted with Samsung's new Invisible Connection and No Gap Wall-mount, which allows it to hang anywhere and blend seamlessly into any living space without unsightly wires or cables. The Frame TV is available in 56-inch and

65-inch models, and it's a television that you'll want to watch- whether it's switched off, or on.



The Frame TV was included in an exhibition entitled "Painting or Not" at Kaviar Factory in Loftan, Norway

IMAGES COURTESY: SAMSUNG, NIKON, LG

SEE MORE, DO MORE**SAMSUNG GALAXY NOTE 8**

Samsung has officially restored the Galaxy Note Series with the release of the Note 8. The device is back with a larger Infinity Display, and a 6.3-inch screen giving you more space to use the S Pen. Although it's larger, the smooth, seamless body is still easy to hold and manipulate. Thanks to the 18.5:9 aspect ratio and Multi Window Mode, you can see and do more at the same time. The fingerprint scanner is virtually

flush with the back of the device, and the Home button is embedded underneath the display, thereby rendering a clean, minimal design. The Note 8 truly shines with its 12MP dual camera technology that includes features like live focus, dual capture and the bokeh effect. Its telephoto lens allows you to zoom in clearly with 2x optical zoom, and both cameras have optical image stabilization. The Note 8's

wide-angle camera captures more light with its 1.4 pixel and bright F1.7 lens, making it ideal for use in low light situations. It includes 6GB RAM, dual SIM capability, biometric authentication and expandable memory up to 256GB via microSD card. With these improvements, plus standard Galaxy features like dust and water resistance, the Samsung Galaxy Note 8 is definitely back with a bang.

Samsung Galaxy Note 8

**SNAP IT UP****NIKON D850**

The D850, Nikon's latest FX-format camera, combines high speed and high resolution to render superior photos and 4K video. It features an EXPEED 5 image-processing engine which enables up to nine frames per second (fps) continuous shooting, a 45.7-megapixel CMOS sensor, silent photography in both photo and video modes, and a wider viewfinder. The camera is equipped with a tilting 3.2-inch touchscreen, focus shift shooting mode, and a rechargeable lithium ion battery. It also supports 4K Ultra HD video recording and slow motion up to 120 fps at 1080p. The Nikon D850 rounds out with Bluetooth and built-in Wi-Fi making it an ideal choice for both hobbyists and professional photographers.



Nikon D850

THE COOLER SIDE OF CONSERVATION

LG Electronics targets the region with energy efficient air conditioners

LG Electronics responds to regional concerns about energy consumption with the introduction of DUALCOOL air conditioning units in the Middle East and Africa. Government entities throughout the region have been embracing innovations that put its residents on the path toward energy conservation- for instance, in the UAE, the Emirates Authority for Standardization and Metrology (EASM) developed a national energy efficiency policy which includes minimum efficiency standards for air conditioning units and a product labeling system to educate consumers. With the landscape moving in this direction, DUALCOOL, LG's latest flagship residential air conditioning solution, uses a Tropical Inverter Compressor to improve efficiency and performance.

"The compressor is the most important element of any air conditioner. It must withstand high temperatures and harsh environments," says Kevin Cho, Vice President of Air Solutions. According to Cho, the top three buying factors for Middle East consumers are durability, fast cooling and energy savings, and that's the basis on which DUALCOOL is developed. With By-Pass Cycle technology to disperse heat build-up, the new Tropical Compressor helps the air conditioner function reliably in temperatures up to 65 degrees Celsius. Coupled with Gold Fin, which shields the heat exchanger from corrosion caused



DUALCOOL air conditioning

by hot, dry and dusty conditions, DUALCOOL is built to withstand extreme desert climates, a promise that LG backs with a 10-year warranty. DUALCOOL is also equipped with an array of smart features that gives consumers greater control over cooling. The Smart Diagnosis interface allows users access to setup, installation, troubleshooting data and other information directly from their smartphone. In addition, the SIMS chip allows users to easily monitor the status of the air conditioner as well as the current indoor or outdoor temperature. An added benefit of DUALCOOL air conditioners is the built-in Plasmaster Ionizer, which sterilizes harmful airborne substances such as bacteria and allergens. With DUALCOOL, LG Electronics combines innovation with smart technology to offer the region a tailor-made solution to decrease energy consumption as it relates to cooling.



#TAMTALKSTECH Tamara Clarke, a former software development professional, is the tech and lifestyle enthusiast behind *The Global Gazette*, one of the most active blogs in the Middle East. *The Global Gazette* has been welcomed and lauded by some of the most influential tech brands in the region. Clarke's goal is to inform about technology and how it supports our lifestyles. See her work both in print regional publications and online on her blog where she discusses everything from how a new gadget improves day-to-day life to how to coordinate your smartphone accessories. Visit www.theglobalgazette.com and talk to her on Twitter @TamaraClarke.

'TREP TRIMMINGS **THE EXECUTIVE SELECTION**

From better goods to better wardrobe bests, every issue we choose a few items that make the approved executive selection list. In this issue, we present our selections from the Sandro Summer/Spring 2017 range, a worthy addition to your skincare routine, and a list of dos and don'ts when it comes to male grooming.

SMOOTH SAILING

SANDRO SUMMER/SPRING 2017

Founded in 1984 in Paris, the House of Sandro ventured into menswear in 2007, which was also when the label came under the creative direction of Ilan Chétrite. For Sandro's SS17 line, Chétrite takes in aesthetic influences from nautical themes: it includes wide, pleated trousers over loose, fluid shirts, with sharp double-breasted or two-button suits. The collection offers plenty to choose from and mix up, since the pieces are also sold separately, making it easy for you to transition from a boardroom look, to a more laidback statement. If you like your suits tailored with an understated nonchalance, this is the label for you. us.sandro-paris.com



IMAGES COURTESY SANDRO

A GUIDE TO BETTER BEARDS

AN EXPLAINER BY MANCAVE UAE FOUNDER AND CEO YASIN VALIMULLA



Yasin Valimulla

When Yasin Valimulla, Associate Partner at Keller Williams Realty Dubai, found the region’s market to be lacking when it came to grooming products for men, he decided to fill the gap by setting up ManCave UAE in 2016. As an e-commerce enterprise, ManCave UAE focuses on beard care, skincare and hair products, as well as suits tailoring and men’s accessories. Along with its own branded products, the startup collaborates with other brands to offer a variety of choices for its customers. Given ManCave UAE’s focus on beard care, we asked Valimulla his tips for keeping one’s facial hair in style- here’s what he told us:

STAY MOISTURIZED

“Understanding your facial hair and having a barber who knows his stuff are two major keys to unlocking your beard’s potential. Moisturizing daily with the right stuff is key. There are millions of products out there, but stick to the natural organic products, beard oils balms and waxes.”

FIGHT THE ITCH

“At some point on your journey to facial freedom, your skin may fight back. The dreaded itch is no joke, but it’s no reason to reach for your razor. Just keep shampooing and moisturizing, and your face will eventually adjust to its newfound glory. We suggest using a beard shampoo that is delicate for facial hair.”

STAY BRUSHED

“It’s key that the beard hair is maintained and brushed / combed with beard specific products like [our] boar bristle brushes and pear wood combs to evenly distribute products, and keep the beard clean and in place.”

SHAPE IT UP

“Once you’ve conquered a month of maintaining your skin, growing your hair and fighting the itch to shave it all off, you should have a perfect canvas with which to sculpt a facial masterpiece. Some guys like to keep it sharp, others like to go natural. It all depends on your face shape, so grow your beard accordingly.”

www.mancave-uae.com

Products by ManCave UAE



EDITOR'S PICK **NIOD**

For all of the late nights you spend at the office (and the stress that comes with it), this new find will help you treat all those unwanted fine lines, dark circles and puffiness around your eyes. NIOD’s Fractionated Eye Contour Concentrate is non-greasy and absorbs quickly, soothing and firming the skin around the eyes. After cleansing and toning, morning and night, use your ring finger for a light touch, and apply moderately with a soft patting motion around the eye area. www.niod.com



Inspiring trailblazers

Cadillac's new brand campaign "Arabs of New York" celebrates innovative minds from the Middle East



Nadim Ghrayeb,
Regional Marketing
Manager, Cadillac
Middle East

"AS A BRAND, NEW YORK IS AT OUR CORE, AND WE WANT TO SHOWCASE OUR HOME AND OUR BRAND TO THE ARAB WORLD. WE DECIDED TO DO THIS BY CELEBRATING TALENTED ARAB INDIVIDUALS WHO HAVE SUCCEEDED, DESPITE SOCIAL OBSTACLES, IN BECOMING AMBASSADORS OF THE ARAB WORLD. THEY HAVE REACHED GREAT HEIGHTS IN THEIR CAREERS, AND DEMONSTRATE WHAT IT TRULY MEANS TO 'DARE GREATLY.'"

contribution to the city of New York, and to their Arabic identity, across diverse realms including music, art, design, architecture and media. We hope that by seeing what these individuals have achieved, others in the Arab world will also be inspired to find the 'daring' person within themselves. To demonstrate creativity and aptitude, and combine this with persistence and courage, to achieve their dreams."

Mohamed Fairouz is one of the entrepreneurial Arabs that will be featured in this Cadillac campaign. The 31-year-old Fairouz, an award-winning Emirati composer based in New York, has been praised by *BBC World News* as being "one of the most talented composers of his generation," with his music having been performed at locations around the world, including in the United States, the Middle East, Europe and Australia. Besides Fairouz, "Arabs of New York" also showcases Michel Abboud, a Lebanese-born artist and architect, whose prolific design ethos has been translated into projects located at a host of major cities like Los Angeles, Baku, Beirut and Dubai, as well as Hala Abdul Malek, a Lebanese-born New Yorker with her own design consultancy studio called *The Design Critic*. >>>

For a brand that has been in the Middle East for 85 years, it's safe to say that iconic luxury auto brand Cadillac knows a thing or two about the passions that drive the people of the Arab world, and its newest marketing campaign looks to be a testament to this. Set to be released toward the middle of September, Cadillac's "Arabs of New York" campaign is set, as the name suggests, in the

home city of the brand, and is a showcase of a select group of inspiring personalities originating from the Middle East who have, through their innate talent and sheer drive, made their presence felt in The Big Apple. According to Nadim Ghrayeb, Regional Marketing Manager, Cadillac Middle East, "Arabs of New York" is a nod to "Dare Greatly," the global tagline of the Cadillac brand, with its narrative showcasing Arabs who live by the same

ideals and principles.

"With this campaign, we are aiming to celebrate a handful of the many talented Arabs in the world that have pushed their personal boundaries to realize key achievements in their respective domains," Ghrayeb explains. "We are not saying they are the most daring, but a representation of the many who have dared greatly. They are examples that represent the 'Arabs of New York' for their great



Cadillac's "Arabs of New York" campaign

Clockwise from top left: Mohamed Fairouz, Hala Abdul Malek, Michel Abboud.

With Fairouz, Abboud and Malek headlining "Arabs of New York," Ghrayeb hopes that the campaign will be able to create an emotional connection with their audience in the Middle East, giving them the required confidence to go out and achieve their ambitions in life. "We hope that people in the Arab world take away two important elements of the campaign," Ghrayeb replies. "The first is Cadillac's drive to celebrate talented Arab individuals, located across the globe, who have dared greatly, and succeeded in spite of social, economic and political obstacles and become ambassadors of our region. The second is that we hope those across the Arab world would see this and feel inspired to push their own boundaries, and if they felt apprehensive about trying something new or taking a chance, that they would feel empowered, despite any obstacles." ■

PRODUCTIVE MEALS

The *Esquire Guy* on navigating the tricky terrain of a business lunch

By Ross McCammon

The business lunch exists so that two people may converse about business matters (which is a meeting), while doing something they had to do anyway (which is eating). It is formal, yet it is human. It is committal, yet it is noncommittal. It is awkward, yet it is tasty. The business lunch is a paradox.

LUNCH? LUNCH.

We'll assume you're meeting your counterpart one-on-one. And we'll assume the other person is, pretty much, a stranger. And we'll assume you're the one who is in need: of money, of a partnership, of a contract. You're the one pitching, and you've made the invitation.

THE WORST WAY TO HAVE A BUSINESS LUNCH IS TO SIT DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE OTHER PERSON- ALL THAT EYE CONTACT IS A LITTLE AWKWARD, AND YOU MIGHT HAVE TO TALK LOUD ENOUGH THAT OTHER PEOPLE CAN HEAR YOU.

You should make the invitation, but it may be a bad idea: Because the business lunch is more lunch than business. The invitee can request a downgrade, like a meeting in their office. Or meeting for coffee. So, throw the lunch out there, but keep in mind: it's a bold move.

"My philosophy is that lunch is not the most productive place to do business," says Eric Manlunas, co-founder and Managing Partner at Wavemaker Partners, an early-stage cross border venture capital firm dual headquartered in Los Angeles and Singapore. "I like to invite people in for a meeting in the office, in the conference room. If the idea is something we like and we believe we can get comfortable eventually investing in, then we may have lunch. Lunch means they've made it through the first filter."

The point is, whether at the first meeting or the second meeting, if you get someone to agree to lunch, you're in. You might be out by the

time the flourless chocolate cake is served, but for at least the first hour or so, you're in.

BEFORE YOUR GUEST ARRIVES

The choice of restaurant is crucial. The place should be clearly convenient for the other person. It should not be in some sort of middle ground- it should be a place the other person need not travel far to get to. The message should be clear: for the purposes of this meal, the other person is to be catered to- even before the lunch starts.

It helps if you've been there before. Because if you've been there, you know how you'll be treated. You want a place that understands service. And good service as it relates to the business lunch is a place where you're seated immediately and tended to immediately.

"If a guest needs a lot of peace and quiet and no attention, then I need to seat that person in an area that's away from everyone else in the dining room, and I need to make sure my service person knows they don't need to provide a lot of attention to the table in terms of social interac-



KEY TECHNICAL MATTERS

What you need to know before setting up a business lunch

- No sandwiches.
- No red sauce.
- No sandwiches involving red sauce.
- Always pay.
- But never pay with a coupon or gift card. (Or change from the petty-cash drawer.)
- Say "appetizers," not "apps." At a business lunch, it might not be immediately apparent which kind of "app" you're referring to.
- "Guac" presents no such confusion.
- If your plate is at least one-third fuller than the other person's, you are talking too much.
- If your plate is at least one-third emptier than the other person's, he or she is talking too much.
- If your plate is at least one-third larger than the other person's, you have (perhaps) ordered too much.
- If the other person checks their watch, immediately ask for the check.
- If the other person checks their drink, immediately order them another.
- If the other person checks their pulse, immediately ask for an ambulance. And maybe refine your pitch a little.



tion,” says Richard Coraine, Chief of Staff at the New York-based Union Square Hospitality Group, which operates restaurants such as Gramercy Tavern and Union Square Cafe and Shake Shack. “The more we know about what you need, the better we are going to be at exceeding your expectations.”

YOU GO TO THE PLACE, YOU ORDER THE FOOD, YOU DO THE PITCH AND THEN YOU HAVE AN ACTUAL CONVERSATION WITH AN ACTUAL HUMAN BEING- ABOUT BUSINESS OR NOT.

Ask yourself if the restaurant you’re going to is looking to exceed your expectations. That’s the kind of place you want.

You want to walk in seven minutes before the meeting. (Ten, and your table might not be ready; five, and your counterpart might beat you. So, seven.) You want to sit down at the quiet table your assistant requested, one where business may be conducted. Not a booth. A table. Four-top. That your assistant requested. (Note: Those who do not have an assistant must, for the sake of reservation-making, deputize someone -the receptionist, a friend,

the delivery guy, Mom- to be their assistant. It changes everything. Assistants get good tables. If you call, you get a two-top for two people. If your “assistant” calls, you get a four-top in the corner for two people. That’s the best table.)

Service-oriented places are used to specific requests. They welcome them. Says Coraine: “The more the assistant can tell us ahead of time, the less intrusive we have to be. We don’t have to try and figure out what your agenda is. So, if your assistant says you want a quiet table and you want to sit by the window, it’s great for us.”

You want a four-top. You want to sit next to each other, around one corner. The worst way to have a business lunch is to sit directly in front of the other person- all that eye contact is a little awkward, and you might have to talk loud enough that other people can hear you. The corner is a little intimate, sure, but lunch is an intimate thing. The key with corner seating is that it allows you to avoid the awkwardness, and it facilitates discretion. Which is occasionally important.

Before your counterpart arrives, you want to order some sort of beverage and scan the menu. You want to look around, you want to get comfortable and you want to be ready to receive your guest. The other person has the upper hand (since you’re the one who needs something, and this place may be a place the other person suggested), but by getting there early, being seated early, getting a good table and deciding what you’ll have -by being relaxed- you’ve made this place your place.

When your counterpart arrives, subtly direct him or her to the chair next to you. Pull the chair out, gesture toward the chair. (Note: do not pat the seat of the chair while smiling. Unless your counterpart is a five-year-old.)

THE MEETING

The lunch part is easy. You eat, you talk. The business part is a little trickier. Because lunch is mostly about socializing and not business,

THE HIERARCHY OF BUSINESS MEALS

(in descending order of productivity)

- Lunch
- Dinner
- Breakfast
- Post-convention breakfast
- Brunch
- Sharing a Twix from the vending machine
- Popcorn Wednesdays!
- Monthly employee-recognition birthday cake time! Make it if you can!
- Monthly employee-recognition birthday cake time. Mandatory.

it might help to wrangle your pitch into something that can be delivered quickly and then dispensed with. Says Jared Goralnick, Group Product Manager at LinkedIn: “Lunches are more about furthering the relationship than they are about furthering the deal. If I’m calling a lunch, I have a goal, but that goal is small, and it might be a five-minute thing. The rest of it is making them comfortable with that five-minute thing or making them comfortable just being around me.”

You go to the place, you order the food, you do the pitch and then you have an actual conversation with an actual human being- about business or not. What the other person wants to see is someone who is comfortable being around a potential new business partner and to confirm that you and your business are as interesting as they initially thought. You can relax. You can have an interesting conversation. You can have an interesting meal. If, after you’ve done your five minutes, they want to bring up the business again, let them.

The best part about the business lunch is that it forces us to do something we don’t do enough in our professional lives: be ourselves. And eat at a table for more than 15 minutes. But mostly, be ourselves. ■



Master the fundamentals

Here's why you need to do more of what already works

By James Clear

In 2004, nine hospitals in Michigan began implementing a new procedure in their intensive care units (I.C.U.). Almost overnight, healthcare professionals were stunned with its success.

Three months after it began, the procedure had cut the infection rate of I.C.U. patients by 66%. Within 18 months, this one method had saved US\$75 million in healthcare expenses. Best of all, this single intervention saved the lives of more than 1,500 people in just a year and a half. The strategy was immediately published in a blockbuster paper for *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

This medical miracle was also simpler than you could ever imagine. It was a checklist.

THE POWER OF NEVER SKIPPING STEPS

The checklist strategy implemented at Michigan hospitals was named the Keystone ICU Project. It was led

by a physician named Peter Pronovost, and later popularized by writer Atul Gawande.

In Gawande's best-selling book, *The Checklist Manifesto*, he describes how Pronovost's simple checklist could drive such dramatic results. In the following quote, Gawande explains one of the checklists that was used to reduce the risk of infection when installing a central line in a patient (a relatively common procedure):

On a sheet of plain paper, [Pronovost] plotted out the steps to take in order to avoid infections when putting a line in. Doctors are supposed to (1) wash their hands with soap, (2) clean the patient's skin with chlorhexidine antiseptic, (3) put sterile drapes over the entire patient, (4) wear a sterile mask, hat, gown, and gloves, and (5) put a sterile dressing over the catheter site once the line is in. Check, check, check, check, check.

These steps are no-brainers; they

have been known and taught for years. So it seemed silly to make a checklist just for them. Still, Pronovost asked the nurses in his I.C.U. to observe the doctors for a month as they put lines into patients, and record how often they completed each step. In more than a third of patients, they skipped at least one.

THIS PATTERN IS JUST AS PRESENT IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES AS IT IS IN CORPORATIONS AND GOVERNMENTS. WE WASTE THE RESOURCES AND IDEAS AT OUR FINGERTIPS BECAUSE THEY DON'T SEEM NEW AND EXCITING.

This five-step checklist was the simple solution that Michigan hospitals used to save 1,500 lives. Think about that for a moment. There were no technical innovations. There were no pharmaceutical discoveries or cutting-edge procedures. The physicians just stopped skipping steps. They implemented the answers they already had on a more consistent basis.

NEW SOLUTIONS VS. OLD SOLUTIONS

We have a tendency to undervalue answers that we have already discovered. We underutilize old solutions



James Clear writes at jamesclear.com, where he uses behavior science to share ideas for mastering your habits, improving your health, and increasing your creativity. To get useful ideas on improving your mental and physical performance, join his free newsletter jamesclear.com/newsletter. To have James speak at your entrepreneurial event contact him jamesclear.com/contact

-even if they are best practices- because they seem like something we have already considered.

Here's the problem: "Everybody already knows that" is very different from "Everybody already does that." Just because a solution is known doesn't mean it is utilized.

Even more critical, just because a solution is implemented occasionally, doesn't mean it is implemented consistently. Every physician knew the five steps on Peter Provost's checklist, but very few did all five steps flawlessly each time.

We assume that new solutions are needed if we want to make real progress, but that isn't always the case.

USE WHAT YOU ALREADY HAVE

This pattern is just as present in our personal lives as it is in corporations and governments. We waste the resources and ideas at our fingertips because they don't seem new and exciting.

There are many examples of behaviors, big and small, that have the opportunity to drive progress in our lives if we just did them with more consistency. Flossing every day. Never missing workouts. Performing fundamental business tasks each day, not just when you have time. Apologizing more often. Writing "Thank You" notes each week.

HERE'S THE PROBLEM: "EVERYBODY ALREADY KNOWS THAT" IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM "EVERYBODY ALREADY DOES THAT." JUST BECAUSE A SOLUTION IS KNOWN DOESN'T MEAN IT IS UTILIZED.

Of course, these answers are boring. Mastering the fundamentals isn't sexy, but it works. No matter what task you are working on, there is a simple checklist of steps that you can follow right now -basic fundamentals that you have known about for years- that can immediately yield results if you just practice them more consistently.

Progress often hides behind boring solutions and underused insights. You don't need more information. You don't need a better strategy. You just need to do more of what already works. ■



Representatives of MBRF and Metis at the signing

| IN THE LOOP |

Strategic support

Mohammad Bin Rashid Fund partners with Metis Management Consultancy for post-fund monitoring of its portfolio companies

Most entrepreneurs in the Middle East (and indeed the world over) would agree that managing operations and funds is as important as all the effort put in for sealing a fundraising round. It is in recognition of this scenario that the Mohammed Bin Rashid Fund (MBRF), a fund established by H.H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai, to finance the UAE's youth and small and medium enterprise (SME) projects, has now set up a post-fund monitoring service for its portfolio companies.

Appointing Metis Management Consultancy to carry out this special service, Dubai SME (the agency looking after Dubai's SME and entrepreneurship initiatives) said in a statement that the partnership would provide support to SMEs "whenever they need to ask questions, bounce new ideas, or even re-plan or budget their forecasts." MBRF currently provides three loan schemes to SMEs (credit bank, seed capital loan and invoice/LPO finance), and Metis will now be responsible for representing MBRF with all the SMEs they fund by handling the post-fund monitoring operations.

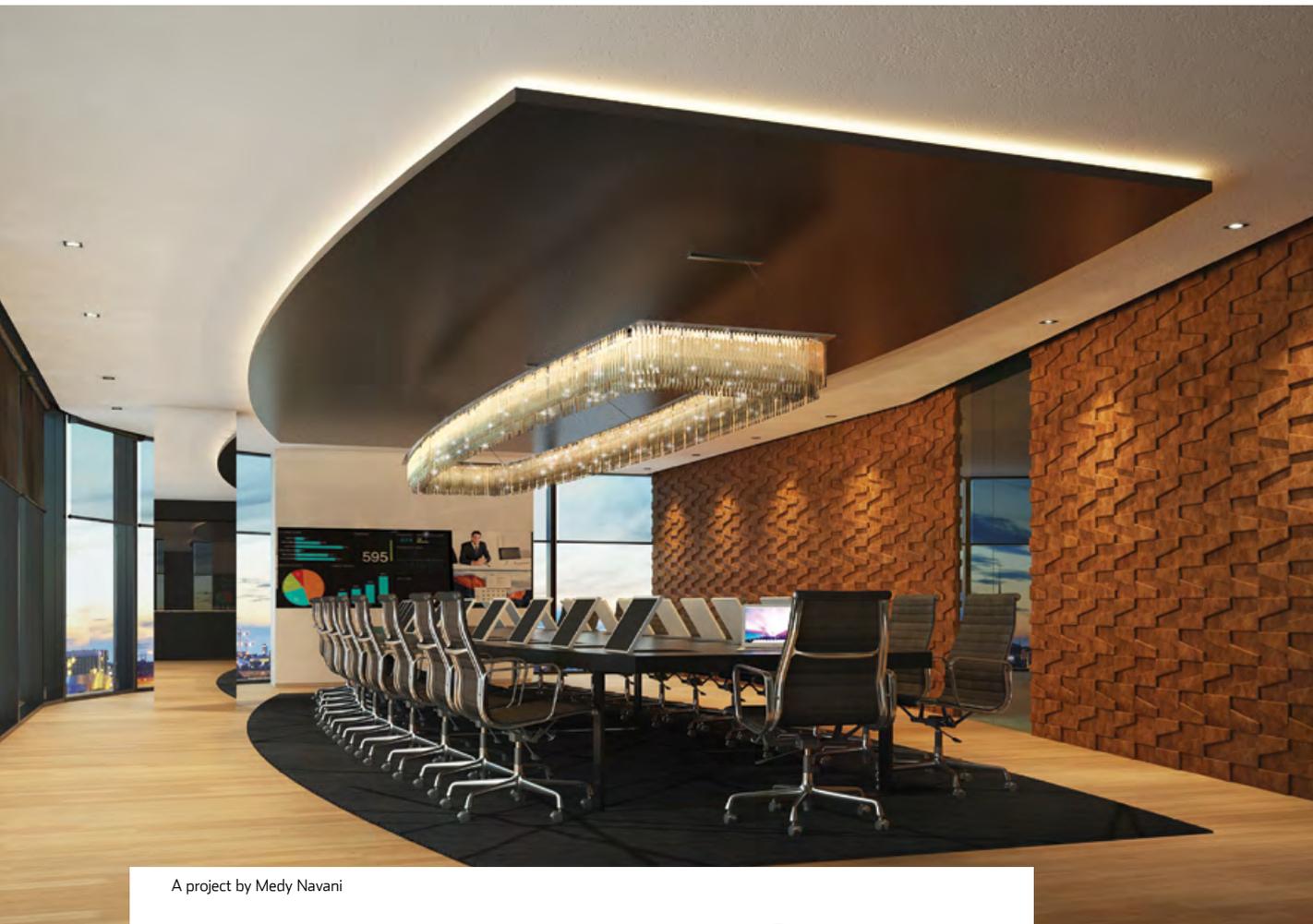
Speaking about the partnership, Nayef Shahin, founder and Managing Partner, Metis Management Consultancy, notes that, under this agreement, Metis will now arrange for routine meetings with the companies funded by MBRF. "Some meetings will be bi-monthly while [some] quarterly depending on the

category assigned by MBRF to the company," he says. "During these meetings, Metis will go through the overall strategy, marketing plan and operating model as well as the review the financial performance against the business plan." Metis will then, in turn, submit its report to MBRF detailing the performance of the company against certain pre-designed and agreed KPIs, and additionally, will also be responsible for flagging off any potential risks that the companies could face.

"By this arrangement, Metis will be working closely with the SMEs/entrepreneurs and will be able to provide advice and support where needed," Shahin says. "We believe in the potential for growth of these companies, however, entrepreneurs or SMEs sometimes lack the tools and the skills necessary to make informed decisions. Big corporations can afford to hire a full-fledged finance team, strategy team and marketing teams but SMEs can't do that. We hope, through our highly experienced team at Metis, to bridge the gap, and enable those companies to achieve, and better yet, surpass their targets."



Saeed Matar Al Marri, Deputy CEO, Dubai SME and Director of MBRF, and Nayef Shahin, founder and Managing Partner, Metis Management Consultancy, sign the partnership.



A project by Medy Navani

FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION

WHEN DESIGNING YOUR OFFICE SPACE, REMEMBER THAT IT SHOULD AIM AT ATTRACTING, ENGAGING AND RETAINING THE RIGHT PEOPLE FOR YOUR ENTERPRISE *By Medy Navani*

Over the past decade, the dialogue surrounding design and its impact on productivity and creativity in the workplace has continued to gain momentum across the architecture, interior and psychology landscape. From a psychological standpoint, such a discussion makes perfect sense— the unity between

accomplishment and success goes hand in hand with feeling great. Further, from a design perspective, we know as designers and architects that there are indeed many aesthetic and practical elements that have a direct impact on the mood, mindset and well-being of an individual or team. Both as a business owner and designer, I can attest to being a fervent

advocate of supporting corporate clients to explore new ways to create healthy, inspiring, and sustainable workplaces in which employees can feel good about where they are, and what they do. Environmental psychologists have come to pour great amounts of focus over how design affects mood, and as recently concluded by *Harvard*

Business Review, “via a chain of psychological reactions, mood influences worker engagement, with more positive moods linked to higher levels of engagement.” Therefore, we must focus on designing for engagement, to make those positive moods more likely. Thankfully, more and more companies are beginning to take notice of the real impact workplace design has on a company’s bottom line. Recent research from Gensler, a global architect and design firm, revealed that poor workplace design was estimated to cost US businesses a whopping US\$330 billion in lost productivity each year.



Medy Navani is the CEO of Design Haus Medy. Established in 2006, Design Haus Medy is an award-winning architecture and interior design practice based in Dubai. With over 233 projects completed, Design Haus Medy uses a bespoke approach for each client, rich in intellectual rigor and creativity, to develop inspiring places with a powerful visual impact.

For those startup and SME owners reading this in dismay, believing that they must hit an annual forecasted turnover before they can invest in productive design, allow me to allay your disillusionment. Rest assured that successful design for increased productivity, happiness and creativity needn't hinge on huge budgets making way for indoor putting greens, slippery slides, foosball tables, or giant hammocks, reminiscent of Google's global offices. In fact, what we are beginning to see more of as consultants, are offices seeking to become more mature and the trend of having the "coolest" office space being trumped by the desire to create more sophisticated work environments. Increasingly, we see workspaces reflecting the brand, organizational ethos and company culture, as opposed to focusing on trendy yet potentially superfluous bells and whistles that are possibly best served as fodder for Instagram.

Globally, we are also witnessing a strong surge in competition to attract top young talent, and having an inspiring and engaging office space helps that talent to identify themselves with the environment and the brand, whilst dually serving to maximize productivity. With that said, what are some of the basic elements we should consider when it comes to shaping the optimum office environment through design, which serves to attract, engage and retain the right people?



It can be as simple as ensuring the right light temperature and lumen is applied during work hours, which has been proven to help people sleep better at night, and hence do great things for individual productivity the following day. Sleep problems are also associated with both short- and long-term sick leave, resulting in yet lower productivity and consequently higher operational costs for the business. Along with proper lighting, ensuring there is a supply of fresh air at the correct temperature is also important in making people more calm, mellow and happy at work.

Further, colors are known to have a direct impact on mood, and can thus profoundly affect how productive we are. Research has shown that blue

colors affect your mind, yellow, your emotions, red, your body, and green, your balance. A recent University of Texas study found that bland gray, beige and white offices induced feelings of sadness and depression, especially in women. Men, on the other hand, experienced similarly gloomy feelings in purple and orange workspaces. Some of the other key positive workplace design elements to consider include flexibility to move, creating a sense of outdoors (green, natural light, natural motifs), mixed space (multi-level, lounges, break rooms, conference areas, open and closed spaces), quiet spaces, as well as color and texture (earthy/mineral tones, natural fibers and fabrics, natural materials such as wood/metal/stone, patterns found in nature).

Creeping beyond the discussion around sheer aesthetic in workplace design, another important facet I believe is important for business leaders to consider is that smart needs to become smarter in the modern workplace. Generation Z is now entering the workforce, and they make up the young, dynamic and hungry cohort of talent that we identified earlier. They are a generation highly advanced in technology, very well connected socially and have the means and know-how to access to huge volumes of information and the push of a button.

So, what does this mean for designing workplaces conducive to the skillsets, behaviors and preferences >>>



A project by Medy Navani

of Generation Z? Undeniably, they require offices which are smarter, and which leverage state-of-the-art high technology that enables them to unlock their sharp skills and digital savviness, and perform at work to their full potential. Offices need to adapt their work settings to support unique work modes, maximizing output without compromising on employee satisfaction or happiness. Ultimately, a smart office needs to understand its users' needs, habits and interactions. It watches, learns and transforms to provide the optimum playground for young, agile talent.

For example, in the next few years, virtual and augmented reality will reshape the employee experience as we know it. The technology is still in the early stages, but the opportunities for young talent to express ideas are exciting. One example is offering employees futuristic-style immersive training, which inserts the individual into "real life" experiences of training and confrontation. I imagine this will not only become very relevant and effective for police or emergency worker training, but also in corporate sectors. Think real life sales pitches in a room full of sharks, or presenting a brand-new product in front of a conference of thousand people. We have very interesting and



A project by Medy Navani

ULTIMATELY, A SMART OFFICE NEEDS TO UNDERSTAND ITS USERS' NEEDS, HABITS AND INTERACTIONS. IT WATCHES, LEARNS AND TRANSFORMS TO PROVIDE THE OPTIMUM PLAYGROUND FOR YOUNG, AGILE TALENT.

exciting times ahead for this style of technology-driven training, so stay tuned.

As both an interior designer and CEO with my own concerns for the wellbeing and productivity of my team, people often ask me: "What do you then consider as the perfect office?" I have to say it is an office which does not feel like "work." It is a place so well designed that it doesn't actually look complete, it

gives the final user an opportunity to add their "cherry on top," it allows the individual to add that final, personalized touch to their space. It is an environment filled with opportunities to become creative. A space that nurtures potential and facilitates the expression of unique skills and passions. A place where both myself and my team can both focus and get distracted. A place which sounds, smells, looks and feels good.

Ultimately, when it comes to businesses both large and small making the best use of their current office space, I always like to start by suggesting organizational leaders ask the actual users of the office -i.e. their employees- for their needs and wants when it comes to office design and features. From there, the designer can provide you with the answers by working closely with you to develop a custom-made solution. Be sure to avoid anything unnecessary if it has no use, as form follows function in an office space.

One final tip from me is that if you are in the exciting position to be creating a new office space completely from scratch, bring the design expert on board from the beginning of the project, as engaging from the very first idea with an architect or interior designer will make a significant difference to the whole project. Good luck! ■



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The link between entrepreneurship and happiness

(AND YES, THERE'S RESEARCH TO BACK IT UP)

By the in5 team

For many people, being an entrepreneur is not mainly about money or ambition, but about doing what makes them happy. And given that happiness is such an important theme in the UAE, perhaps we should consider an increase in entrepreneurship as a way to also increase national happiness. The connection makes intuitive sense, but there is also research to back it up.

Yes, entrepreneurs face struggles and risks galore, but they also have the free-

dom to be their own boss and drive their own destiny. That is the intuitive part. And research from Europe confirms it. Martin Binder and Alex Coad are German economists who wrote a 2010 paper entitled *Life Satisfaction and Self-Employment: A Matching Approach*. They looked at a large sample of data from the British Household Panel Survey for 1996 through 2006. The British survey asks people how satisfied they are with their lives overall, and also measures their mental well-being through a series of 12 questions. Binder and Coad

PEOPLE ARE HAPPY WHEN THEY SHARE AN IDEA OR BRAINSTORM WITH A LIKE-MINDED PERSON FROM ANOTHER PART OF THE COMMUNITY. THIS IS HOW INNOVATION HAPPENS AND IT IS A GOOD FEELING.

made an important distinction, separating people who became self-employed as a matter of choice from people who became self-employed as a matter of necessity.

What did they find? That for the necessity group – those who moved to become their own bosses– happiness outcomes were little different than for people who moved into or in between regular jobs. But for the opportunity group, who had moved voluntarily, it was a different story. Binder and Coad reported “significant positive effects on happiness of switching from employment to self-employment, compared to a matched sample of those who remain where they are.”

In their conclusion, the researchers suggest that “the autonomy enjoyed by ‘being one’s own boss’ more than compensates entrepreneurs for the hardships otherwise associated with self-employment.”

From our base in Dubai, we at in5, TECOM Group’s enabling platform for entrepreneurs and startups in the region, have a few more ideas on why being an entrepreneur can make you a happier person.

Entrepreneurs are more exposed to positive influences, which, by themselves or in unison, promote happiness. These include optimism towards the future, motivation to do one’s best, self-confidence, wealth, power and societal. The satisfaction derived from social entrepreneurship –a type of entrepreneurship that provides innovative solutions so that society can use them to advantage– is another important source of happiness.

in5 is an enabling platform for entrepreneurs and startups, offering five key benefits through its robust startup framework, creative spaces and specialized industry centers, training and mentorship programs, community-wide networking events and access to investors, in5 nurtures ideas and businesses to their next phase of growth. Launched in 2013 by TECOM Group, in5’s three specialized Innovation Centres provide aspiring students, entrepreneurs and startups with access to a diverse community of creative minds, facilitating the constant exchange of knowledge and passionate debate conducive to ideation.

That is not to say that entrepreneurs are immune to negative sentiments. They are susceptible to the fear of failure, the uncertainties from volatile market conditions, a nagging worry concerning revenues, or even the pressures that come with the day-to-day running of the business. For some aspiring entrepreneurs in the UAE, these negative sentiments are the hurdles that prevent them from achieving their potential. But many of these reservations are being addressed.

The Government of the UAE recognizes the challenges faced by entrepreneurs. A lot is at stake, since entrepreneurs are the progenitors of the small and medium businesses that are the lifeblood of the economy and generate 42% of the workforce and contribute around 40% to the total value add generated in Dubai's economy according to government agency Dubai SME.

With this knowledge, the Government of Dubai is building a business ecosystem that nurtures entrepreneurship. The principles that support happy entrepreneurs are articulated in Dubai Plan 2021. The plan, with the aim of happiness at its core, aspires to lead the Emirate into a happy place—

a city where people feel creative and empowered, a smart city, a global hub which has the wherewithal to serve as the financial, trade, logistic and touristic hotspot.

Communities such as Dubai Internet City, where in5 is located, contribute to another aspect of entrepreneurs' happiness: collaboration.

Humans are social animals and it is our nature to want to work together. It gives context and meaning to our work. Communities bring businesses with similar goals into a common space and encourage this sort of interaction. People are happy when they share an idea or brainstorm with a like-minded person from another part of the community. This is how innovation happens and it is a good feeling.

It is true many entrepreneurs begin solo as a business entity, and that thought in itself is quite challenging. But they absolutely don't have to go it alone. Dubai has a solid support system in place where they can receive practical help, guidance, camaraderie and the network.

This is why we chose to write this article as a team, the in5 team, rather than have it be the work of one person. Because not only are we stronger when united, but happier too. ■



| IN THE LOOP |

Calling Arab innovators

Arab Youth Startup Marketplace in Dubai will to showcase MENA's youth entrepreneurs

Now seems to be the right time for the aspiring entrepreneurs of the Arab region to take a leap of faith with a business idea that they have always wanted to execute. Under the directives of H.H. Sheikh Mansour Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, UAE's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Presidential Affairs, the Arab Youth Center has launched the Arab Youth Startup Marketplace (AYSM), a platform that strives to create a supportive community of aspiring Arab startups and entrepreneurs. Aspiring youth entrepreneurs in the Arab world can thus stand to gain from AYSM's core objectives of creating a space to "showcase innovations, exchange knowledge, and empower the youth." The event will also connect startups to regional and international mentors, speakers and investors, and reward innovations in the process.

To be held annually, the first edition of the event will be held on October 3-5, 2017 at Emirates Towers in Dubai, where startups, spearheaded by Arab entrepreneurs,

are invited to participate and present their ventures to investors and other ecosystem stakeholders, and thereby generate opportunities for growth, and get connected to mentors. The event will also host a pitch competition to discover and award the best startups with cash prizes and other non-monetary rewards. The event also hosts a startup exhibition, and intends to feature some of the top innovative businesses of the Arab world as part of it. In order to be successful in creating a collaborative environment for the Arab region's startups, AYSM invites entrepreneurs, investors, mentors, incubators, and other supporters to collaborate with them and play a key part in the event's first edition. As for the entrepreneurs themselves, if you are an early-stage Arab-owned startup (from any sector) with a tech or non-tech oriented product or solution to offer, you can visit the official website to know more about the application process to be a part of AYSM 2017. aysm.arabyouthcenter.org



Building a (great) company culture

Investing in this now will pay rich dividends later

By Tarek Bayaa

“We’ve got a great culture here” is a phrase that’s thrown around during interviews, scribbled at the top of job descriptions, and a perk that millennials are often desperate to hear about in companies wishing to employ them. In recent years, there has been a monumental shift towards nurturing this thing called culture, but what is it, why is it important, and what are some of the ways you can work towards it?

THE WHAT

Company culture defines the environment in which employees work. It includes a variety of elements, such as work environment, company mission, value, ethics, expectations, and goals.

When you consider companies with a clear company culture, names like Google, Facebook, Zappos, Twitter, and Zenefits come to mind, with their offices featuring no doors, motivational slogans strewn across the walls, apps to help manage benefits, computer rooms alongside football tables down the hallway—your home away from home, as it were.

While offices don’t have to be as eccentric or eclectic as these, there is a definite paradigm shift towards exuberant and welcoming offices that commemorate this move away from the stoic and cold corporate way of life by removing traditional office features—bland walls, cubicles, dull hanging prints from Ikea— and replacing it with chill-out

rooms, mobile cafes, and casual dress codes.

How you choose to express your company character is up to you, so do your research not on what everyone else is doing, but who your current employees are, including their demographic, interests, and whether they are creative or techy, and if you are starting fresh, what kind of employees you want to attract and how you are going to go about it.

THE WHY

While we could pretend that corporations are growing soft and finally recognize the need to treat employees as people, it is important not to delve too far into fantasy. One of the principal reasons for this budding interest in fashioning a unique and overarching company culture is the generational shift in the workforce. Millennials are taking over.

In 2015, more than one in three American workers today were millennials—adults aged 18 to 34. In 2017, they surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce, according to new Pew Research Center analysis of US Census Bureau data. This is even more true for young populations, such as India and Dubai, where a significant majority of workforce are already part of this well-researched generation.

And if there is anything recruiters have learnt about millennials, it is that they are looking for tailored employment that supports their needs and accepts their individuality. If you are not going to provide that, they aren’t going to grit their teeth and stick around—they will leave. Having a strong company culture is the

ticket to keeping millennials happy, because, if done right, it should reflect their interests and values and make them feel part of the company they are investing in.

Fundamentally, creating an interactive and engaging culture—if done right—will strength the bonds between company and its employees, which for most businesses is fairly abysmal. The workplace should not be something that people dread every morning. Staff should feel energized about their role and find something to look forward to. Challenges, their co-workers, the hour they get to play on the Playstation at work— all of these should galvanize them. Stress at work is inevitable, there is no business model that removes this element entirely. Nevertheless, a strong support network in form of a great company culture will alleviate it.

This is why culture matters. Culture sustains employee enthusiasm—the charger that fuels them when they are low and awards them when they have accomplished something. Regardless of the challenges and potential pitfalls, it will be there to soften the blow.

Finally, happy employees are



If there is anything recruiters have learnt about millennials, it is that they are looking for tailored employment that supports their needs and accepts their individuality.

productive. They work overtime, they go the extra mile to help their colleagues, and they are constantly innovating on your behalf. No one does extra for people/business they don't like. If you're willing to invest a little capital in building and nourishing their culture, you will be repaid threefold.

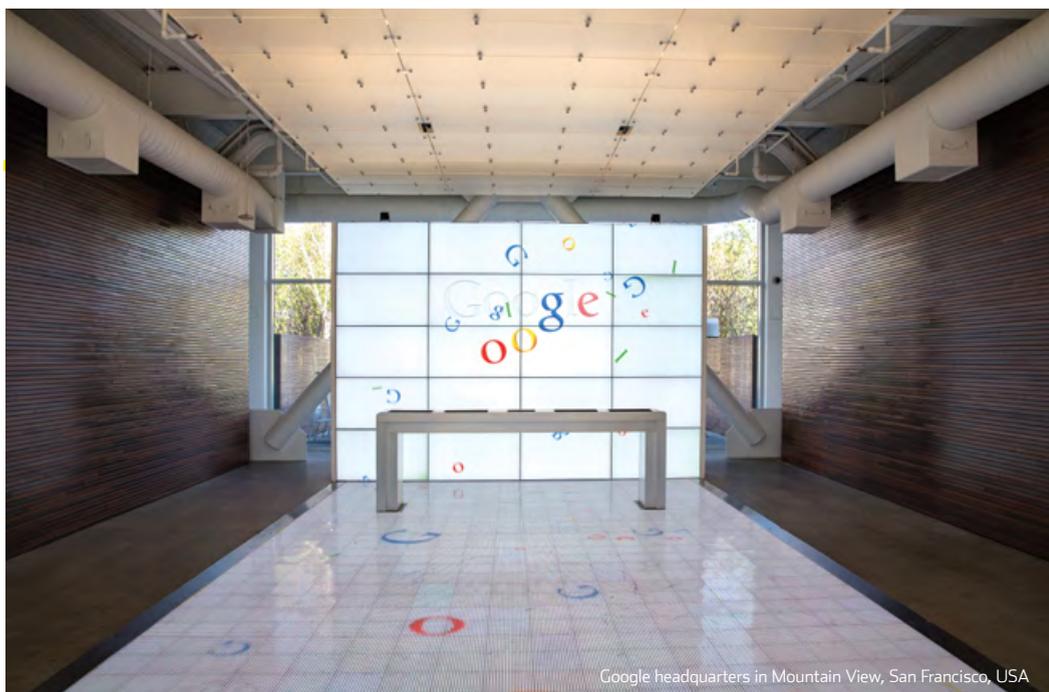
Another reason for investing in your company culture is so that you attract and retain top talent. One of the first things you learn about Google is that it receives millions of job applications a year. Why? Because its benefits and company culture are incredible. Although it must be one of the most stressful industries to work in, hundreds of thousands of people around the globe flock to its careers page.

Culture is a recruiting tool. If you have established yourself as a company that treats its employees well, it is not going to stay secret for long. Your employees will tell their friends, will share pictures of last week's pizza day at the office on social media—word about what a workplace it is will quickly get out, attracting those looking for that level of care and support.

In short: giving employees prodigious professional experiences will transform them from staff to ambassadors, and help you recruit and retain the top talent your business needs to flourish.

THE HOW

Start by assigning a leader for this purpose: that person will be your cultivator, groomer, nurturer, and all the things in-between. For most companies, this will take the form of your HR Director or Manager. They will be the vanguard of this fledging thing that will become



Google headquarters in Mountain View, San Francisco, USA

Creating an interactive and engaging culture -if done right- will strength the bonds between company and its employees, which for most businesses is fairly abysmal.

THE WORKPLACE SHOULD NOT BE SOMETHING THAT PEOPLE DREAD EVERY MORNING. STAFF SHOULD FEEL ENERGIZED ABOUT THEIR ROLE AND FIND SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO.

your office culture. Now, this is not a one-person job, but it does require direction, responsibility and ownership— a dedicated official who will water it with new ideas and concepts, and prune it of unsuccessful ones when necessary.

As your staff grows, so will your culture. It is inevitable that something that was visualized by one or two key players will become a dream shared and shaped by many. While the core values should never change—after all, they are the pillars on which the company rests upon— you need to ask your team about it. How can you improve it? What elements would they like to see incorporated into the existing structure? If there are echoes of advice coming from your A-players, it might be a good idea to listen and integrate them.

Also, don't be afraid to rearrange your structures. There is something to be said about the throng of corporations shifting from archetypal management styles. Open offices without doors (metaphorical and literally) are picking up speed,

and the logic for it is sound: if you want your employees to feel equal, to feel more than a small cog on a big wheel, having an open system where they can go with their ideas to department heads or even CEOs without getting buried under the hierarchy ladder is a great move to empower them, and build a culture that values everyone equally.

Now, culture can seem like this all-powerful thing with the potential to unite hearts and minds and turn a profit, but it is also an incredibly fragile thing too. Frequently communicate, internally and externally, what your culture is. Like a corporate mantra, it will keep everyone focused on what is important, and remind them of what they are working towards. Reward those who embrace and exude your core beliefs, be honest and upfront with those who aren't. That way, there will be less disturbances and disruptions, and your original culture pitch remains at the heart of its constantly evolving form. ■





THE TWO WORDS EVERY LEADER MUST USE

They may be simple- but their power shouldn't be underestimated *By Colin Caulfield*

Being in a position of leadership can be a double-edged sword. For some, it is a burden that is placed upon them and unwillingly accepted; for others, it is a goal achieved and embraced like an old friend. Either way, when a person finds themselves in a leadership position, their team is looking at them to lead, so lead they must.

Over the last 30 years, I have observed many leadership styles, and borne witness to the various reactions that accompany each one. I have seen autocratic leaders making decisions in isolation with an inflexible expectation, democratic leaders encouraging team input, and at the other end of the leadership spectrum, laissez-faire leadership, which appears a free-for-all management style with the inevitable negative consequences.

But however a person finds themselves in a leadership position, or whatever leadership style they adopt, there are two words that all leaders must use every day.

It's not "Good morning," though very polite and definitely encouraged, and it's most certainly not "Be quiet" or "Shut up," unless you're rude and uncaring- in which case you should seek real

help! No, the two simple -yet highly effective- words you need to use are: "Thank You."

In May this year, Dacher Keltner a professor of psychology at University of California, Berkeley, published *The Power Paradox (How We Gain and Lose Influence)*. After its launch, Keltner wrote an article for *The Guardian*, in which he says: "Expressions of gratitude create strong, collaborative ties, and pave the way for greater influence. Studies find that individuals who express gratitude to others as groups are forming stronger ties within the group months later. Romantic partners who express gratitude to their partners in casual conversations were more than three times less likely to break up six months later. When experimenters

touch participants on the arm in a friendly fashion, those individuals are more likely to sign petitions and co-operate with a stranger. When teachers encourage students with a pat on the shoulder, those students are three to five times more likely to try solving hard problems. Simply being thanked for completed work led participants to be twice as likely to volunteer for more."

But if saying "Thank You" is such a simple and effective way to enforce teamwork, encourage engagement, and seek volunteers rather than hostages to achieving business goals, then why do some leaders seem to find it so difficult to say? In her blog for *HuffPost*, Diane Gottsman identified at least four reasons why saying "Thank You" may not occur:

THE LEADER FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE

Being socially anxious, which results in poor communication, or worse, no communication at all, is something that a leader has to overcome. Communication is critical to the success of the team, and personal anxiety towards displays of outward emotion need to be wrestled with and pushed aside. It's appreciated that that's easy to say, but not so easy to do for socially awkward leaders, but it's imperative to read each situation and be comfortable with your gratitude.

THE LEADER IS DISTRACTED

This is a two-way street. Leaders can often become distracted when they "step out of their helicopter and work in the weeds." Remaining holistic is essential as this will allow leaders to identify who is delivering and conversely who is not. It's also important to identify who is "overwork-

ing," either to meet business deadlines or because someone else in the team isn't carrying their weight. The leader has to identify the resourcing challenges of the business and overcome them, meanwhile thanking the individuals and team for pulling together in the meantime.

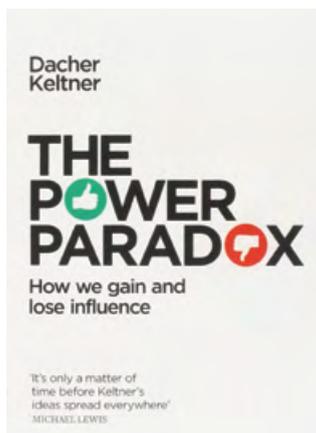
THE LEADER DOESN'T RECOGNIZE THE EFFORT

If you walk into your office each day and don't see the floors shining, the security officer uniformed who greets you with a smile or the administrator who photocopied and scanned thousands of documents to support the business, then you have fallen into a trap. Every effort should be recognized, and as a leader you should place those efforts into context. Rewarding business development executives for clinching deals, but ignoring the rest of the team is just poor leadership and a sure-fire way to break morale. The next time you see the cleaner buffing the floors you should thank them for protecting the image of the business. After all, if a prospective client walks into a filthy building, it will reflect on the business- they may think there is lack of care, a lack of process. Acknowledging the efforts of the "entire" team is critical.

THE LEADER HAS SOME UNRESOLVED CONFLICT

Hostility towards another member of the team is a business killer. Leaders need to get over any grudges and communicate their issue with their colleague so they can move on. Once the issue is aired and the matter closed, saying "Thank You" should not be a challenge.

There is a moral here, and it's uncomplicated and clear: the words "Thank You" are simple and will take you far in life. Leaders shouldn't underestimate them. ■



Colin Caulfield is Executive Director, Upper GCC at EFS Facilities Services Group.



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EXPERIENCE MATTERS

IT'S NOT THE SHOPPING PLATFORM—IT'S THE SHOPPING MINDSET THAT REALLY MATTERS

By Ahmed Galal Ismail

WHILE SOME PEOPLE ALWAYS WANT "TO SHOP" AND OTHERS ARE ALMOST ADDICTED TO THE THRILL OF "GOING SHOPPING," MOST ALTERNATE BETWEEN THE TWO MINDSETS.

Have a think about the last time you made a purchase— maybe you ordered food for delivery online, or you picked up a new pair of shoes from the mall, or you may even have sourced a handmade gift made by a local designer on Instagram. Was it a smooth and seamless experience? Maybe not. Could it have been better? Almost definitely. No matter how you shop, it is safe to say shopping consumes a large amount of our time, so surely it should be painless, rewarding, and satisfying, rather than a source of frustration.

Omni-channel has been a buzzword recently, and it's a regular fixture at conferences and trade shows, and frequently tops the agenda in corporate boardrooms. Its premise is simple— deliver offerings across multiple offline and online channels to help fulfil the needs and expectations of customers, while opening up new revenue streams. But while the theory is sound, the message is misleading.

To be successful, you can't think channel first— build it and they will come. You need to think experience first— build it but only if it strengthens your overall experi-

ence and offers your customers more "emotional value." This is because, as branding expert Martin Lindstrom once put it, "Emotions are the way in which our brains encode things of value." Customers think in experiences, not channels.

Armed with this "experience" and "emotion" mindset, you may decide that expanding into new channels is not even necessary. Take Primark, for example. While other major high street retailers with significant omni-channel presences have been floundering, Primark has consistently posted strong revenue and profit growth, and it doesn't sell a single product online. It remains, at the face of it, a classic brick and mortar retailer. It just delivers an extremely compelling experience, rooted in the principle that purchasing fashionable items at price points acces-

sible to everyone creates guilt-free pleasure when going shopping.

Another good example is Waterstones, the British bookstore. It was struggling for some time and, after failed attempts to embrace the digital world, changed its direction. Under the vision of helping people fall back in love with books, the company reshaped its stores to make them more welcoming, tranquil and immersive. It also trained its staff on great stories and authors, so they could more passionately provide both compelling and accurate product recommendations.

Of course, the answer is by no means always to focus on the physical. There are a number of omni-channel success stories, too. Walmart, for example, recognized that one of the biggest causes of stress and frustration among its customers were long queues. Rather than opening more checkouts, it created the innovative Walmart Scan & Go app, which allows customers to scan items' UPC codes on their phone, check out via a simple ecommerce-style cart, and then walk straight out of the store after showing a security guard their digital receipt.

The immersive experience of Waterstones is vastly different from the efficiency of Walmart's Scan & Go app, but which should retailers offer? If you look at how consumers shop, there are two distinct types of shopper mindsets— either "I need to shop," or "I want to go shopping." The first is a very functional and planned process. An extreme example would be the grocery shopping list where you have things that you need to tick off as quickly as possible.



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On the other end of the spectrum is more of an experiential journey where customers want to “go shopping.” They are looking for a more interactive, immersive experience that goes beyond simply purchasing a product. While some people always want “to shop” and others are almost addicted to the thrill of “going shopping,” most alternate between the two mindsets. A working mother could be in a “to-shop” mentality when buying groceries for the house during the week, but in an exploratory mood of “going shopping” with her girlfriends on the weekend. The key here is for brands to understand which mindset customers are in at any given moment, and shape the core customer experience accordingly— if a customer is coming “to shop,” make that functional experience even quicker, more seamless and hassle-free. If your customers are in the frame of mind to “go shopping,” you know they are looking for an inherently entertaining and social experience. Retailers need to be prepared to cater to customers’ varying mindsets through an omni-experience offering.

It is tempting to simplify the situation by asserting that customers tend “to shop” online, but “go shopping” offline. However,

there are pioneering examples of brands that deliver exceptionally experiential online shopping journeys. Take Amazon, for example. Amazon, who mastered convenience with one-click shopping online, only opened their physical grocery store Amazon Go once they could offer that convenience if not better with zero click shopping; just pick up the vvgroceries and walk out.

Whilst it may not be possible to change a person’s mindset, I believe there are ways in which brands and companies can look to alter their behavior, depending on the product type, shopper persona, time, and geography. By delivering a super-focused omni-experience, brands can even influence buying moods and density of purchase, which is hugely exciting for the retail industry.

So, if we know that people display different mindsets when it comes to shopping, how do brands go about identifying these, in order to shape the core customer experience accordingly?

I believe it all comes down to the smart use of relevant data. At Majid Al Futtaim, we are in the unique position of being able to collect customer data at multiple touchpoints, whether someone is grabbing a coffee, purchasing new jeans, catching the latest film or just

DATA BY ITSELF DOESN'T AUTOMATICALLY LEAD TO DELIVERING A SUCCESSFUL OMNI-EXPERIENCE- TO TRULY UNDERSTAND OUR CUSTOMERS' MINDSETS, WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE JOURNEYS THEY TAKE AND USE THIS DATA TO TARGET THEM WITH A HYPER-PERSONALIZED AND MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE THAT KEEPS THEM COMING BACK.

window shopping. We do this by combining data from a range of sources, including Wi-Fi connectivity, point of sale, card transaction data and mobile payment apps. However, we recognize that data by itself doesn’t automatically lead to delivering a successful omni-experience- to truly understand our customers’ mindsets, we need to look at the journeys they take and use this data to target them with a hyper-personalized and memorable experience that keeps them coming back.

Let’s look at the example of our personal finance business Najm, that partners

with Carrefour to offer shoppers special promotions available only to Najm credit card holders, but through data analysis it was noticed that there was a gap to be filled. By tracking the customer journey, it became apparent that many shoppers who didn’t have Najm cards wanted access to these promotions, but by the time they applied for the card and received the standard approvals, the promotions were no longer available. Najm then leveraged its technology and solutions provided by the Etihad Credit Bureau to offer Instant Card Issuance, which allows customers to apply, get approval, and receive their credit cards for immediate purchase in store within just 15 minutes.

Understanding customers’ needs and responding to them effectively and efficiently has set companies apart from the competition since the dawn of time. In our fast-moving, multi-channel world, it is easy to get distracted and stray from this proven path. The secret is to keep striving to truly understand what your customers want, constantly seek new ways to enhance your experiences, and deliver more value for your company by creating more emotional value to your customers. ■



Ahmed Galal Ismail is the Chief Executive Officer of Majid Al-Futtaim Ventures, a subsidiary of Majid Al Futtaim Holding, and the Chairman of the Board of Directors for Enova, and both Majid Al Futtaim Finance and Cinemas. He manages the company’s strategic relationships with the Presidents and CEOs of various international partners, and oversees Majid Al Futtaim’s Cinemas, Leisure and Entertainment, Fashion, Healthcare, Finance business, as well as its involvement in both its F&B and energy management joint ventures.



DERIVATION, DISRUPTION, DIFFERENTIATION

Ensuring singularity amid the marketing clutter

By Abdulwahed Juma

Strategic brand differentiation is becoming increasingly challenging for brands in today's digital age, where competing for a share of voice has become even more competitive amongst traditional players and disruptors. Today, a marriage of creativity and service excellence is a must for marketers to make a mark on consumers, and with loyalties flailing, brands have no option but to make a *big* impression every single time.

What does this mean for marketers? It means running multiple, simultaneous campaigns in a manner that is fresh and new each time. It means creating and co-creating interesting content, driving synergies with consumers through partnerships that will drive an emotional/brand love quotient, and it means taking more risks to reach more customers.

Loyalty amongst consumers is flailing—this is a fact. According to a 2015 study by Catalina, a leading digital and consumer marketing firm, 90% of consumer packaged goods brands experienced share declines, driven predominantly by the fact that customers are switching, and loyalty is playing a smaller role.

Having said that, in the consumer technology space, one company seems to continue getting the loyalty formula right—Apple. In fact, Apple has become a benchmark for many when it comes to marketing and driving consumer behavior. Apple credits its continued customer devotion to offering an innovative, differentiated product, and ensuring a satisfaction rate that is consistently in the upper 90 percentiles.

Driving brand affiliation and resonance is a key point of differentiation; in addition to offering a superior service, we need to consider a number of avenues that brands can take to ensure singularity in a cluttered environment.

The new reality of branded content sees creative narrative becoming human again. We see the latest reality of creative brand experiences, beyond just activations directed at educating and familiarizing.

Derivation: sticking to our roots

As a local brand, championing the heritage of the brand roots is a strategy that drives affinity amongst consumers. A whole lot more than merely creating products for a particular market, it is, in fact, creating a conversation amongst consumers and serving them in a way that is familiar. Humanizing the brand to become a valued member of the community through the formation of highly customized interactions, through products and services, is an important driver of brand loyalty. According to Deloitte's *2016 Millennial Survey*, 73% of millennials said that business must have a positive social impact on society, as such companies that integrate within local communities are far more likely to drive brand affinity.

At du, amongst our many customer service touchpoints, which include in-store, digital/online and social media amongst others, we also have a 100% Emirati call center for national customers. Not only are we proud of our heritage, we are also forward-looking and cater to our customers in a way that they are becoming more and more accustomed to, by offering more digitization and automation in our services. At the same time, we continued to stay true to our roots by integrating with the local communities through a variety of initiatives including our annual Mawaed Al Rahman initiatives, as well as socially relevant campaigns such as #digitalfasting and #postwisely.

Today, when a brand stands behind a social cause, its power can be amplified even further afield owing to this incredible proliferation of the internet and social media that we are witnessing— and when its messaging is emotional and speaks to the consumer on an individual level, social change can happen. When brands take on the onus of driving a social conversation and inspiring positive change, they become more than their product and corporate image— they become aspirational.

Disruption: changing the game

As technology continues to change the way that we live and do business, it's also changing our relationship with our customers. In today's consumer driven market, it is up to us as a business to tap into that market's mood and offer an exciting and viable solution— this is where disruptive marketing takes its cue. What we have seen globally is that disruptive marketing goes hand in hand with innovation— one of the go-to brands as a success benchmark is Red Bull: the company has become a publishing empire that happens to sell a drink. The company has consumers excited about the brand.

By tapping into individual sensibilities, and catering to them, a brand differentiates itself from its offering to drive affinity. At du, we believe in creating platforms for



Abdulwahed Juma is Executive Vice-President of Brand and Corporate Communications at du.

Maximize your potential

The Thomson Reuters Accelerate SME platform has resources aplenty for MENA entrepreneurs

our consumers to achieve their dreams, and we have done this successfully at a grass roots level with our Agent 055 Network and the duFC platform, as well as various initiatives with Zayed University and the American University in Dubai. Today, our customers know that we are their number one supporters, and this helps us further entrench ourselves in their lives.

Differentiation: standing out

While communicating a product, consumers weigh its success based on its delivery of promise. Is the product good? Is service delivery sufficient? Does it meet the standards set in the communication? If a product falls short of its promise of differentiation, consumers lose trust. In a cluttered market, product differentiation is key— but how do we showcase that differentiation through the clutter? As marketers, we have to speak to consumers in a way that they are now accustomed to. We have to humanize the brand, give it personality, and our offering and marketing strategy will ensure it stands out.

The new reality of branded content sees creative narrative becoming human again. We see the latest reality of creative brand experiences, beyond just activations directed at educating and familiarizing. We see a new reality of digital influencers and digital natives. As such, content has become king, and there has been a migration from a monologue to a dialogue.

No matter how secure a brand may feel in its market position, it should never feel comfortable. Every single brand has a responsibility to its consumers to strive for differentiation, from competitors and from itself to deliver a fresh and exciting proposition— a promise of relevant, differentiated benefits will ensure increased customer loyalty. ■

The Thomson Reuters Accelerate SME platform was launched in September 2016 with an aim to become the digital gateway for the SME ecosystem in the MENA region, and with over 4,000 entrepreneurs, startups and small business owners having already signed up for its offering, the portal now seems to be well on its way to realizing its vision.

It's easy to see the reason for these good figures though— not only is it a one-stop-shop providing access to resources and solutions for business owners at any stage in their enterprise lifecycles, Accelerate SME is also completely free to join, making it a valuable resource for cash-strapped enterprises in the region.

"We offer an extensive and growing repository of industry insights, practical advice guides, business tools and easy-to-use templates," explains Tina Ghanem, Head of Accelerate SME. "Members are able to create a profile and get their services listed on Accelerate SME, or simply connect and network with other business owners and entrepreneurs via our online community hub. We have also joined forces with some of the region's premier firms to create a marketplace for fast-track funding and financing solutions, and discounted business services on Accelerate SME. Our members are able to quickly search, view and apply directly online via our platform for the services they need."

With the platform having already secured a sizeable audience in the region, Accelerate SME is now gearing up to broaden its scope and build itself up further. "We hope to continue growing our community and onboard a wider network of financial, government and technology partners from across the MENA ecosystem," Ghanem says. "Our future plans for Accelerate SME also involve launching a network of country-specific portals to provide SMEs with access to localized resources and partners, which we're very excited about. First up, we are launching Accelerate SME Jordan in partnership with Bank al Etihad."

Accelerate SME is built in such a way that it has something to offer businesses at all stages of their

lifecycles. "For businesses in the early-stage and growth-stage, we provide a wide array of business resources to help them plan for business expansion to new markets, leverage digital marketing to grow their customer base, improve management of their cash flow, among others," Ghanem explains. "Through our business services marketplace, everyone from startup companies to established businesses can find what they're after. We have built a curated marketplace, partnering with various providers, to create discounted, ready-to-go service packages exclusive to our members with anywhere up to 15% discount on the providers' standard rates. Our members can apply for discounted services ranging from internal and external audit support, credit and financial advisory, insurance and much more."

For an entrepreneurial ecosystem that's growing so quickly, Accelerate SME's presence in the MENA region bodes well for the upstarts that are making inroads into this realm.

"We offer a great starting point for any new entrepreneur or startup owner simply looking to arm themselves with the insights and knowledge to handle some of the big decisions required when setting up a new company," Ghanem notes. "Our online Community Hub also provides a fantastic space for them to connect with other entrepreneurs who are looking to make the leap, and bounce ideas off of. For startup founders, we offer specific how-to guides, custom toolkits, and other resources to support many of their key decisions and business activities from the start. We help them figure out where to set up their business, how to price their products or services, how to pitch to investors, and much more." Suffice to say, there are a lot of benefits entrepreneurs can enjoy by joining Accelerate SME—so, what are you waiting for? Head to AccelerateSME.com and sign up now!

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A McDonald's outlet

Keep it local

The importance of localizing your franchise approach

By Rafic Fakh

NEW FRANCHISEES CAN AVOID A LOT OF THE MISTAKES STARTUP ENTREPRENEURS TYPICALLY MAKE, BECAUSE THE FRANCHISOR HAS ALREADY PERFECTED DAILY OPERATIONS THROUGH TRIAL AND ERROR.

Brands that have grown exponentially to enjoy widespread success in their country of origin but are approaching saturation point can find themselves at a juncture of choices. Does the brand continue to grow steadily yet incrementally within a familiar market, or does it take the leap to a new territory, one abundant with new consumers but with unique nuances to navigate?

The Middle East is a region that undoubtedly offers attractive opportunities to brands looking to expand their international footprint. A long list of foreign companies have recognized this opportunity and jumped into new markets such as the UAE with the hopes of a warm welcome from its new customer base. This can be

seen through a recent CBRE report within which Dubai was listed as having one of the highest levels of brand integration in the world, second only to London.

Franchising can be one of the most effective ways to amplify business growth. Within the thriving food and beverage category in the region, it is a model that has proved particularly compelling.

While the UAE represents a supportive market, these opportunities do not equal a challenge-free process. In the UAE and across the GCC, there have been numerous instances of popular brands entering the Middle East only to fail shortly after, often pulling out entirely. So why is this? Why doesn't an international track record equal regional success?

First, some context. The UAE is a common point of entry for international brands that want to expand into the GCC and the wider Middle East and North Africa region, due to its growing economy and proximity to other regional markets. When considering a new market, understanding the regulatory and legislative frameworks will make all the difference, helping prospective franchisors deftly preempt and navigate the hazards.

CONDUCTING MARKET RESEARCH BEFORE ENTERING A NEW MARKET IS INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT, GIVING THE FRANCHISOR GREATER CONFIDENCE THAT THERE IS A DEMAND FOR THE PRODUCT OR SERVICE.

KNOW YOUR BRAND

The franchising model is almost instinctive in the retail, hospitality and F&B sectors, especially in the GCC where each of these sectors have experienced significant growth over the past few years. When it comes to "first to the region" brands, there are guidelines that both the franchisor and the franchisee should follow before taking the plunge in a partnership.

From the franchisor's perspective, the first of which is to explore the brand's history, looking into the heritage of a brand and at how that will fit into the local market. Additionally, brand awareness is a key factor for franchisors. Is this a brand that local consumers covet but don't have access to? Has its online or social media presence penetrated the local market? If the brand is unknown here, its launch may get lost in the already internationally integrated restaurant landscape that the region has to offer.



Rafic Fakh is the Managing Director of Emirates Fast Food Company and Partner & Operator of McDonald's restaurants in the United Arab Emirates. He is responsible for managing and growing McDonald's in the UAE. Rafic has played a crucial role in the success and growth of McDonald's in the country since the first store opening in 1994.



A McDonald's outlet

SCOPE OUT THE COMPETITION

Conducting market research before entering a new market is incredibly important, giving the franchisor greater confidence that there is a demand for the product or service. Failing to do adequate market research is one of the biggest mistakes independent entrepreneurs typically make.

Throughout the market research process, franchisors should also look into competitors. Competitors will always be in the picture, but is there “space” in the market, or is the competition too fierce for your potential brand to thrive?

Do not only think about space in the market, but also within your existing portfolio. Consider if this brand would be a strategic fit for your existing franchise portfolio, if it doesn't mesh with the others or, on the other hand, if it conflicts them. Especially within the quick service restaurant market, looking into which of your potential competitors have already made it (or failed) in the region is crucial information.

STICK TO BRAND GUIDELINES

The brand equity you're acquiring is not the only advantage, but logistically

there are a lot of benefits that aren't available to the entrepreneur starting a business from scratch. Perhaps the most significant is that you get a proven system of operation and training in how to use it.

When I began my journey with McDonald's, I worked for nine months in two locations around the world, learning how to construct the perfect burger in Singapore and prepare our world-famous fries in Philippines. The level of “McDonald's way” practical training I received on both a service and business level was unparalleled to anything I could have taught myself.

New franchisees can avoid a lot of the mistakes startup entrepreneurs typically make, because the franchisor has already perfected daily operations through trial and error. This also ensures brand-level quality and consistency internationally; making sure businesses are offering their customers the same quality service that they've received or would receive at locations elsewhere.

LOCALIZE THE BRAND

Not every aspect of the business internationally will be as easily adaptable to a new market as processes. The arguably most important aspect to consider is who you'll now be selling to and how they and their environment are different to your prior experiences.

WHEN A BUSINESS IS SUCCESSFUL, EXPANSION IS PRACTICALLY INEVITABLE FOR THE AMBITIOUS BRAND. THIS SORT OF EXPANSION IS SIGNIFICANTLY PROFITABLE AND CAN HAVE A STRONG POSITIVE EFFECT ON THE LIFESPAN OF A BUSINESS.

Selling to a different audience means you have to consider the appeal of the product to the region's culture, and the Middle East is the ultimate challenge for most brands in doing so. Local trends, customs and consumption habits must be taken into account, including everything from halal requirements to something as personal as taste.

At McDonald's we've of course covered the basics of making sure all of our offer-

ings are halal and adhere to the local health regulations, but we've also introduced new menu items such as the McArabia to appeal to the local audience.

You must think of more than just product adaptation, as product compliance for a new country's regulations may be a hurdle. If there are regulations restricting some of your products from entering the country due to safety and quality regulations outlined in consumer protection laws, you could incur legal penalties and fines for breach.

When a business is successful, expansion is practically inevitable for the ambitious brand. This sort of expansion is significantly profitable and can have a strong positive effect on the lifespan of a business. Though doing business in a new market can be testing at times and requires both care and extensive research and due diligence, the dividends can be great. To grow domestically, location is crucial, but to grow internationally, the onus is on localization. ■



A McDonald's outlet



CITYSCAPE AWARDS

EMERGING MARKETS

HONORING VISIONARIES

Shortlist revealed for coveted Cityscape Awards for emerging markets—organisers confirm highest number of submissions received in Awards history; projects selected from across the world represent best in architectural design

The shortlist for the Cityscape Awards for Emerging Markets has been revealed, announcing the best real estate and architecture innovators behind some of the world's most renowned new projects. With more than 300 submissions received – the highest in the Awards' history – a total of 45 projects have been selected by an independent panel of experts. Representing 13 countries including the UAE, USA, Brazil, Egypt, India, Turkey and Hong Kong, the projects will compete in 11 categories at

the upcoming award ceremony on Monday 11 September 2017 at Conrad Hotel, Dubai. The panel comprised 18 experts from prominent organisations including the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, Mace Macro International, and HLM Architects. Christopher Seymour, Regional Development Director and Head of Markets MESA, at Mott MacDonald and one of the judges of the Cityscape Awards for Emerging Markets 2017 said: "The quality of entrants continues to improve and this year we saw a welcome return of some of the big names in regional property development underlining the prominence of the Awards in our industry. Sustainability as a theme is as strong as ever but we are also seeing a much needed increase in the planning and application of facilities management – this is something that the judging panel has been expecting to see emerge over a number of years and demonstrates continuing maturity in the clients' portfolios where cost of operation is becoming just as important as the cost of build." Covering categories across sectors such as Commercial, Leisure & Hospitality, Community, Culture & Tourism, Residential, Retail, and Sustainability, the Cityscape Awards for Emerging Markets offer international architects and leading real estate developers a platform to communicate a shared vision



for the future, from culturally integrated city skylines to sustainable urban communities. Carlos Arnaiz, Principal at CAZA, shortlisted for the Commercial Project Award – Future with the BCDA Iconic Building in Taguig City in the Philippines believes that there are enormous opportunities in the socio-economic milieu of emergence. He said: "People are hungry for new ideas, the market is searching for different ways to cope with challenges and, as a result, architecture has the potential to produce qualitative change in how people will live in countries in the emerging world. Our design research has been focused on this unique phenomenon and our goal is to transform it into an architectural trend. It is an honour to be recognised for our efforts." Muhammad BinGhatti, CEO and Head of Architecture at Binghatti Developers, who are shortlisted in two categories

with UAE projects Binghatti Pearls and Binghatti Stars, said: "We are absolutely thrilled to be selected as finalists for the 2017 Cityscape Global Awards for Emerging Markets. It is an incredible honour to be recognised for our efforts on an international level by such a prominent and reputable organisation like Cityscape." The Cityscape Awards for Emerging Markets are sponsored by Vitra as Platinum Awards Sponsor and Crystal Gallery – Official Crystal Trophy Supplier, while the Cityscape Global exhibition is supported by Foundation Partners: Dubai Properties, Nakheel PJSC; Platinum Sponsors: Al Marjan Island, Binghatti Developers, Union Properties PJSC; Gold Sponsors: Tamleek Real Estate Registration Trustee, and Silver Sponsor: Maryapi Real Estate Development; Project Marketing Sponsor: Aqua Properties and Strategic Partner: Dubai Land Department.

For more information on the exhibition go to www.cityscapeglobal.com, or call +971 4 407 2579.

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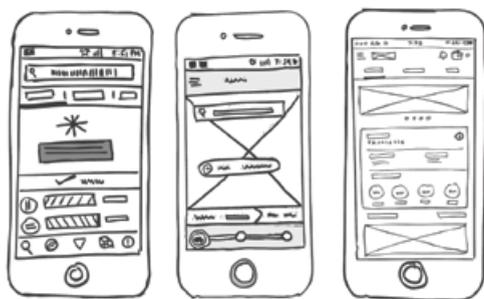


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FROM CONCEPT TO LAUNCH

[THE HOW-TO]

Want to launch an app in the MENA region?
Here's a roadmap you can follow

By *Andy Meikle*

WHETHER YOUR STRATEGY WILL ALLOW YOU TO BOOTSTRAP AND GROW, OR IF YOU BELIEVE INVESTMENT WILL BE NEEDED, UNDERSTANDING THE WAY IN WHICH YOUR IDEA WILL MAKE MONEY IS IMPERATIVE.

THERE'S NO DOUBT about it: first impressions in the tech and digital world matter a great deal. On average, almost 80% of apps are never used again 72 hours after they are downloaded. So, what is the key to success, particularly in the MENA region, where smartphone usage is topping the charts?

First and foremost, assess the opportunity and where it's at its greatest. For example, whilst there is a global shift in how fans are con-



suming sports content, we identified the MENA region as the best market to launch a social sports app. The MENA region has a higher smartphone penetration than anywhere else in the world, more time spent on social media than anywhere else in the world, and most importantly (to us!), sport, social and photo/video apps make up three of the top six app download categories in the region. So, before you go about actually launching something, spend the time to do your research, think carefully about your target audience, and the problem you're solving.

Furthermore, ask yourself if it is scalable. If your business is successful in Dubai, for example, will it be successful in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the rest of the region? Of course, the MENA region is certainly a great place to launch a new tech product or service; the cost per acquisition compared to the value per user, coupled with the uptake of new technology, makes the MENA very attractive. Should you then identify an opportunity to exploit, it's important to ensure that your product offering caters to the users' wants and needs. Spend time designing and building prototypes, and testing them with your target audience. User testing can be performed on as little as five people (any more in a specific test session can be counterproductive) to get a true understanding of what does and does not work. You're not necessarily going to get it right the first time, and as much as research and user testing will help you, your product will evolve once it is live, based on

10 sports app



technological advances and shifting consumer behavior. Don't become disheartened; remain persistent, yet agile.

Along with identifying what your platform, product or service will offer, you must also establish what your business model will be. Whether your strategy will allow you to bootstrap and grow, or if you believe investment will be needed, understanding the way in which your idea will make money is imperative. Either way, relationships are key to make this happen, so take the time to network with potential customers, clients, partners and investors. I believe this is especially important in the MENA. Whilst the region offers huge potential, it is a "small town," so build relationships and grow to understand who is looking for what. Ask direct questions and push for answers; fairly often, manners and respect can make it difficult for people to tell you that what you're offering is not actually for them.

The danger here is wasting time focusing on a lead - be it a potential customer,



Andy Meikle is an entrepreneur and founder of sports app, 10. Launched in August 2017, 10 is set to revolutionize fan engagement with sport by giving them the tools and destination to react, capture, share and chat about key moments with friends. Personalized sports updates act as the catalyst for fans to film or snap their reactions, giving them a fun and safe space to share their emotion about the sporting moments that matter to them.

client, partner or investor—because they haven't said yes, but they still haven't said no! Whilst having such conversations you may have concerns over confidentiality. I'm often asked whether NDAs should be signed before speaking to anyone about your world-changing (or even region-changing) plans. The reality is, if there isn't any competition now, there probably will be soon enough. Approach each conversation at your own discretion, but don't forget that the key to overcoming the challenge of someone replicating your idea is to be as agile, focused and competitive as you can be so that you win!

Once you have recognized the opportunity, established your product offering, developed a business model, defined your target audience, and designed a smooth user experience, it's time to focus on your brand identity. Make sure your target audience resonates with both your brand and product in equal measure. For us, as sport is enjoyed by all nationalities and as the region is a melting pot of such, we selected "10" and trademarked our logo, as it's a number that is synonymous with sport, but also universal, unlike many words or names. At this point, consider also what name, tone, languages and color schemes will appeal to your target audience. You should perform this exercise before you start building your product, as identity and brand guidelines should be consistent across your marketing efforts and product. Whilst it isn't fun, if you haven't done it yet, then now is certainly the time to complete your administrative tasks. When setting up a business, you'll need to be well positioned to hire



Andy Meikle, founder, 10

additional staff, raise investment, generate revenue or whatever it is that your strategy demands. Now, it's time to start building! From experience, when possible and should financial resources permit, don't cut corners. Having grown my previous business to over three million users, the biggest challenge we faced was ensuring our product could scale, having cut corners when we initially built our

10 sports app



app— it was an important lesson we learned! Consumers aren't very forgiving; if an app is slow, or they come across glitches and bugs then they're probably not going to come back. In fact, over 60% of apps are deleted after being used once because of technical issues such as crashing or error messages. That said, if financial resources do not permit you to build your dream team from day one, then build yourself a minimum viable product, and take it to market or a beta group of users. This will allow you to validate your offering, proving the concept to either monetize and grow, or raise investment to build your business.

There are several key stages to launching and building a tech startup in the MENA region, and whilst all of the above are essential to get your business up and running, one of the most important components is cash! Some may argue that your budget should dictate your strategy; however, one can also argue that the strategy that will lead your business

to success should dictate your budget. If you can proceed with the latter, then this approach will give you a better chance of succeeding. With 10, we're very fortunate to have the support and belief from institutional and individual investors in the region, who share our vision for changing the way that fans will consume sports content, not just here, but globally.

While all of the above may seem like an exhausting list or a tedious approach to launching your tech startup in the region, I'd highly recommend going through the motions anyway. You're going to be spending a lot of hours building this business, and hopefully, for many years to come, so before you set off on the journey, make sure you've planned well before you start executing. Yes, it may feel like it's a race to produce and launch your tech idea before someone else does, and it often is; however, to avoid that infamous 80% bucket, the most important thing is to get it done right! ■



Nooruldeen Agha, founder and CEO, Elabelz

BEWARE OF THE UNDERDOG

THIS E-COMMERCE STARTUP'S TRACK RECORD AND GROWTH RATE SO FAR MAKES IT ONE TO WATCH *By Tamara Pupic*

"WE ARE WORKING ON FINALIZING OUR FIRST MAJOR ROUND OF FUNDING FROM VENTURE CAPITALISTS. WE ARE TALKING WITH MULTIPLE REGIONAL INVESTORS WITH A PLAN TO CLOSE THE ROUND WITHIN THE NEXT SIX TO EIGHT WEEKS."

In October last year, reports came out about a Dubai-based fashion e-commerce venture entering the very nascent Iraqi e-commerce market, having developed a customized solution of delivery and payment for the country's large, increasingly tech savvy and often deep-pocketed youth population. The online fashion e-commerce platform, described by its founder as "officially the world's first international e-commerce company that directly caters to the Iraqi market," had already been operational in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Qatar, in addition to the UAE. Surprisingly, this news bit wasn't about some of the region's leading e-commerce players, who have (arguably) a

stronger brand power and substantial resources at their fingertips, but about Elabelz, an online fashion retailer that had, at the time, been established only four months earlier. Since its launch in May 2016, Elabelz's website and Android and iOS apps have offered over 21,000 fashion products for men, women and children from high profile local and international brands, adding 250 new products every day. Their target audience are young consumers, aged 30 and below. The company has been enjoying a steady 40% growth month on month, beating even its most ambitious expectations and plans.

"So far, we have been low key, gathering strength, experience and brain power while

enjoying being the underdog," says Nooruldeen Agha, founder and CEO of Elabelz. "We needed to build our operations by integrating the best practices from the region and beyond, and we wanted to ensure that we could offer to our pool of customers a service they had always dreamt of having in the region." As of now though, given all that the Elabelz team have accomplished so far, the startup is now all set on growing its operations.

"With a proven track record and amazing growth rate over the past 10 months, we are now ready to scale our operations in multiples of 10 in a very short period of time, putting what we have built to work, and starting to gain a sizeable market share," Agha reveals. "We are working on finalizing our first major round of funding from venture capitalists. We are talking with multiple regional investors with a plan to close the round within the next six to eight weeks."

A graduate of the American University of Sharjah, Agha started his career as a software engineer in 2010, climbing up the ranks in the region's oil and gas companies. However, it was in 2013 that he decided to carve out his own path by co-founding Elephant Nation, a branding and digital advertising agency, with his wife Rand Al Maeni. Having gathered a team of "creative tech savvy enthusiasts from around the world who are hungry for innovation, new design experiences and intelligence," the wife-and-husband entrepreneurial duo left their mark on the region's branding and digital advertising sector, having worked with more than 100 clients, including the Government of Dubai, Emaar Properties, and DP World, to name but a few.

In mid 2015, with Elephant Nation reaching its stable phase, Agha decided that it was time for his “next big thing”, utilizing the data and knowledge the company had enabled him to acquire. On the first day of 2016, he says, it was clear to him that his goal was to enter the region’s e-commerce sector and build “an Amazon for trendy fashion buyers.” “I believe that our region had not been ready for e-commerce until 2015,” he says. “Even today, we are still in the very early days of e-commerce in the MENA region. The total available market is growing every day and doubling every year. It is one of the very few sectors that are actually seeing such growth. I believe that the state of the e-commerce sector is just getting started in 2017, with the Amazon entry into the market, and the Noon venture. The appetite to invest in the sector is now growing, and I believe it will reach a peak in late 2017 till the end of 2018. The reason is that the MENA’s total spend online compared to offline is

still very low when compared to the US and Europe. We always catch up four or five years later. So, the four years of us catching up with the rest of the world has started in 2017, which simply means that the e-commerce market is only going to grow in the next four years in the MENA, even more than it grew in the past 10 years combined. Furthermore, the fashion e-commerce front still has a lot of room for another big company in the market. The competition in what we offer is still limited to a company or two. Needless to say, the margins in the fashion industry are much higher than electronics which will get us closer to profitability in a shorter period of time compared to other e-commerce businesses.”

Elabelz is incorporated in the British Virgin Islands, and has registered offices in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Following a transition period of a few months, Al Maeeni took full charge of Elephant Nation by the end of 2016, enabling Agha to fully focus on the new ven-



The Elabelz platform

ture. Putting his analytical mind and business acumen to good use, especially when facing powerful e-commerce competitors across the region, Agha decided not to squander the opportunity of being at the bottom. In less than a year and without much fanfare, the Elabelz team has grown from 18 to over 170 people, grouped among different departments, including operations, sourcing, technology and development, photography and marketing. “In the beginning, the biggest challenge was to assemble the right

team, to gather the people who believe in the vision of what we want to build, although building the right team requires a continuous effort throughout the life of the company,” Agha says. “We have big a photography team that is shooting 24/7 as our studio is always running. As fast as we shoot the products, they get on the website for our customers. Our sourcing and data entry team is big as well because every single day we add over 250 new styles to the website. That is one of the most important things we offer. Our product range is always updated; every single day you will find new products on our website.”

This rapid growth has, of course, not been without challenges. “Exactly because our growth is so fast-paced and our plans are so big, our other major struggle has been to get employees, investors, and suppliers to believe that we actually can deliver on the promise and the aggressive numbers we have sought out to achieve. Today, we have a proven track record and a concept that has achieved and sustained growth rates at or above the expected benchmarks, during which we have gained great traction. It is only due to us believing in our vision.” >>>



Elabelz offers over 21,000 fashion products for men, women and children



Nooruldeen Agha, founder and CEO, Elabelz

Although hesitant to talk about the company's financials, Agha reveals that he put his own skin in the game, and later received funding from four angel investors. "When it comes to tech or e-commerce, there is still resistance from investors to understand and believe that this sector is the future," he explains. "It is where the world is going and where money should be shifting to, just like that shift happened in the US before. We are getting there, but at a slower pace than we should. Still, I believe our region today is very attractive for entrepreneurs and investors since it is going through its biggest growth ever. In addition, the good thing about starting in Dubai, in particular, is the availability of talent. A lot of

eager young minds want to be a part of a vision, want to take part in a success story. People want to build something big and/or be part of something big, which makes a great environment for startups in the region." Not long after the Elabelz team built a solid base in Dubai and a few of the neighboring countries, their eyes were set on Iraq, which was a case study of how quickly and how well they could enter an underdeveloped market, Agha remembers. "We wanted to test and see if we would be able to enter and operate in a market that had hardly seen the concept of buying online before," he adds. "Our customers in Iraq have one main question, and that is: 'How do I buy?' It was something that

we had in the UAE in 2009 and 2010 when e-commerce had just started, but no one understood how exactly it should work. Also, a very important note here is that Iraq doesn't have infrastructure that supports the e-commerce sector like we have in the GCC. That meant that we had to build our on-the-ground operation, from consolidating to shipping to collect on delivery (COD) service. We do it all in-house. Being a pioneer in a market as big as Iraq, with 30 million people and with customers who are eager to get the same quality of services offered in the GCC, is one of the most important things we needed to achieve in order to build a brand name that would be associated with fashion all over the region and beyond."

"THE GOOD THING ABOUT STARTING IN DUBAI, IN PARTICULAR, IS THE AVAILABILITY OF TALENT. A LOT OF EAGER YOUNG MINDS WANT TO BE A PART OF A VISION, WANT TO TAKE PART IN A SUCCESS STORY. PEOPLE WANT TO BUILD SOMETHING BIG AND/OR BE PART OF SOMETHING BIG, WHICH MAKES A GREAT ENVIRONMENT FOR STARTUPS IN THE REGION."

As Elabelz gets set for its next phase of growth, Agha notes that one of the main challenges the company will face will be sustaining the same customer service level that they are providing at the moment. "The key in e-commerce is how good the products are and how fast and seamless can we get them to our customers," Agha says. "This is one of the main aspirations that we have at Elabelz- to deliver a service to our customers which we have always dreamed of receiving as customers. For that reason, we will continue to be relentless in maintaining and improving the service level delivered to them." ■

'TREP TALK

Elabelz CEO Nooruldeen Agha's tips for entrepreneurs

1. AS AN ENTREPRENEUR, YOU LIVE BY A DIFFERENT SET OF RULES

"From the moment you start up your business, no day will be 'business as usual.' In the fast-growing entrepreneurial ecosystem that we have today, you need to be vigilant, fast and on point in every action you take. Clearing out your email inbox is not your main target anymore. Getting the world to move in the direction you want is what you wake up to do every day as an entrepreneur."

2. GET A GREAT TEAM TOGETHER "A company is simply a group of people. Make sure you have the greatest people you can find in order to build with them the greatest company in the world."

3. MANAGE YOUR RESOURCES (AND YOUR TIME)

"Learn the art of delegation. You can never do everything right, and your opinion will not always be right. As an entrepreneur, you will always be changing your mind, so let your team be creative and give them the freedom to make mistakes and learn from them. Your job is to guide this creativity to serve the bigger vision which you and your team share."

4. SET CLEAR GOALS FOR YOUR BUSINESS

"Be clear on how you will make money and how you can be profitable. Don't start a company thinking, 'I want to do what I love.' Sometimes what you love cannot generate scalable revenue. That is called having a hobby, which costs money, and doesn't make you an entrepreneur."

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Putting together a **crowdfunding campaign**, from Andrea Baldereschi, Founder, Remedi and Daniel Zywiets, CEO of Enerwhere



HOW FAST, HOW MUCH.

Social ads that pooled in \$1.5 million in 4 weeks, Jonathan Wichmann, Founder, Wichmann/Schmid

Patrick Grove, Founder of iflix, on **taking 4 companies from startup to IPO and beyond**

Learning how to grow business, from the mobile only continent of Africa, Toby Shapshak, Editor in Chief, Stuff Magazine



WHAT'S NEXT.

Explore how blockchain can liberate the music industry with Benji Rogers, Founder of PledgeMusic

The journey of foldable smart scooters – **from crowdfunding to selling on Amazon**

Say hello to **Nadia**, an **emotionally intelligent chatbot** built by Soul Machines

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Tarek and Andrew Kabrit, co-founders, Seez

SHAZAM FOR CARS

The AI-powered Seez app is all set to change the way you buy cars

By Sindhu Hariharan

We've all been there: asking for recommendations from social circles, relying on online classifieds, and visiting numerous showrooms before we zero down on a car to buy. In fact, according to Tarek Kabrit, the co-founder and CEO of tech startup Seez, people spend an average of 17 hours in this process, and he believes that as our cities get smarter, our efforts to buy a car should evolve positively as well. Seez is an app that helps you search, shortlist, and negotiate deals on a car of your choice- but it isn't just another cars marketplace.

Seez is more like Shazam for cars- if you spot the make/model of a car you'd like to own on the roads, click an image of it on the app, and its machine learning and artificial intelligence capabilities will find out someone around you who's selling it, assess its fair market value for you, and its personal car buying concierge chat bot Cesar will also aid the negotiation process.

So, how did Seez come into being? "We were walking on the street in Beirut, and saw a Mini Cooper we liked, so we started checking it out and wondering how much a car like that would cost... While we were peeking into the car, the owner came by and we chatted with him, [and it] turned out the car was actually for sale," Kabrit remembers. This got him thinking about a technology that could help enable transactions of a similar nature. "Cars are usually the second most expensive things people buy, and to have such inefficiencies in the process doesn't make sense," he says. Seez was founded in 2015 by Tarek and Andrew Kabrit, and the app launched with two key features- a machine learning enabled search engine feature that provides information on cars with images as input, and other, a marketplace model wherein people can list their cars with Seez to receive bids and offers from potential buyers.

Given that any enterprise with a search engine model needs critical mass before chasing monetization, Kabrit says the Seez team is currently focusing on two key things- proving that the service can be monetized, and building a product that solves a real problem for users. The startup, however, has planned for various revenue streams to tap in the near future, including a freemium model for users "seizing" cars, and charging sellers a fee to connect with

prospects, among others. "Over the past year, we added two new features that had a great reception with our users," Kabrit says. "The first is a price estimator to find the value of any car, and the second is location-based contextual marketing. We realized that one of the problems for buyers or sellers is connecting logistically, and finding a time that works for both to meet and check out the car. So, we introduced the ParkCar feature, which allows buyers to park the car they are interested in, and next time they drive into a mall or a complex, they get a notification telling them that there are 2-3 cars similar to the ones they want at the mall at that point that are for sale."

As the region welcomes a new generation of car buyers open to new models and ways of buying, Kabrit believes such a trend has been met with an equal evolution in marketplaces. As companies like SellAnyCar, Dubizzle, CarSwitch, and others are addressing the need by coming up with value-added services, Kabrit stresses that he doesn't see Seez fighting for a piece of the marketplace pie. "We see ourselves as a pure tech company, where we use AI and machine learning in almost all of our features- image recognition, price predictor, and chatbot. We obviously augment the AI systems with manual/human work to ensure a seamless experience for our users, but with time, we aim to fully automate the search process for buyers." But are the region's consumers ready to make one of their major investments relying on a niche tech with high novelty factor? Kabrit believes so. "Initially, Seez might be a niche solution, but over time, we definitely see it as more of a mass market solution," he says. "At this stage, it is free and not mutually exclusive, so there is very little opportunity cost to try it in parallel with your manual

search. That said, like every new tech there will surely be an education period to explain our service and features to the users. But regional users have proven to be more than ready to take up new technologies in the past.”

With over 16,000 cars currently listed in the marketplace side of the business, and 80% of users said to be returning to the app with an average of three daily sessions, Seez, which is based out of the UAE, seems to have had a fairly positive run till date. Even as the lean team perseveres at adding new features to the app, it has grown its returning users by over 80% since the launch, and says a steady stream of inquiries on big-ticket partnerships have also been coming in. Perhaps it's on the back of this growth trajectory, coupled with the founders' strong industry experience (Tarek and Andrew each have around 10+ years experience in management consulting/private equity and big data/IT project management respectively) that the startup has managed to raise US\$1.8 million in seed funding just a couple of years into the launch. Pitching in for this round were undisclosed regional angels and three MENA-focused venture

Seez recently launched a “slimmed-down version” of the app called Seez R, which focuses on three key utilities: image search, price estimator, and a personal concierge chatbot.

“I THINK WE SURELY UNDERESTIMATED THE TECHNICAL COMPLEXITY OF WHAT WE WERE BUILDING WHEN WE FIRST STARTED, PROBABLY BECAUSE I AM NOT A TECHNICAL FOUNDER.”



The Seez team

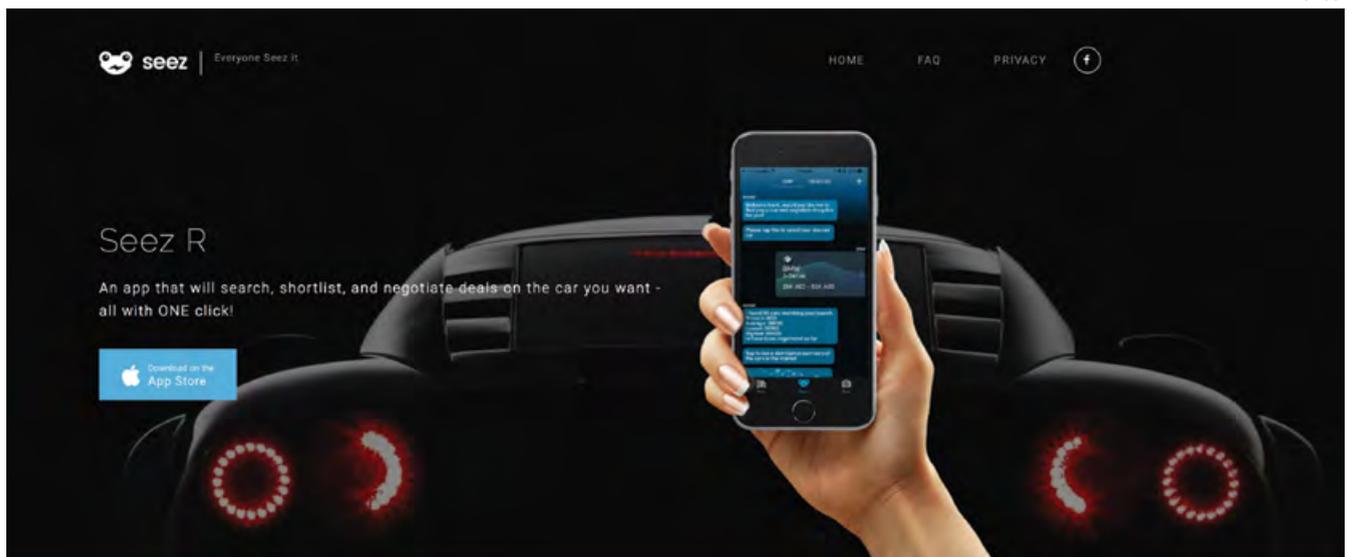
capital firms Wamda Capital (where Tarek was a Managing Partner earlier), Phoenician Funds, and B&Y Ventures in June 2017. “We have been fortunate enough to raise some funding that allows us to keep focusing on the product for the short-term, before the pressure to monetize at scale kicks in,” Kabrit says.

With a founding team that has a wealth of tech and business management experience, one may think they have had it all fall in their laps, but Kabrit says that it wasn't at all easy. The team has had its share of delays and obstacles along the way, but believe they are overall still on track on their “road to one million downloads” strategy. Kabrit admits that finding tech talent in the region proved to be a huge challenge, leading to bringing in a team of five Danish engineers specializing in machine learning to

Dubai. As for markets, Seez is clear that while the MENA region is the perfect launch pad for them, they consider themselves a global service. A cryptic Kabrit says their next market “can be KSA, but it can also be the UK, or even the US.” Along with constant additions and revisions to the app's features, Seez also launched recently a “slimmed-down version” of the app called Seez R, which focuses on three key utilities: image search, price estimator, and a personal concierge chatbot.

They say fortune favors the brave, and one can't help but notice that the Seez team has been quite brave to pack in various emerging technologies from AI to image recognition to geo-marketing etc. into its product. I ask Kabrit if that strategy has worked well for them, or if they have bitten off more than they can chew, >>>

The NOW Money app



and his plain-speak response is sure to be useful for all you emerging entrepreneurs. "I think we surely underestimated the technical complexity of what we were building when we first started, probably because I am not a technical founder," he says. "If I knew two years back what I know now, I would surely not have launched all those features together, but we did, we struggled at times, but we made it. Going forward, we want to

simplify things and focus on one problem, and solve it really well- the car search problem." As for Kabrit himself, he's pretty glad about having moved from the corporate world to life at a startup. "Working on a startup has been very refreshing in a way; there are no politics, perception, and other things that are common in the corporate world... There is just you, your product, and your users- so you better make it count." ■

A BOOST FOR FINANCIAL INCLUSION

NOW Money raises US\$700,000 from Accion Venture Lab and Newid Capital

UAE-based fintech startup NOW Money has managed to attract US-based venture capital (VC) firms Accion Venture Lab and Newid Capital with its technology that promotes financial inclusion of the Middle East's unbanked population. The startup announced in August that it has raised an investment of US\$700,000 from the aforementioned VC firms as part of its seed round, a year after raising an initial seed funding of \$500,000 from an undisclosed investor. NOW Money plans to extend the reach of its services across the UAE, and also expand to other GCC nations with the latest financial boost.

Commenting on the investment, Ian Dillon, co-founder,

NOW Money said, "Accion Venture Lab and Newid Capital are specialist VCs for fintech companies that work towards financial inclusion. This means that the expertise and support that they can offer is unparalleled." Owing to the nascent fintech ecosystem in the region, which, according to Dillon, "isn't very well understood globally," the NOW Money team spent considerable time explaining their business impact to the investors. "We hope this will be the first of many US venture capital investments in the region, and will help to grow the ecosystem further," he said.

Dillon added that while they didn't specifically chase funding from investors based in the West, it was a conscious decision to work with Accion and Newid, given their expertise in this space. Both Accion Venture Lab and Newid Capital are investment entities focused on ventures that positively impact the financially underserved. According to a statement by Ameer Parbhoo, Director of Investments, Accion Venture Lab, the firm's investment in NOW Money marks a number of firsts for them- "our first investment

'TREP TALK Tarek Kabrit Co-founder and CEO, Seez

What are your top tips for an entrepreneur to start a business here in the MENA region?

"After completely indulging in this space, I noticed that there is very little new information that you can't get by reading a few books and articles: pick the right team, big market, solve a problem, listen to users, do things that don't scale etc. But in reality, it is not just about 'knowing' these things, but about figuring out what to apply, when, and how.

That said, if I really need to summarize three key findings I would say: [First], make sure your timing is not off, so many great companies came too early and eventually went under. [Second], make sure your product solves a real problem and double check that people actually care about you solving that problem. Some founders jump to conclusions about what users want because it sounds logical or because they think that way themselves, but in reality, most of these are just assumptions that need to be very well tested before jumping in. [Finally], no need to try and be original for the sake of it, there are

many great businesses in the West that we can adapt and bring to the region. No need to reinvent the wheel as adapting something that exists elsewhere mitigates a lot of the market and tech risks associated with startups; then it becomes an execution game."

What is your outlook on the MENA's tech startup ecosystem?

"I think the ecosystem is definitely evolving fast in the region. From VC funds to accelerators to support systems, and even governments, there seems to be a very healthy buzz around startups lately. This coupled with a few success stories has gotten people excited about this space. For the longest time, whenever people wanted to talk about exits it was always Maktoob and Zawya only, now there are over 20 sizable exits including Souq with close to a \$1 billion valuation, and Careem seems to be on track for an even higher valuation. Those two companies have proven that you can build billion-dollar business focusing on the Middle East. With over 300 million people and very favorable young demographics and exceptional mobile penetration, there is no reason why the region can't be a very sizable and lucrative market for most startups."

in the Middle East region, our first investment into a wholly-digital neobank, and our first opportunity to focus on reaching low-income migrant workers."

NOW Money is a mobile banking technology service that aims to bring the migrant blue-collar workers in the Gulf region and other low-income population into the ambit of the financial systems, and also offers them a range of low-cost remittance

options. Over the last two years, the fintech startup has been carving a brand reputation for itself within the region with recognitions like being declared IBM's Startup of the Year 2016, Global Women in STEM Best Startup 2016, and also as the GCC regional winner of The Venture 2017, a challenge organized by Chivas that seeks to reward social enterprises from all over the world.





Tonye Cole

Nigerian oil tycoon & member, UN advisory board for SDG fund.

Went from bankruptcy to co-found energy giant Sahara Group.

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"WE GOT FUNDED!"

A look into how STARZ PLAY Arabia and Wego secured their latest fundraising wins- and what one can expect to see from them in the future

By Sindhu Hariharan

STARZ PLAY ARABIA

arabia.starzplay.com

STARZ PLAY Arabia, a subscription video on-demand service catered toward the Middle East, announced in July that it had raised a third round of funding, which now brings the total amount of investment in the 2015-founded enterprise to US\$125 million. The financial boost comes in from new and existing investors including international media and entertainment company STARZ, global asset manager State Street Global Advisors, and technology investment firms SEQ Capital Partners and Delta Partners. The digital streaming service plans to utilize the new funding proceeds to primarily enhance its customer experience, acquire new programming content, and enter additional markets. STARZ PLAY Arabia is American television network STARZ's first branded streaming service outside of the US. Besides having a collection of Hollywood movies, international TV series, and children's entertainment, the digital service also streams dedicated Arabic content to 19 countries across the MENA region.

"THE MENA MEDIA ECOSYSTEM IS GOING THROUGH A MAJOR SHIFT AS THE BUSINESS MODEL OF BROADCAST AND LINEAR TV GIVES WAY TO ON-DEMAND STREAMING BEHAVIORS. THE CHALLENGES TO THIS LEGACY BUSINESS MODEL ARE CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR EMERGING PLAYERS SUCH AS STARZ PLAY."

"We initially launched with around 3,000 hours of content, and this has now increased to 6,500 hours in 2017," says Maaz Sheikh, CEO, STARZ PLAY Arabia. "Since our launch, we have also introduced Arabic and French language content as part of our service. Our aim is to continue to add more relevant and up to date TV series and movies as the year progresses."

With industry giants Netflix and Amazon having recently entered the region, Sheikh acknowledges that while they have an opportunity to get acquainted with best practices of such peers, STARZ PLAY Arabia "continues to stay ahead of the game by offering value for money, exclusive content, and a localized user experience." With its current pricing model starting at AED30 per month, Sheikh considers their service "a premium yet affordable" service catered specifically toward this region, with one of its differentiating factors being partnerships with the region's telecom operators, which allow for customers to easily subscribe to the STARZ PLAY Arabia service.



Maaz Sheikh, CEO, STARZ PLAY Arabia

Sheikh credits this and a "continued support from industry giants and strategic investors" for STARZ PLAY Arabia's success in introducing various service enhancements over the years. This includes a download function for offline viewing enabling subscribers to save their favorite content to personal

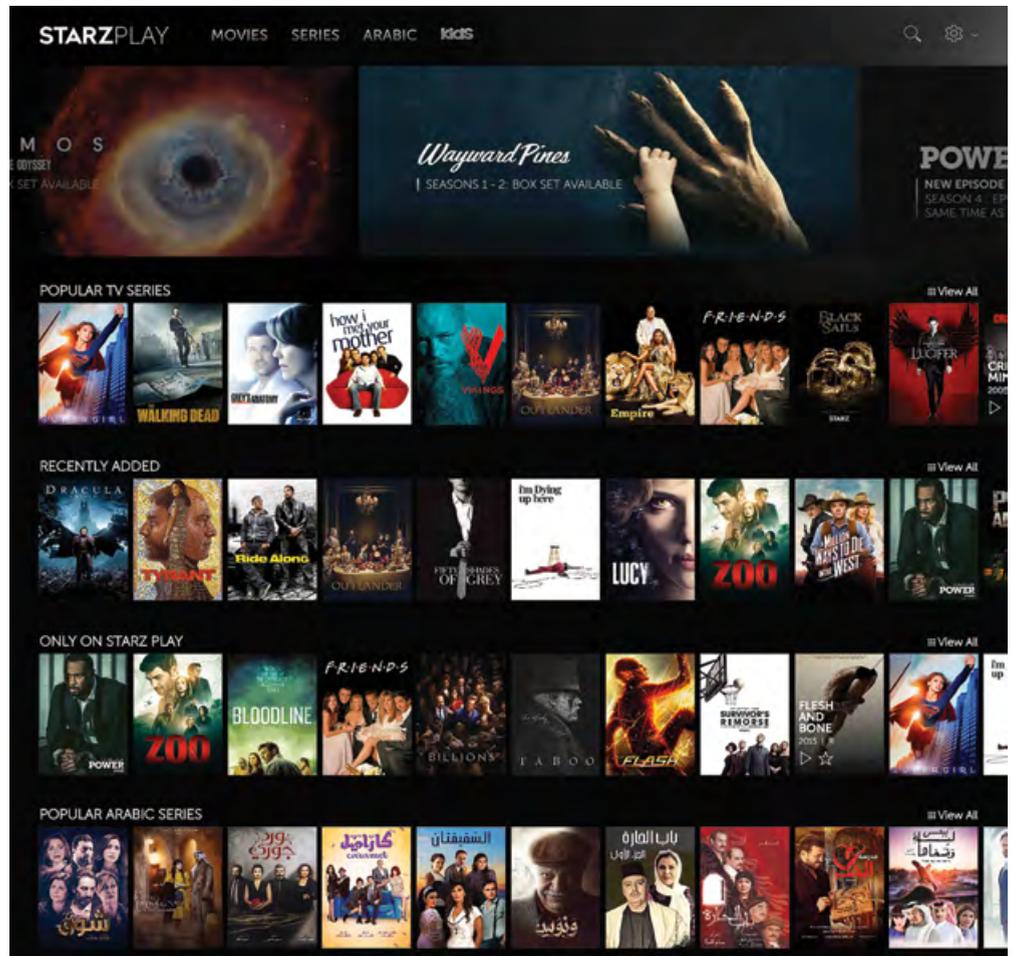


IMAGE CREDITS STARZ PLAY ARABIA

devices and watch offline, additional telecom partnerships in North Africa, and content agreements with major Hollywood studios. “During the last three years our team has acquired a unique e-commerce skillset for the high-growth markets in the world. We will continue to leverage that skillset, and plan to expand beyond the MENA region into markets that offer similar economic opportunities in the media and entertainment sectors,” he says.

“BEYOND THE OBVIOUS IDEA, MARKET SIZE, AND BUSINESS PLAN, I THINK INVESTORS INVEST IN A TEAM. WHEN STARTING FROM NOTHING, AMBITION AND CONVICTION ARE GOOD, BUT HUMILITY AND FLEXIBILITY ARE EVEN MORE IMPORTANT. FOR US, HAVING AN EXPERIENCED MANAGEMENT TEAM WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF OUR FUNDRAISING SUCCESS.”

Headquartered in Dubai, STARZ PLAY Arabia says it has signed up more than 700,000 new paying subscribers since its launch in 2015. In May 2017, the platform reported a total of 95 million viewing sessions across the MENA region, earning them the status of 11th most visited website in Saudi Arabia, and 25th in the UAE, according to SimilarWeb’s data. Speaking about the company’s long-term strategies, Sheikh believes that “even a year can seem like an eternity” in an industry such as theirs. “We have adjusted and pivoted elements of our business hundreds of times since our inception three years ago, and we will continue to listen to our fan base while creating long-term value in the company,” he says.

‘TREP TALK

Maaz Sheikh, CEO, STARZ PLAY Arabia

Based on your track record of raising funds in the MENA region, what would be your top tips for the region’s small businesses and startups to pitch and clinch funding for their ventures?

“Beyond the obvious idea, market size, and business plan, I think investors invest in a team. When starting from nothing, ambition and conviction are good, but humility and flexibility are even more important. For us, having an experienced management team was the most important aspect of our fundraising success. When pitching for funding, entrepreneurs should always think of creating lasting and long-term shareholder value. Finally, despite one’s zeal to raise

funds, entrepreneurs should not compromise on the type and number of investors.”

What is your take on the MENA region’s current business ecosystem?

“For our industry, the MENA region offers a unique opportunity due to a combination of favorable factors such as population, demographics, smartphone penetration, and mobile broadband growth. The MENA media ecosystem is going through a major shift as the business model of broadcast and linear TV gives way to on-demand streaming behaviors. The challenges to this legacy business model are creating opportunities for emerging players such as STARZ PLAY.”

WEGO

www.wego.ae

Online travel marketplace Wego has got into a strategic partnership with Middle East media conglomerate MBC Group, with the latter making a “significant amount” of investment in the online travel marketplace. It is a part of the portal’s larger Series E funding round, valued at US\$12 million.

Wego uses a proprietary technology that searches and compares travel deals from “hundreds of airlines, hotels and travel agency websites,” thus helping users find the best deal. Founded in Singapore in 2005, during the early days of the marketplace model, Wego is now dual-headquartered in Dubai and Singapore, after experiencing rapid growth across the MENA region. Prior to the current round, Wego had already raised close to \$45 million over four rounds (Series A to D) from global tech investors including the US-based Tiger Global Management, Singapore’s Crescent Point, and SquarePeg Capital from Australia.



According to Wego co-founder and CEO Ross Veitch, MBC was the “obvious people” for them to reach out to for its Series E round given the media company’s support to various online companies. “We’ve worked with various teams at MBC for several years now, but the investment conversation became serious after an introduction to Amin El Hussein [MBC’s Mobile Busi-

ness Development and Senior Product Manager] and Fadel Zahreddine [MBC’s Group Director of Brand Management-Marketing] by some venture capital friends,” he says, alluding to the importance of professional networks for entrepreneurs. “MBC is not unfamiliar with the online travel category and we weren’t surprised to learn that they shared our views on the size >>>



Fadel Zahreddine, MBC's Group Director of Brand Management signing the partnership with Wego co-founder Ross Veitch

of the opportunity and the king-making role that TV advertising can play."

As part of the partnership, Wego's app and website will be promoted across MBC Group's various media platforms, throughout the year. "As we incorporate more video-based editorial content and product merchandising to Wego's online travel marketplace, there is obvious cross-over potential between MBC's programming and Wego's online services," says Veitch. He adds that proceeds from the round will be used primarily in marketing,

both online and offline. "MBC obviously has some powerful media platforms, production capabilities, and knows more than a thing or two about building strong brands in the region, so we plan to leverage our new partner as much as possible." Wego also aims to focus on team building, and says it's on the look out for "talented and passionate digital marketers, data scientists and designers" to join them in Dubai and Cairo.

It's taken a good 12 years for Wego to reach where it is today, and Veitch notes that it wasn't an easy journey by any means. "Our biggest miscalculation was market tim-

ing," he says. "Back in 2005, when we first launched Wego, we were targeting the markets of Southeast Asia, and there just wasn't enough online travel agencies or suppliers selling online at scale at the time. We were obviously aware of this, but believed that the online travel markets would develop a lot faster than they actually did... But what doesn't kill you makes you stronger, and we learnt quite a few things along the way that turned out to be very good conditioning for approaching the markets of the Middle East."■



Wego office in Dubai

'TREP TALK

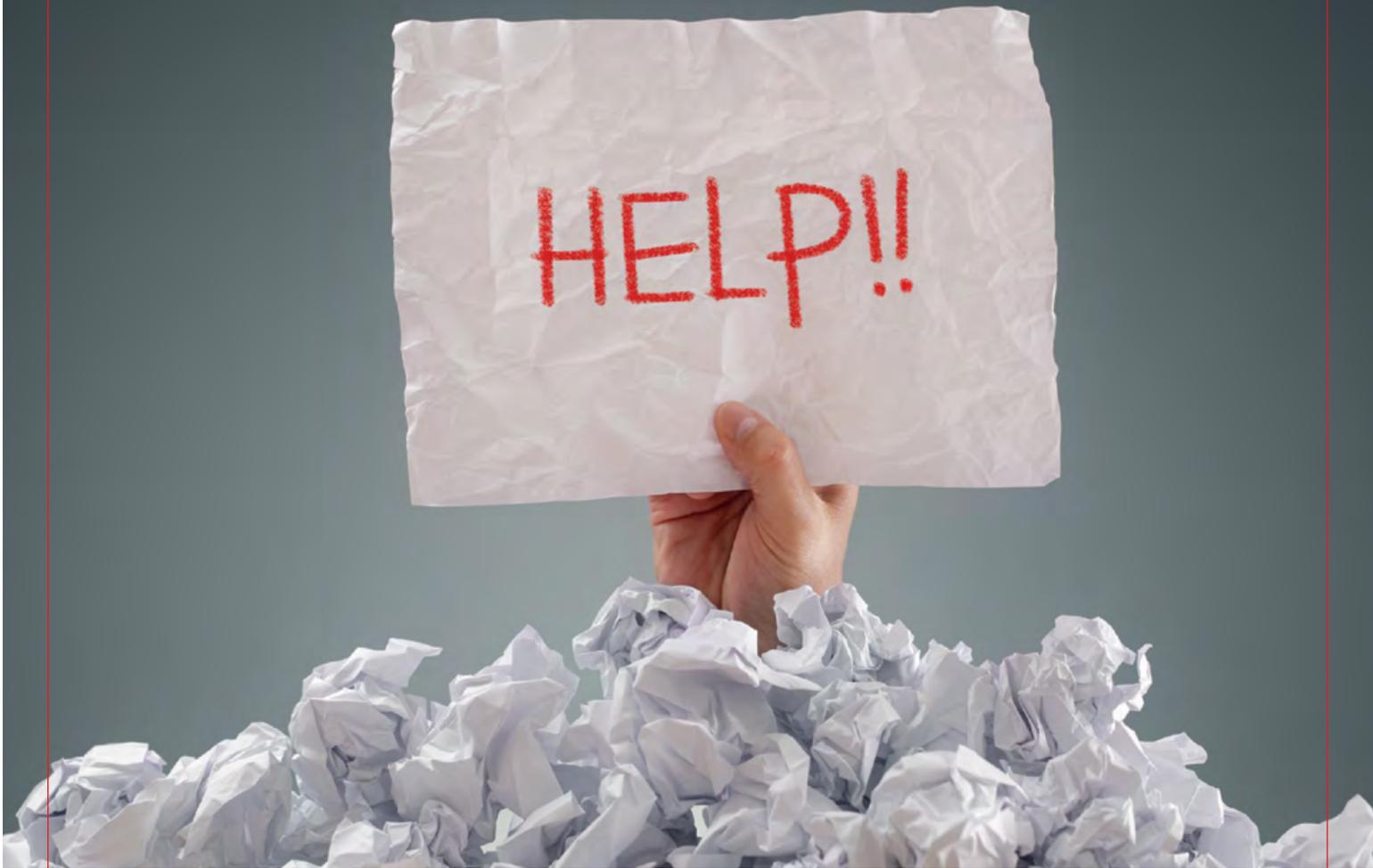
Ross Veitch, co-founder and CEO, Wego

Based on your experience in raising funds in the MENA region, what are your three top tips for the region's startups to pitch for funds?

"[Firstly], keep in mind that all startups are different, so be very careful when taking generalized advice from other entrepreneurs about anything, including how to go about raising investment. [Second], I personally engage in some tech angel investing and see a lot of startups at a really early stage. I often advise founders to forget about fundraising and instead focus on getting a 1.0 version of the product out the door, and iterate until they get some significant traction with real users. At that point you can have a more meaningful conversation with potential investors, and you'll end up giving away less of your company in the process. [Third], for early rounds you really need to run the process yourself rather than hiring an advisor to do it for you. All investors want to meet the founders or promoters before investing, and for an early-stage company being able to hustle enough to get in front of investors and then pitch them convincingly is a good proxy for the skills you'll need to get your company off the ground. For later rounds I encourage founders to engage an advisor, typically an investment banker, to help manage the process. It's still a lot of work but the process will run a lot smoother, faster, and with a higher probability of a successful outcome if you have a dedicated team focused on the task rather than you trying to do it all yourself on top of everything else involved in running a company. In our case we worked with the investment banking team at Arqaam Capital, who were very professional."

Ross Veitch, co-founder and CEO, Wego





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Abu Muadh, founder, Smart Labour presenting at Expo Live



The jury panel at Expo Live grant presentations



Dionyssia Lyra, founder, ICBA presenting at Expo Live



Winners of the Expo Live grant at the presentations day

Innovation for good

Five Middle East startups among 29 winners of Expo Live's grant for social enterprises

As Dubai's much-awaited Expo 2020 promises to bring in opportunities for small businesses and entrepreneurs, one of its initiatives implementing this objective, Expo Live, has announced monetary grants to 29 social innovation projects from 22 countries, including five Middle Eastern startups. According to a statement, Expo Live, while not disclosing the amount for each project, says it would grant up to US\$100,000 per initiative under its Innovation Impact Grant program.

Launched by Dubai Expo 2020, Expo Live with a fund of \$100 million on offer, seeks projects "offering creative solutions to pressing challenges that impact people's lives or help preserve our world- or both." Kicked off in January 2017, Expo Live says it will support winning projects through "funds, business guidance, promotion and acceleration." In addition to the aforementioned support, the winners also get an opportunity

to showcase their work at Expo 2020, a world Expo in the Middle East, Africa and South Asia region that expects large-scale attendance from businesspersons and policymakers worldwide.

Among the 29 projects that have benefitted from the first set of grants are five Middle East-based startups -three from the UAE, and two from Egypt- that aim to improve lives of people across the globe with their digital solutions. The three UAE-based organizations include a digital learning platform for blue-collar workers Smart Labour, the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA), a non-profit agricultural research center established to develop agricultural production systems in desert environments, and Ver2 Digital Medicine, an e-health services platform. The beneficiary startups from Egypt are Yomken.com, a "crowd-solving platform" that connects businesses to the right solutions from the crowd, and Transport for Cairo,

a digital solution attempting to solve Egypt's road congestion by mapping the city's formal and informal transport networks.

Commenting on how the Expo Live grant can help bring a change, Expo Live Vice President Yousuf Caires said in a statement, "These are real change-makers addressing our world's most pressing challenges; they are visionaries who are determined to see their projects bring meaningful change to those that need it. We are fortunate to have them on our program, and look forward to walking by their side on their path to success." Besides the MENA, the other recipients of the grant originate from countries such as Bangladesh, Rwanda, Chile, Nepal, Kenya, Slovenia, among others.

The Innovation Impact Grant program is open for submissions twice a year (next cycle opens in September 2017), and it recognizes creative solutions falling in the purview of Dubai Expo 2020's themes of opportunity, mobility and sustainability. Organizers say they received 575 responses to their initial call for proposals, which was then narrowed down to the 29 winners.

www.expo2020dubai.ae/Expo-Live

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