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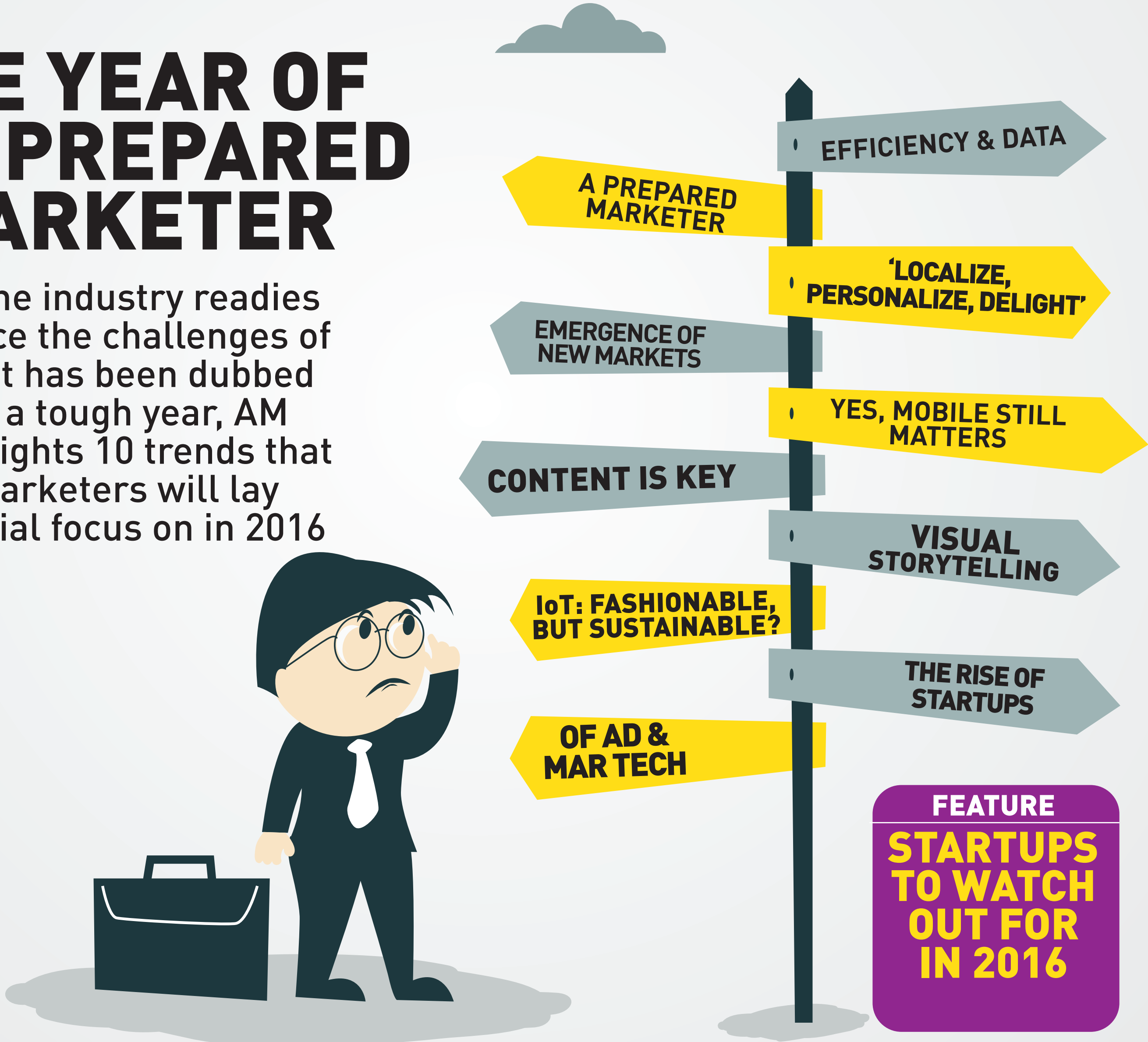
THE ARABIAN MARKETER
thearabianmarketer.com
PRINT EDITION - FEB 2016

THE YEAR OF THE PREPARED MARKETER

As the industry readies to face the challenges of what has been dubbed as a tough year, AM highlights 10 trends that marketers will lay special focus on in 2016



FEATURE

STARTUPS TO WATCH OUT FOR IN 2016

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A LITMUS TEST FOR MENA

ZEBA MAHMUD
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Every aspect of life has its ups and downs. No matter how cliché or repetitive this statement is, it is the one that never ceases to get old. It is also the one that pushes The Arabian Marketer forward.

Political and economical upheavals in the MENA region have been consistent in the past few years. These have had a direct impact on every business, the marketing and advertising sector being no different. The year 2016 began on an even sober note. The news of slowdown, budget deficits, shutting down of MENA offices of the likes of Yahoo and job cuts in companies in the banking and finance sector, indicate that MENA will have a harsh road ahead.

While most marketers, agencies and media owners will look to adapt to these limitations, some will have to resort to cutting down resources and budgets to stay in business. This emphasizes the 'downs' in my opening statement.

In all the conversations that we have had so far, I am convinced that companies in MENA are well prepared for these challenges. As VivaKi and Starcom MediaVest Group's Chairman for MENA, Alex Saber, puts it, the region has dealt with this in the past. Taking a cue from his advice, and that of the region's senior leaders, I sincerely believe that this is also the time where taking risks will reap greater rewards, and creativity will have higher incentives. Growth in MENA is exponential, not linear. Staying the course and pushing forward will hold the key. This aspect of the pursuit of achievement, on an inevitable rocky road, is definitely the one that will distinguish the players who, focusing on the 'ups', are in it for the long haul.

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Marwan Al Zarouni Printing Press LLC

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THE YEAR OF THE PREPARED MARKETER

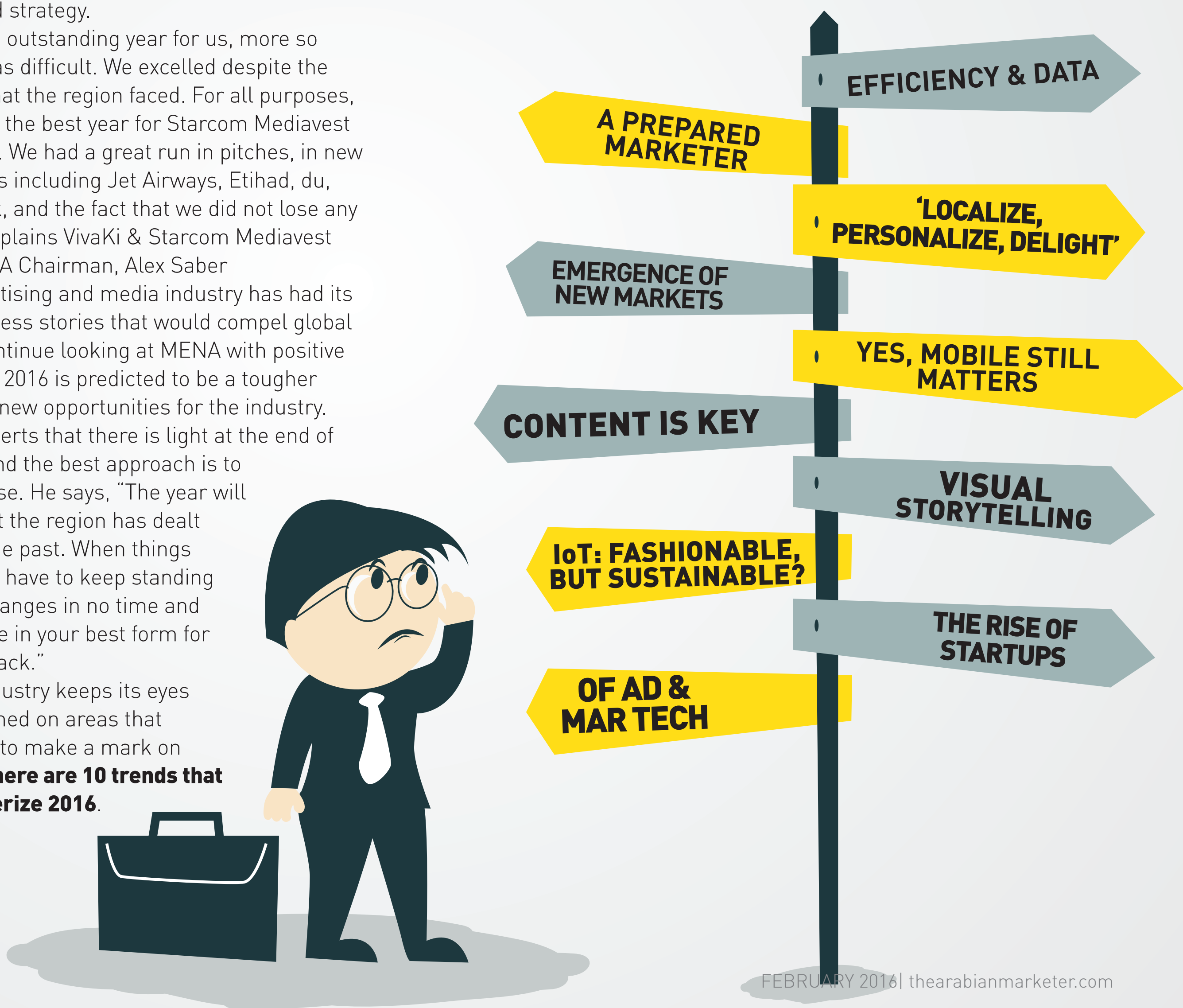
As the industry readies to face the challenges of what has been dubbed a tough year, **Zeba Mahmud**, **Editor-in-Chief, The Arabian Marketer**, highlights 10 trends that marketers will lay special focus on in 2016

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region ended 2015 on what some may call neutral, and others slightly below expectations, growth rate. But not everyone is complaining. The year brought good news to some of the players in the region, reiterating that even tough times in MENA can be dealt with the right approach and strategy.

"It was an outstanding year for us, more so because it was difficult. We excelled despite the challenges that the region faced. For all purposes, 015 has been the best year for Starcom Mediavest Group MENA. We had a great run in pitches, in new business wins including Jet Airways, Etihad, du, Visa, Citibank, and the fact that we did not lose any business," explains VivaKi & Starcom Mediavest Group's MENA Chairman, Alex Saber

The advertising and media industry has had its share of success stories that would compel global players to continue looking at MENA with positive lens. Even as 2016 is predicted to be a tougher year, it holds new opportunities for the industry. Mr Saber asserts that there is light at the end of the tunnel, and the best approach is to stay the course. He says, "The year will be testing but the region has dealt with this in the past. When things go south, you have to keep standing because it changes in no time and you have to be in your best form for the bounce back."

As the industry keeps its eyes and ears trained on areas that will continue to make a mark on consumers, **here are 10 trends that will characterize 2016**.



1. A PREPARED MARKETER

Marketing will change this year, again. Among other reasons, the primary reason for this is because it is expected to. Consumers are evolving, media landscape is shifting and the talk of a downturn does not make it any easier for the marketer. The first reaction would be to say that marketers will be more cautious but the 2008 experience has made them more 'prepared' for 2016. Instead of cutting down spends, marketers are seeking more bang for the buck. This may mean that marketers will tend to take lesser risks but if the 2008 experience is anything to go by, now is the time to invest in 'brand'.

Emphasizing this, Vikram Krishna, Head of Group Marketing & Customer Experience, Emirates NBD says, "There will be strong focus on efficiency and getting more for less. At a time when there are cost challenges and revenue is harder to come by, marketers will have to be more innovative." Among the various steps that marketers are taking for this, the first is asking more from both media and message. Digital media, such as social, has proven that it can connect and engage consumers but marketers are exploring whether it can be monetized. "We have a strong following on social platforms, and with initiatives such as Twitter Pay, social has already become more than just media to a business generating platform," Mr Krishna says.

In creative messaging, brands need to show their human side to consumers. News of slow economy and budget deficits will impact all, injecting skepticism in consumer mindset. "Brands should become community oriented. Companies that look to help people will win hearts and minds, and get more respect," advises Vikram Krishna.

2. EFFICIENCY & DATA

Data will have a primary role to play in the year ahead. The need for precision targeting, relevant messaging and controlling wastage in advertising will be more pronounced in a year when budgets are unlikely to increase. The effectiveness of each campaign will count more. Whether it is online, onscreen or reaching through traditional and new media platforms, the efficacy of an ad campaign will depend on reliable data and insights.

Mr Krishna adds here that simplicity will matter too. "As brand owners, we have to become more open, transparent and simple. In our case specifically, being a financial service, extra efforts have to be made so that customers find it easier to connect with us," he says.

"At a time when there are cost challenges and revenue is harder to come by, marketers will have to be more innovative."

Vikram Krishna

Head of Group Marketing & Customer Experience, Emirates NBD

3. LOCALIZE, PERSONALIZE, DELIGHT

More than ever, consumers have to be a brand's core focus. Adding relevant touch-points, understanding changing consumer behavior and preferences has become imperative. Data has a role to play again to give granular information that brands can use to personalize conversations with consumers.

A strong social connect and personal bond with regional consumers can open up newer consumer segments for brands. Localizing an offer or one-on-one marketing has been the mantra for a while, but it is only now that technology and data analytics for the required framework to achieve this is available to brands.

4. EMERGENCE OF NEW MARKETS

The year will see slowdown in some markets but it will also see the opening up of newer growth markets. With a population of 80 million, and economic sanctions being lifted, Iran is an excellent example. While some feel that the untapped potential of Iran can offset the expected slowdown, logic states that it may not all happen in 2016 itself. "Iran will bring immense potential but the question is when. There are many logistical barriers that are still to be dealt with. It would be wise to set expectations right. Even though Iran can add momentum to the region in terms of business and investment, we do not expect things to change much in the next six to eight months," cautions Mr Saber.

5. CONTENT IS KEY

If there was another overused word after efficiency for the industry at present, it is content. In the year ahead, getting content right will hold much significance in the MENA region. As attracting and retaining consumers becomes more challenging, marketers have been switching budgets from the so-called 'interruption' media to exploring content marketing through owned, earned or paid media. "It is really important for brands to create right content and distribute it correctly. If 2015 was about influencers and bloggers, 2016 will be about 360-degree integration and making sure that we are linking different platforms, making the same piece of content work harder," says Yara Abdullah, Branded Content Unit Manager, MBC.

One may question whether such marketing forms will be impacted in a 'playing it safe' environment. "Economy, politics and current affairs are changing in this part of the world, and they all impact brand and media alike. But the Arab world has become immune to turmoil. We are working around them with resilience," replies Mr Abdullah.

"In every aspect, 2015 has been the best year for Starcom MediaVest Group MENA. We had a great run in pitches, in new business wins including Jet Airways, Etihad, du, Visa, Citibank, and the fact that we did not lose any business."

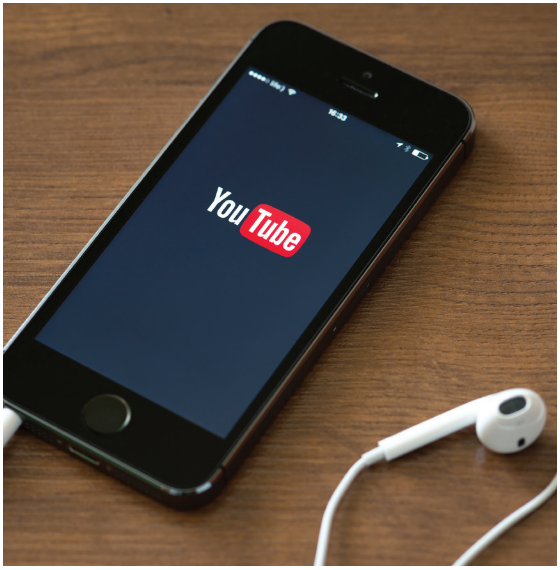
Alex Saber

Chairman MENA, VivaKi & Starcom MediaVest Group

6. YES, MOBILE STILL MATTERS

For the last three years, brands have turned every stone to unlock the power of mobile in marketing. Some have met with more success than others but most continue to include mobile in their plans. According to eMarketer, the Middle East's mobile internet ad spends share is forecasted to hit 8.9 percent of the total global spends by 2017. This is still very low even though consumers spend more time consuming media on mobile phones than any other device.

In the year ahead, mobile will continue to be a huge opportunity for MENA marketers. Mobile has led to further growth for media, specifically social media platforms. The work done by some of these players to connect brands to all markets, including the feature phone markets, in the region has augured positive results. And the Middle East continues to lead mobile and video trends in the region, implying that this is one area marketers cannot cut down, or stagnate, their budgets in.



7. VISUAL STORYTELLING

Linked to the growth of mobile and social media platforms, is the rise of online videos. There will come a time when consumers will buy a brand recommended by a YouTube personality more than by a movie or TV star. Visual storytelling implies using engaging content including videos instead of a conventional banner or display ad to connect with consumers. Some brands are even adding ecommerce options around this to enable sales. The era of user-generated visual storytelling is here as well. As the 'Snapchat generation' comes of age, brands are seeing visual story telling in an all-new light. "We are seeing a definite explosion of video consumption. Our YouTube channel recorded over 10 million views last year. Building on that, we are putting out videos on our services and are using this platform to be more informative, interactive and engaging to our consumers," informs Mr Vikram Krishna.

"Brands should become community oriented. Companies that look to help people will win hearts and minds, and get more respect," Vikram Krishna

"Economy, politics and current affairs are changing in this part of the world, and they all impact brand and media alike. But the Arab world has become immune to turmoil. We are working around them with resilience," Yara Abdullah, MBC

8. IOT: FASHIONABLE, BUT SUSTAINABLE?

Internet of Things (IoT) is yet another subject that brands are working hard to understand better. Brands want to embrace technology and innovation in unprecedented ways but the question remains on whether they are doing so relevantly, and in a manner that will yield long term results. From connected cars and refrigerators to wearable technology, some of the most prominent brands have invested much in this segment already. "Targeting younger generation that is interested in the technology sector is a trend," remarks Mohammed Abdulmagied Seddiqi, VP of Sales & Retail, Ahmed Seddiqi & Sons that is competing with global players in smartwatches.

"Several brands in the watch industry are creating smartwatches using traditional style or iconic models such as Bulgari, Frederique Constant, Tag Heuer and many others. As we see high-end brands embracing the wearable tech trend, there will always be buzz around it. However, when we talk about wearable tech specifically, it has a shorter lifespan. This leaves a question on the future of the industry, especially in a difficult time for the watch industry as a whole," Mr Seddiqi points out, voicing the concern for some players in the segment.

9. OF AD & MAR TECH

Like most markets, MENA also is working towards decoding advertising technology, and ably integrating it into marketing solutions. As programmatic and data gain attention in the region, and play a key role in disrupting the media landscape, they are also faced with various challenges across the ecosystem.

The shift from don't-get-inventory-in-this-space to demand for programmatic has seen a steep rise, specifically so last year. The region still needs answers in video programmatic or growing remarketing beyond just ecommerce players. The mobile internet growth in MENA is posing the dual question of how to crack technology led solutions for marketing, and also who are best placed to do this. Mr Alex Saber states that a major breakthrough in 2015 was programmatic, adding, "Last few years were the years of digital. 2015 was the year of programmatic. It was a slow start. Publishers were really not keen to be on programmatic platforms but things have evolved. 2016 will be even more critical for programmatic and automation."

"When we talk about wearable tech specifically, it has a shorter lifespan. This leaves a question on the future of the industry, especially in a difficult time for the industry as a whole."

Mohammed Abdulmagied Seddiqi
VP of Sales & Retail,
Ahmed Seddiqi & Sons

10. THE RISE OF THE STARTUPS

The mega corporations of today were startups of yesterday. And a very important difference between any slowdown seen in the past and now is the rise of the entrepreneur spirit and the startup culture in the region. Early successes have become large advertisers in some markets bringing in advertising spends that were hitherto missing from the industry. Over the last couple of years, MENA has also emerged as one of the largest startup ecosystems, and in 2016, the startup flavor will continue to attract advertising professionals, as they study an emerging new breed of clients.

In all, despite the tough forecast, 2016 will be a year of opportunities for those who want to seize it, and even if MENA markets do not grow, staying strong in 2016 will bring benefits in the years ahead.

WHAT DOES NOT KILL YOU MAKES YOU STRONGER

In a conversation with **Arabian Marketer's Editor-in-Chief, Zeba Mahmud**, **Samir Ayoub**, until recently the CEO of Mindshare MENA and among the most experienced regional leaders, says that the best way to face a tough year is by learning from past mistakes...

A veteran of the advertising business in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, Samir Ayoub has held the position of Mindshare MENA CEO for 17 years before he decided to resign from the post earlier this year. He continues to be affiliated with Mindshare MENA till July 2016 as its Board Member. In his reign, Mindshare not only grew its product from traditional media planning and buying to newer products and services in areas including data analytics and luxury as alternate revenue streams but also expanded in all markets in the region. Mr Ayoub is confident of the structure Mindshare has created for itself to face the challenges of a tough year, and advises the industry to see downturn as an opportunity to invest.

Will MENA lose its place as a growth market given the economic forecast and political turmoil?

Most international companies perceive MENA as a growth region even though Middle East is facing more than its share of crisis. Falling oil prices, lack of political stability, power struggles and impact of global economy among other factors made 2015 a tough year. 2016 will be even tougher. I am confident that in 2017, the markets will pick up and there will be benefits for all. The downturn is an opportunity to invest. Companies should take the right steps to establish themselves so that they can avail these benefits.

What are some of these steps?

To begin with, it is important to be efficient and well structured across the region, because then the structure can deal with challenges. Mindshare has a very efficient system across the region. We don't have to downsize and we look for opportunities outside the box like data analytics, activation that can add to our revenue streams. Whatever does not kill you makes you stronger. This phase is a good learning experience that is making us stronger.

How do you see the growth in technology impacting the business in 2016?

The fast development in technology is not only affecting consumer's lives but also the way they interact with brands and consume media. Digital is growing at the expense of other media such as print and to some extent, television. When you look at our offering in digital as an agency today versus what we offered three years back, we have tripled headcount, increased investment and attention to cope up with this emerging trend. And digital will continue to evolve at high speed. Three years ago, it was considered niche and today, it is mass. Everyone is online.

What does that lead to?

The growth of social, search, programmatic, display and such is impacting traditional display. Buying banners for the sake of awareness is history because the way people will buy digital cannot be based on leads or acquisitions. Now we have data to track what is performing and what is not. Marketers' view of digital will change moving forward because of accountability and how digital is delivering. Banners on the net will stop and even on social media. Look at the change in social media, for instance. Twitter is more popular in Middle East than Facebook. In future, there will be a question mark on the performance of such social platforms and new platforms will come up.

What is your advice to agencies to make MENA a growth market?

Learn from the mistakes of the past – everyone makes a mistake but the better company is the one that has taken its lessons from it. We have to constantly look at ways to attract and develop clients because that is the only asset we have as an agency. We need to see how to keep the upper hand in competition. It is becoming more important than ever to have credible research data to know what works and what doesn't work when we invest clients' money. Finally, as an industry, we also have to see how we minimize, if not stop, the price fall that is affecting everyone.

EFFICIENCY: A TOUGH YEAR'S HOLY GRAIL

BY **SANA MAHMUD**

The year 2015 was tough for Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and predictions are that 2016 will be even tougher. This comes as the International Monetary Fund reports average economic growth slowing to below 3 percent in the Middle East, with fiscal deficits close to 15 percent. There are always high expectations from the Middle East given the extraordinary story of the region. However given the fact that the region is plugged into the world economy, the effects of global events will be felt here as well.

Stakeholders of the business are gearing up to face the challenges of the year."While there was growth, the level of growth was not up to expectations in 2015. We see the trend continuing in 2016 as well. The global commentary has not changed significantly and China, Russia and Europe are likely to be soft, affecting trade and tourism numbers. Similarly soft oil prices are likely to cause large government projects being slowed down or put on hold," says Satish Mayya, CEO, BPG Maxus.

However, there are those who are not affected as yet by the gloomy situation. Although, funds have been restricted, especially in the advertising sector, this has not impacted companies whose revenues are driven from sources such as premium content or subscriptions. "We had seen good growth in 2015, reassuring us that we are in the right direction. Our primary focus is putting premium content at the forefront of broadcast technology development. This year there will be increased competition with newer players in the region, but we continue to be optimistic," remarks Khulud Abu Homos, EVP, Programming and Creative Services, OSN.

WHY MENA SHOWS HOPE

Opening up of newer markets such as Iran

Countries like UAE and Qatar growing non-oil revenue

Saudi Arabia still going strong

The rise of the startup and entrepreneur culture

Africa continues to show great growth potential

MENA: STILL A GROWTH REGION

Low oil prices, political conflicts and the global economic slowdown make short term prospects of recovery unlikely. Despite this, 2016 will hold opportunities for the industry and the region. This is driven by various factors. The post-Lehmann experience taught that companies that benefitted from the slowdown were those that continued to invest in brand. MENA is becoming a fertile hub of entrepreneurship and startups, creating a strong growth driver. Add to this the opening up of newer markets and revenue streams, and

While there was growth, the level of growth was not up to expectations in 2015. We see the trend continuing in 2016

Satish Mayya

CEO, BPG Maxus

In light of the energy price hikes in Saudi Arabia along with reduction in government subsidies and plans to introduce taxation, the private sector ad spend will drop in 2016

Faysal Zok

Managing Director, Initiative KSA

MENA builds a great argument in its favor.

Shoppers in this part of the world may have less disposable income and would focus on spending on necessities but MENA is the full package. "I would remain buoyant on the region because MENA bounces back," says Ahmed Yahya, New Businesses Development Director, Kelloggs Middle East, Africa and Mediterranean, adding, "It is a world of its own with every kind of market –developed markets like the UAE, developing markets such as Saudi Arabia and emerging markets including Iraq and Iran. You have the whole gambit here. Brands that want to succeed need to weather the storm. Let's not walk away from long term strategies because in any case, brands are not built overnight."

Sitting with a population of 80 million, Iran is double the size of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council). This implies that as a marketer even if Iran came into the mix, half way into the year, it will give the same number of consumers of a full year of GCC.

EFFICIENCY, EFFICIENCY, EFFICIENCY

If there was one prominent word that every marketer would focus on in the year, it is efficiency. Whether it is about spending ad dollars, building new initiatives and programs or the typical digital versus conventional media debate, all strategies will have to be driven by efficiency. "We, as an industry, and in equal amount our ad dollars, need to work harder in the year. The only way we can make that happen is by upping our focus on efficiency," Mr Yahya observes.

Marketing budgets are expected to be constricted this year, and the solution is getting the best out of the situation by exploring newer opportunities amid challenges. "Budget constraint would lead to exploring newer avenues such as digital that will come at a lesser cost but would need a more innovative approach. We must look at this as an opportunity and craft solutions that will increase returns without necessarily increasing investments. This kind of a mindset would essentially achieve three things – make the ad dollar work harder, help the finance team in getting some savings and thirdly, it will bring learnings we may have missed on otherwise," Mr Yahya states.

UNWISE TO UNDERESTIMATE KSA

The impact of the oil price fall is expected to climax in 2016, with monetary authorities in Saudi Arabia specifically starting to revise fiscal policies. This is likely to have a direct negative short term effect as it will influence consumer spending due to reduced disposable income in conjunction with higher energy rates. "In light of the energy price hikes in Saudi Arabia that were announced during the Saudi Arabian budget for 2016, along with a gradual reduction in government subsidies over the next five years and the plans to introduce VAT and taxation on items such as cigarettes and soft drinks, the private sector ad spend will further drop in 2016," explains Faysal Zok, Managing Director, Initiative KSA.

However, Saudi Arabia has shown growth despite the drop in oil prices over the last few years. There is precedent where point-of-sale (POS) spending increased when gasoline prices fell in 2006 and decreased with Saudi-ization, and the end of the amnesty program for expats, introduced in 2012.

I would remain buoyant on the region because MENA always bounces back

Ahmed Yahya

New Businesses Development Director, Kelloggs Middle East, Africa and Mediterranean

"In the private sector, expectations are that telecom and banking will not be impacted directly, as the effects on these will be dependent on the ability of each company to pass-on the additional costs to consumers. On the other hand, public sector ad spending may well maintain 2015 figures, driven by high government support for sectors such as education (20 percent of the budget and at the top following defense), health and social affairs (12.5 percent of the budget), and water, agriculture and manufacturing (9 percent of the budget). These are all sectors that have recorded considerable ad spend amounts in the past few years and show a potential to hold that support in 2016," argues Mr Zok.

This year too, Saudi Arabia, that has the largest economy in the GCC, is pursuing a fiscal adjustment strategy centered on efficiency and viability. The 2016 budget gives special focus on long term sustainable development. Lower subsidies and introducing new fees that will allow the economy to mitigate the impact of low oil prices, increase efficiencies and create globally competitive industries. "In 2015, Saudi's non-oil revenue contributed 27 percent of total revenue versus 10 percent in 2014, recording a 36 percent growth. We believe this trend will continue, reflecting the government's commitment to diversifying and enhancing productivity," Mr Zok asserts, reiterating that Saudi Arabia will continue to be an important growth market in the region.

SIX REASONS WHY SAUDI MATTERS

Private sector companies such as in telecom & banking expected to be shielded

High government support for sectors such as Education (20% of budget)

Health & social affairs (12.5% of budget)

Water, agriculture & manufacturing (9% of budget)

In 2015, Saudi's non-oil revenue recorded 36% growth over 2014

Government shows commitment to diversifying & enhancing productivity

A PREPARED REGION

There is no denying that the broader international economic environment will remain volatile this year, mostly with emerging markets adjusting to the normalization of US monetary policies. Nonetheless, despite the economic turbulence, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE are still among the lowest countries in terms of the ratio of debt to GDP, with KSA at 5.8 percent, the UAE at 16.7 percent and Qatar at 31.5 percent, compared with 60 percent for countries such as India, France, Germany and the USA.

For the Middle East, political turmoil and oil price drops have become a norm. The region has learnt to work around these challenges over the years. The strategic planning for a sustainable development by the GCC governments is likely to give the much needed boost to the region for the challenging year ahead.

WITH GREAT CHALLENGES COMES GREAT CREATIVITY

TAREK MIKNAS
CEO, FP7/MENA

It goes without saying that this year has been one of the hardest for our industry in this region. And the outlook for 2016 and 2017 is predicted to be just as tough, if not more. We're a part of the world that is heavily dependent on the success of the world economies. The slowdown in Asia hurts. China, Brazil, India and Russia, along with other emerging markets faltering, also hurts. A refugee crisis in Europe that questions the sustainability of a modest recovery in a scarred Europe (still suffering from high unemployment and high public debt), hurts too. Especially that the refugees that get into Europe are only a fraction of those that enter some of our 'more stable markets'. Finally, the forecast of a 2.4 percent economic growth rate in the US suggests that 'flat is the new up' as Money Watch quoted in its September issue. A little more hurt.

To compound this, in the Middle East, most of our income is from oil. And although the GCC has made huge strides to diversify the economy, a drop in oil prices quickly translates to a further dent in our growth, and the concept of 'flat is the new up' becomes one that we share. GCC governments are putting major projects on halt, and using their buffers carefully, to tread water hoping that things will return back to the USD100-a-barrel days.

All that aside, there's that silly every day stuff that is happening across our part of the world – a war in Yemen, lack of a Government in Lebanon, a 'little' tit for tat in Iraq and Syria, a spray of bronzed bullets on the beaches of Tunis, a plane taken down over Egypt, and all that sort of never-ending Middle East stuff that discourages business and confidence. Yet, with all of that said, I wouldn't be representing my industry well if I believed that all was doom and gloom. I'm as positive as ever and probably it's the mix of unforgiving optimism and conscious deliberate naivety that keeps me going.

The truth is, that the harder the planet is challenged economically and politically, and the harder our part of the planet is hit, the greater the need for creativity. Great creativity is a direct result of solving a great problem. We'll need to apply great creative thinking to keep our business moving forward, and focus our efforts on solving the ever-increasing challenges faced by our clients. I'm not saying that 2016 will be the year that our shareholders celebrate our financial performance, But 2016 will be a year where we see some brilliant creativity as an outcome of many 'big problems'. We'll see unique thinking, a lot of experimentation in the digital space, many small bets placed that just might yield high returns, and set new standards.

The other thing that we're bound to experience is the fact that marketers will put greater focus on effectiveness. Marketers are always under pressure to demonstrate results. And again, in the hardest of times, unless marketers demonstrate the value of any investment that they make, business owners, who are always under pressure to deliver numbers, will start to pull funding. This will force marketers to seek short term results before considering long term impact. And that's alright. Those will provide us with the quick wins that we will need to realize the longer term ambitions.

As George Lois, an infamous industry veteran says, "Creativity can solve almost any problem. The creative act, the defeat of habit by originality, overcomes everything."

THE RISE OF THE MOBILE FIRST USER

Young people across the world's largest advertising markets will spend more time accessing the internet via mobile than via all other devices combined by 2018. This is the key finding from a global insight study into changes in mobile behavior conducted by ZenithOptimedia and GlobalWebIndex, indicating the high growth rate of mobile first users, defined as those with 90 percent internet access via mobile handsets. Stefan Bardega, Chief Digital Officer, ZenithOptimedia, comments, "In just three years' time mobile will outstrip all other digital devices combined when it comes to young people share of internet time. This has profound implications for marketers, many of which will need to accelerate their mobile programmes to keep pace with the rapid consumer adoption of mobile."

10 POINTS THAT DEFINE MOBILE FIRST USERS

Within 3 years, 16-24 year-olds across 34 markets will spend more time accessing the internet via mobile than via all other devices combined

Mexico and Saudi Arabia have already reached this tipping point

41% **of mobile first users are from the 16-24 age group**

Another 31% of mobile first users are aged between 25 and 34

Middle East leads markets with highest mobile first users (KSA - 11% & UAE - 8%)

The most popular mobile web activity for mobile first users is social networking

23% **said they had bought a product via mobile in the last month**

Mobile first users, on average, spend 3.59 hours per day, on mobile

63% **of mobile first users live in urban environments**

This is followed by checking the weather (38%) & watching online video (22%)

50% OF MARKETERS' TOP CONCERNS REVOLVE ON MAR-TECH

Advertising and marketing technology will continue to be an area of high interest for marketers in the year ahead. Many technology trends are predicted to transform businesses in 2016 and beyond. The fact that five out of 10 World Federation of Advertisers (WFA) predictions for 2016 are around the impact of technology is yet another indication of the focus that mar-tech will hold for industry' stakeholders. **Arabian Marketer's Kiran Kidwai** takes a quick look at some of WFA's things to watch out for:

#1 Ad-Blockalypse Now?

By June 2015, almost 200 million internet users around the world are estimated to be using ad blocking technology. Evidence indicating the motivations for the use of ad blocking are starting to emerge; it paints a concerning picture of ad blockers as a one-stop-solution to people's online concerns.

#2 Ad Fraud, A Rising Tide?

In 2016, the impact of ad fraud will be high on marketers agenda as they seek to reduce its capacity to whittle away their media spend. A WFA survey found that more than 30% of digital budgets are consumed by fraud and other studies have claimed that global advertisers lost USD 6.3bn to bots in 2015.

#3 Viewability, When The Eye Doesn't See:

At present impressions that are only 70% viewable can be sold as 'premium'. There will be increased pressure to reform the standard definitions for viewability and create measures with much greater integrity in this area.

#4 Capabilities, Taking Tasks In-House:

Marketers will look to their own teams and those of their agency partners to ensure they have the ability to operate in today's data-led environment. Marketers will seek to develop internal marketing resource, particularly in areas including programmatic, ecommerce and CRM.

#5 Content Generation: A Growing Concern

As the marketing cliché has it, content has always been king. However, its growing importance means it has been met with some trepidation from the marketing community. Successfully creating, amplifying and distributing content will continue to be high on marketers' priorities.

KEEP THE CREATIVITY ALIVE: MENA'S GUNN SCOREBOARD

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has done well in the year gone, especially in context to winning accolades on local, regional and global stages. The UAE and Lebanon in particular have stood out in consolidated award rankings 'The Gunn Report'. The Gunn Report essentially measures various award platforms to provide a single listing of the most awarded agencies, campaigns and individuals.

TOP HIGHLIGHTS FOR 2015 FOR THE REGION:

UAE ranked #14 Most Awarded Countries (previous best was #13 in 2014)

Lebanon makes it into the 25 Most Awarded Countries in the World League Table for the first time Ranked #20 (previous best was joint #26 in 2012)

Leo Burnett (Beirut) ranked equal #18 Most Awarded Agencies in the World. The first time the agency has been ranked in this league table

Johnnie Walker 'Keep The Flame Alive' by Leo Burnett (Beirut) ranked #17 Most Awarded Digital ad in the World and ranked #28 Most Awarded All Gunns Blazing

Du Communications 'Too Depressing', 'Too Complicated' campaign by Leo Burnett (Dubai) ranked #33 Most Awarded Commercials in the World

Ali Ali (Egypt, UAE) ranked equal #18 Most Awarded Director in the World

Most Awarded Agencies in UAE

#	Agency	Film	Print	Digital	AGB	Total
1	Impact BBDO Dubai	3	2	1	2	8
1	Memac Ogilvy Dubai	3	1	2	2	8
3	Leo Burnett Dubai	4	1	0	0	5
4	FP7/DXB Dubai	0	1	0	3	4
4	J. Walter Thompson Dubai	1	2	1	0	4
4	Y&R Dubai	0	2	0	2	4

Most Awarded Agencies in Lebanon

#	Agency	Film	Print	Digital	AGB	Total
1	Leo Burnett (Beirut)	2	2	7	9	20
2	Republique (Beirut)	0	0	2	0	2
3	Impact BBDO (Beirut)	0	0	1	0	1
3	J. Walter Thompson (Beirut)	0	0	1	0	1

"All in all 2015 will go down as a very good year with loads of wonderful new work, particularly it seems in All Gunns Blazing and Out of Home. A healthy mixture of consistency – with previous winners proving their greatness again – and surprises – with new and future stars making their moves up the tables," says Donald Gunn.

WHY ICFLIX LOOKS TO FOCUS ON LOCAL & ORIGINAL

The online streaming market in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region promises to be an interesting area to watch out as the region shows strong consumption for online videos. Earlier in the year, local players rolled up their sleeves to face increased competition as international players such as Netflix made way into the region. **Arabian Marketer's Senior Correspondent Asma Wangde** caught up with **Carlos Tibi**, CEO, Icflix, a streaming platform that provides services throughout the world, to understand how online streaming will shape up and some of the challenges ahead for similar companies. Excerpts:

On How 2015 Fared For Icflix & 2016 Plans...

One of our great achievements for 2015 was our in-house Jazwood (Arabic) co-production for example 'Alf Leila we Leila' that was launched over the Ramadan period. This was followed by our first animated TV series, 'Dunia', introducing the first Arabian teen female superhero. For our expansion growth for 2016, we will be concentrating on our productions from Morocco. Another achievement for Icflix was the expansion of our native app on devices such as PS4, Android TV and Roku set top boxes. Icflix is now available on more than 12,000+ devices.

On Online Video Trends In The Region...

The OTT (over the top) landscape has grown rapidly. The number of connected devices such as tablets and smart TVs is fueling the demand for OTT because consumers love the convenience and accessibility of being able to watch what they want, when they want and where they want. With infrastructure improving and internet speeds picking up, people want high quality video on any device and a seamless experience that carries across all their devices. Also with mobile devices readily available and extremely intelligent to stream content, and with the screens becoming larger with every new release from the major mobile manufacturers, consumers are more inclined to leverage their devices as their personal video viewing instruments. As a result, we are seeing a big jump on access from mobile devices.

On Challenges Ahead...

English subtitling for Arabic productions is still a challenge to us because prior to 2013, the Egyptian distributors did not have a post-production time coded script for subtitling services, which makes it difficult to make subtitles for older films. We are doing a lot of research to ensure that we can deliver 4k streaming at the lowest possible bandwidth without interrupting the quality. Providing a technical solution to deliver our content in the best quality, at the lowest bandwidth, in a way that is very usable and exciting for the user is our ever-present challenge. Another challenge at the start was the localization of payment gateways. However we developed our own payment gateway to address the local markets across the MENA region. We faced problems in the past in securing content deals because some entertainment

providers in the region would buy outright output deals from the major studios so no one else could get rights to the content. However, the situation is changing slowly and hopefully the studios will realize that they are locking their content from propagating for more viewers.

On Icflix' Evolving Business Model...

Our business model has also evolved to offer pay-per-view alongside subscription because of the demand for latest content straight after its cinematic release. The PPV offering will in turn also help tackle the issues of piracy and illegal downloading in the region. Icflix also has strategic partnerships in place with telecom operators by becoming their video-on-demand arm for them and for Icflix to be able to leverage infrastructure for localized billing purposes. This also gives telecom operators another opportunity to increase the ARPU (average revenue per user) for data consumption and makes legal streaming available to a wide audience.

On The Arabic Focus For MENA...

Our prime focus currently is original Arabic productions. There is a constant demand for local content. With Icflix venturing into original productions, we want to ensure that we cater to the needs of the local market and provide filmmakers a platform and opportunity to express their art and creativity and allow them to grow and exist in the market. We are working on number of productions in Morocco, a new TV show titled 'Familia' for 2016. We are also co-producing 'Burn Out' with director Noureddine Lakhmari, which will be final installment of the trilogy following 'Casanegra' and 'Zero' as well as the movie, 'Come Back', which will be the first movie to tackle the Daesh problem and its ramifications on the Arab community living both abroad and in MENA.

On Differentiation From Competition...

We differentiate ourselves by the content we offer to our users. For example, we are the only VOD (video on demand) service to offer Hollywood, Jazwood and Bollywood on a single platform service. Also our focus on original production does not only differentiate Icflix as a brand but also helps to enhance Arab content production. This enables Icflix to become the only place for viewers to watch original content.

STARTUPS

TO WATCH OUT FOR IN 2016

As the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region begins to encourage young minds to become their own bosses, **Arabian Marketer's Group Editor MENA, Sana Mahmud**, begins a series on the startups to watch out for in the region

The entrepreneur bug has bitten the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and how. No matter how one looks at it, the rise of startups spells good news for all involved, including stakeholders in the advertising and media business. Eventually, as these young entrepreneurs grow and look to make their mark, they will turn to advertising and branding experts to be guided on growing their brand awareness and identity. In some of the markets, startups are already spending more than conventional advertisers, injecting new advertising revenues into the system. MENA is expected to head in the same direction.

The set up of AstroLabs, in partnership with Google for Entrepreneurs, in Dubai was among the clear signals that the region is ready for younger talent to branch out on their own, giving life to new and disruptive ideas. At the time of the launch of AstroLabs, the founding partners, Mohammed Mekki and Louis Lebbos, had asserted on the importance of not only fostering startups in a market like the Middle East but also in facilitating cross market learnings.

"The attraction of Dubai as an international startup hub is definitely growing. We witness this every day with applications from global startups who want to access the emerging markets from their base at AstroLabs. We are also working on increasing this profile by holding the Google For Entrepreneurs Exchange program, hosting 12 travel technology startups from across the world and introducing them to the leaders of the travel industry in Dubai," Mr Lebbos had said.

However, as more of such companies come to play, it is also important to identify those winning trends and ideas that have the potential to truly standout. In this first edition of startups to watch out for, there is a mix of MENA borne companies and those who have opened up shop in MENA alongside their home markets.

CLASSDIVE

Founder:
Avin Shahani
HQ: **UAE**
Headcount: **3**
Founded in
December 2015

"Being a geek at heart, I researched on the new trending fitness crazes and one caught my eye. ClassDive was born."

Need Gap ClassDive Addresses:
People want more options. Traditional fitness memberships do not suit the requirement of many. ClassDive offers a flexible commitment free fitness membership that allows access to all the studios in Dubai, and soon Abu Dhabi.

Company's Business Model:
ClassDive offers fitness membership costing AED 399 per month. The membership allows people to book an unlimited amount of classes on our platform. Once booked, the user has to just show up at the class at the given studio. At present, ClassDive has over 45 studios in Dubai for classes on yoga, pilates, cross fit, or even dance.

Marketing Strategy in the UAE
While ClassDive has followed a combination of media, the most successful has been Instagram, events and meetups.

LIMITLINES

Founders:
Ehson Sinaki & Arash Jalali
HQ: **Dubai, UAE**
Headcount: **15**
Nine Months Old

LIMITLINES

"Being active in the startup scene for the past three years as founders of our startup Acopio, we realized that the digital illustration and vision that we had in our mind was not what designers could present. As we engaged some of the brightest digital designers, we also noticed a gap in the UAE and other markets in the way digital companies were branding themselves. That's when we saw the opportunity."

Need Gap Limitlines Addresses
There are primarily two sides of the spectrum in the digital branding industry – the big marketing agencies that charge a premium or the lower end agencies that can develop web platforms with pocket change. Either side is not sustainable. Limitlines addresses needs with a creative and innovative design that is done from scratch and uniquely develops for that company's brand identity at good pricing.

Successes So Far
Both founders are on the committee of the CSS Design Awards, a global digital design judging panel. Limitlines offers its services with clients from Los Angeles in USA to Guangzhou in China.

NUTRITION SOUQ

Founder:
Damian Brennan & Alex Pascoe
HQ: **UAE**
Headcount: **2 full time, 10 part time**
Founded in **Apr 2015**

"Our goal is to take the fitness and nutrition industry online. The lightbulb moment came after visiting a nutritionist and being recommend a range of sport supplements and snacks but no clear answer on where to buy the products. That was when the seed of the idea - to create a marketplace where professionals could recommend products and then provide home delivery options - was planted."

Need Gap Nutrition Souq Addresses

The UAE fitness market has grown at 15 percent, yet the online fitness market is almost non-existent. With the fast growing ecommerce, it's the perfect time to combine online with health & fitness in the GCC.

Successes So Far

Nutrition Souq has crossed 32000 followers on Facebook. It has developed content and strategic partnerships. The startup has launched an online store and has signed-up trainers, gyms and a bootcamp, building customized fitness bundles.

Business Model Of The Company

The business model revolves around the online store. We will also generate revenue from featured listings on the site, offering online membership and so on.

Marketing Strategies In The UAE

Nutrition Souq aims to be at the top of the funnel when anyone searches online for health, fitness or nutrition in the UAE.

EXCLUSIVE TABLES

Founder:
Chris Bergman
Co-Founders: **Neels Steyn & Hector Frigola**
HQ: **UAE**
Headcount: **8**
Founded in March 2014


Chris Bergman

"Exclusive Tables was formed out of pure frustration with the inefficient and opaque process in making table reservations at high-end restaurants and nightlife venues, coupled with the experience of the night out being tainted by further inefficiencies/ low-satisfaction touch-points before, during and after the night out."

Need Gap Exclusive Tables Addresses

Exclusive Tables helps restaurant and nightlife venues fill tables, guarantee guests show up and improve holistic guest experiences. It helps guests discover their next night out and simplify the booking and payment processes. Its overall mission is to improve guest satisfaction.

Successes So Far

Exclusive Tables has partnered with more than 40 premium venues where users can place bookings directly through the app. After launching in Dubai, the company is eyeing Barcelona and Ibiza as next markets.

Business Model Of The Company

Exclusive Tables charges the venue a service fee for securing a reservation.

Marketing Strategies In the UAE

The company has used online as primary marketing medium with Facebook ads, content writing (blogs and social media) and Google Adwords.

JUSTMOP

Founders:
Kerem Kuyucu & Ali Cagatay Ozcan
HQ: **UAE**
Headcount: **6**
15 Months Old

JUSTMOP


Kerem Kuyucu

"We had a dream of starting up a company together since 2012, the moment when we witnessed Rocket Internet Turkey shut down. We were unprepared and heartbroken but we always look for positive tidings. When Rocket Internet announced it was shutting down, we thought it was a sign for us to do something on our own."

Need Gap JustMop Addresses

JustMop helps users find a good service provider in first trial and guarantees assigning the same crew on a regular basis. Cleaning companies take an average of two and a half years to sustainably utilize 90 percent of its staff. JustMop not only helps them get fully booked but has also built an online CRM and a one-stop platform for tackling technological requisites.

Successes So Far

The company is growing at an average rate of 20% since launch.

Business Model Of The Company

It has a commission-based revenue model. It charges cleaning company partners a service fee for every cleaning session.

Marketing Strategies In The UAE

Data is important for JustMop so that it can measure and optimize. It prioritizes digital marketing channels. Google Search Network, Facebook and Instagram have been main sources. It also advertises on online communities but the key driver has been word of mouth.

BUZZKITO

Founder:
El Mehdi Benslim
HQ: **Morocco**
Headcount: **40 in Morocco, 2 in Dubai**
Two Years Old

Buzzkito Network

"Before establishing the main office in Dubai a month ago to expand activities in the GCC region and Africa, Buzzkito Network stands as one of the leading companies in the digital industry, which focuses on short content video production and distribution within the Maghreb region. Great interest was shown by our top management to establish an office in Dubai in order to address the lack of digital content for companies."

Need Gap Buzzkito Addresses

Buzzkito Network has developed an expertise in native ads with a digital brand-centric approach.

Successes So Far

Since arriving in Dubai a month ago, Buzzkito has been well received by the media and advertising agencies. It has also undertaken negotiation for fundraising in Dubai.

Business Model Of The Company

Buzzkito Network operates in multi platforms allowing it to manage all processes in-house. The content is produced in its Casablanca studio so it can deliver high quality format at a very competitive price. Its services come as a package with guaranteed KPIs.

Marketing Strategy In The UAE

Buzzkito publishes branded and non-branded digital content to boost its awareness in the GCC. To date, 80 percent of its audience is dispatched within the GCC region with a focus on KSA.

ABWEB

Founder:
Taher Alami
HQ: **Morocco**
Headcount: **32**

"I was always passionate about internet. I started 19 years ago and it took me only one year to realize back then that I needed to be a producer and not a consumer on internet. Two years after, I created my first company. And here we are today, with a dozen of internet startups. My focus today is on two of them - Abweb as a 360-degree digital agency for MENA and eMailDude.net as its latest SaaS project."

Need Gap That Abweb Addresses

Various global brands need local agencies for web marketing and branded content in the MENA region. Abweb's teams are able to manage communities in Middle East and Africa, in Arabic, French, English and Spanish, creating local content and ideas that make a difference to brands.

Marketing Strategy In The UAE

Having worked for brands such as Sony, Frico and Europcar, all of Abweb's marketing is online based on some advertising and social media.

EFFILAB

Associate Director: Middle East & Africa: **Timothée Désormeaux**
HQ: **France**
No. of people employed: **40**
Four Years Old

"In 2011, digital ad budgets were booming and online advertising markets were progressively converging towards functioning of the financial market. Prices were changing in real time based on offer and demand, and bidding strategies were replacing fixed price strategies. Traditional agencies had trouble addressing this completely new paradigm in the industry."

Need Gap Effilab Addresses

Online advertising is shifting from creative skills to analytical. The two original founders of Effilab decided to gather a team of ex-analysts from the finance and consulting industry to design data-driven strategies and create advertising accounts led by data-based decisions. The company realized that the functioning of online advertising markets has become even more challenging and requires dedicated skills to perform. This is where Effilab comes in.

Successes So Far

Effilab manages more than USD 50 million/year for more than 200 customers around the world. The company just opened a new branch in Sydney.

Business Model Of The Company

Effilab charges commission on the budgets it manages.

Marketing Strategy In The UAE

Effilab has so far relied on word of mouth, leveraging on its experience in the European market, in specific verticals such as ecommerce or classified ads.

INFOTRUST

Regional Managing Director MENA – **Amin Shawki**
HQ: **USA**
Headcount: **30**
Six Years Old

"The investment in digital marketing is growing as consumers are increasingly connecting to brands online. One part of marketing that will never change is the need for measurement. Digital marketing allows for robust and deep data collection but organizations are still struggling with the complexities of setting up a measurement strategy. Organizations were making marketing decisions based on gut-feel with no data to back up investments."

Need Gap Infotrust Addresses

InfoTrust helps organizations bridge the gap between marketing and data technology to allow for data-driven marketing. Beyond understanding what channels are effective, who consumers are and how they interact with brands online, InfoTrust's looks to help organizations use data to power marketing efforts automatically.

Business Model Of The Company

InfoTrust is a consulting company that works with clients on monthly retainers to help drive analytics innovation and develop measurement strategies. It operates in the USA and UAE, but services global clients. InfoTrust also has self-service SaaS products that aid in deploying accurate and insightful measurement strategy across organizations.

Marketing Strategy In The UAE

The main strategy for InfoTrust in UAE is education. InfoTrust also publishes blog posts, whitepapers and other free content to share its best practices.

INKIN

Formed with
5 co-founders
HQ: **Yerevan, Armenia**
Headcount: **5**
Founded in
November 2014

"We created inKin because we realized that people who use different fitness trackers couldn't view each other's results and achievements, and challenge and compete with each other. Users would have to either buy fitness wearables that their friends were already using, or convince them to switch to the preferred brand, which is even harder."

Need Gap inKin Addresses

The inKin Social Fitness Platform is a free service that allows you to connect with friends, relatives and coworkers with different fitness devices and apps. It currently supports Fitbit, Jawbone, Garmin, Microsoft Band, Misfit, Withings, iHealth, Lumo, and The Moves app, with more apps and devices to be integrated by the end of 2016. inKin's mission has been to motivate and inspire users to start on a journey towards a healthier life - all the while socializing with friends and family.

Business Model Of The Company

inKin is building a paid corporate solution for companies of different sizes to engage staff in a healthier lifestyle. Soon, users will also be able to enjoy benefits such as prizes, discounts and deals as they increase their daily step count.

Marketing Strategy In The UAE

inKin is a global platform that considers UAE as one of its markets.

*AM Unicorns is a dedicated Arabian Marketer effort to celebrate startups in MENA

AT THE HEART OF ANY GOOD WORK, IS A GREAT IDEA

Arabian Marketer's **Sana Mahmud** catches up with Grey MENA's Chief Creative Officer **Mike Shackle** on the creative values he looks to bring to the agency

"At the heart of any good work, is a great idea," Mike Shackle, Grey MENA's recently appointed Chief Creative Officer, made this comment while pointing at the price that creativity has to at times pay in the craze for 'viral' videos. "Creativity takes a backseat in videos sometimes, when the only aim is to make it viral. We forget the very fundamental that you need a great idea that will attract and retain people's attention," comments Mr. Shackle.

He explains that good work resonates at an emotional level with audiences. The basic human nature thrives around the same set of emotions. Creative professionals have to equip themselves with the ability to create work that can touch the right emotional chord, while communicating the brand message.

It is this guiding principle that he has based Grey MENA's way forward on. More than six months in his new role now, Mr. Shackle informs that the ambition is to build a world class agency, and this has been one of reasons why he joined the Grey group.

"I did my bit of research in the region before accepting this job," he quips, adding, "I loved Grey as a network because there really is no other agency that stays with the moment, the way Grey does. The manner in which Grey has turned around the business and carved out creativity at the heart of everything it does is the opportunity that excited me."

Needless to say that on top of his priorities is great work, and hence the purity of an idea. "I am old-fashioned. I believe in the purity of an idea. The great thing about advertising is that there are so many different channels and ways that you can communicate with people. The most exciting part of the day is to see it all come together at the agency," he remarks.

From his initial experience of the region, Mr. Shackle highlighted some of the work that markets such as Beirut are producing. "While Dubai is doing some amazing work, Beirut is ahead of the other regions. Every year, we see incredible work coming out from the region in various regional and global platforms," he pointed out.

And can the sexiness of technology take away from the purity of idea? Mr. Shackle is of the opinion that people too close to the business can sometimes over think what they can do with newer channels such as social media. You need to first understand, and then make sense to others of what you are communicating on behalf of the brand. It does not mean you can just go crashing on social media. Technology and mediums have been empowered and can be enablers however, it cannot take away from the fundamentals of doing good creative work, and it will serve us well to remember that," he sums up.

CATERING TO A DIGITAL CROWD

GREG YOUNG
CEO, OOREDOO OMAN

The MENA region is experiencing an upsurge in connectivity and social media interaction with more than 113 million internet users in the region. This has resulted in a push for operators to become more digitally focused to meet customer needs. The move to a more digitally focused business model will bring change to the customer experience and the way it is delivered and received. Supply chains will also be transformed, with digital markets being increasingly used to buy and sell products. This presents the industry with an important opportunity to embrace change and develop a digital model to reach out to customers or take the risk of being left behind.

At Ooredoo, we have pushed forward with efforts to harness changes in the market and as a result have led the way in catering to the digital crowd with the development of apps, products, and services that speak to their needs. The digital age has arrived and on our part, digital disruption has only served to drive our innovation.

In all aspects, 2015 had exceeded our expectations. Beginning only months after we rebranded, 2015 proved to be a year in which we performed better than ever. From a customer experience viewpoint, the changes brought about by the rebrand have been nothing short of inspiring. More products and services tailor-made to meet the needs of our users were launched and the payoff has been substantial.

The company's revenues for the first nine months of 2015 grew by 12.4 percent to OMR 186.8 million compared with OMR 166.2 million in 2014. This growth continues to be driven by increases in both mobile and fixed data revenue streams. Our customer base also went skyward, rising by 10 percent compared to the same period of 2014.

As an industry, we took a big step forward when we completed our 5,500 kilometer national fiber backbone. The conclusion of this project signified the dawn of a new era in Oman's telecommunications, one where we are able to keep up-to-date with emerging technologies from around the world, and deliver a host of socioeconomic benefits. It also meant that Oman is no longer dependent on just a single fiber network, bringing huge benefits to the country in terms of security, dependability and attractiveness to large international businesses as well as government organizations and established businesses. This will be a gateway to more efficient network solutions for consumers, SMEs, and corporations.

The year gone was remarkable and we expect our growth to continue, delivering even more data driven services to support the evolving needs of our customers. We remain committed to grow and focus on our business services, providing cutting edge and unique offerings to business customers of all sizes. We will also continue with the final phase of our network modernization program, the delivery of cutting-edge technologies and products, in addition to inspiring services designed to reach out to customers and businesses, no matter where they are in Oman.

2016: NOT TOO HIGH, NOT TOO LOW

IMAD EL CHOUEIRI
MANAGING DIRECTOR,
GROUP PLUS GCC

We battled with all kinds of growth rates for 2015. The year was a great improvement over 2014 in terms of overall figures, but every quarter was a different story. It started off acceptable as Q1 was average, and Q2 was much better but Q3 was low and Q4 was below expectations. The economic challenges surrounding us continued to affect budget in the advertising business.

This was also true for the international spending in the market even though these marketers have more to deal with. Some of the big spenders in region are not just affected by the dynamics of region but also the play of global economies and related factors. Given all this, 2015 closed with some stagnation but it was much better than the years before.

In the out of home business in the region, the key growth driver continues to be about being in the right locations. For any player, it is imperative to be in prime locations and supplement that with good service. That is one of the reasons why the prominent players in the region are attracting good spending from clients and agencies. From a MENA viewpoint, while we have seen opportunities in Africa but the structure and legal framework is not clear, and hence risk prone. The markets in Middle East are still some of the biggest OOH markets, one of the biggest spenders being the KSA followed by UAE, Bahrain and Lebanon.

> In many ways, the last quarter of 2015 is an indicator of how things will be in 2016, which means a steady year without any big jump

The strategy we adopted in the year, and much of it will be followed in 2016, was about acquiring new locations. We pitched and won few tenders. We added newer kinds of inventories such as lampposts and other kinds of street furniture. We added 3D scaffolding to the mix as well. However, in all that, I would say we benefitted from leveraging the growth trends that digital media such as LED screens have to offer. We have won a 10-year contract across Dubai Mall and International Financial District, which was a highlight for us in the year. The area is booming and we are expecting that it will become one of the most visited sites in Dubai.

In many ways, the last quarter of 2015 is an indicator of how things will be in 2016. Based on this, we are not expecting 2016 to be much better than 2015 on the whole. There will be growth and downturn spurts but we are budgeting that 2016 will be almost similar to 2015. That means that it will not be too bad and we should not expect a big jump either. It will be mostly similar, so if we plan well, the year will hold us in good stead.

THE 7 PILLARS TO SMART CONTENT

CARLA DABIS
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR
AT LIQUIDTHREAD

Content Marketing has come quite far for a new communication tool. A quick search throws over 300M results for content marketing. But what is content marketing? Remove the fancy marketing jargon from the equation, and it is stuff people want to see. Millennials consume almost 18 hours of content a day, implying that they are either sleeping or consuming content. In those 18 hours, they are bombarded with over 5,000 different pieces of content, yet only 12 make an impression, which is where our seven pillars to smart content come into play.

The first of our seven pillars is shareability. This is potentially the biggest reason we create content. Most campaigns are measured according to likes, shares and comments. The ALS Ice Bucket Challenge is a great case study to understand how the power of a cause created one of the most viral campaigns ever made.

Useful is the next pillar of smart content; the least exciting but perhaps the most important. Some brands entertain, others should be useful if they have to add value beyond engagement.

Perhaps the most used word in content creation, and our third pillar, is storytelling. We have been listening to and telling stories since we were children. Every brand has a narrative and this is the single best way to connect with audiences.

With all the various new social platforms popping up, it's become increasingly important to customize for audience and distribution. A great example is the campaign 'Dumb Ways to Die', which addressed a seemingly boring topic about train safety to millennials. It is equally important to be tailor made for the medium in which you are distributing the content. As we know, one size no longer fits all, a 30-sec TVC will not be as effective on YouTube and a Snapchat campaign won't work for LinkedIn.

Snackable content is the next pillar. With the rise of platforms like Vine and Snapchat, snackable content is critical for brands. Recent studies show that humans have a smaller attention span than goldfish which means brands have less than 8.25 seconds to make an impression. Facebook will tell you that it's less than three seconds. As a result we have seen brands develop small bite size pieces of content that will grab user's attention in the few seconds.

Content also needs to be smart both in terms of content creation and amplification. With decreasing budgets, it is important to be efficient with production. It's just as important to be smart with the amplification of content where we see more brands turning to influencers to leverage their reach and network.

Simplicity is the final pillar to smart content. As we know, less is more. With all of the technology at our disposal, the industry has gone full circle, always coming back to simplicity. We tend to overthink content campaigns but we always see that the simplest of campaigns are the ones that perform best and connect with people.

We are in an industry saturated with brands trying to get a piece of the pie. While most content campaigns will not check all seven boxes every time, but it should check a few of these boxes at once.

IRAN
THE LAST GREAT UNTAPPED MARKET

BY **ASMA WANGDE**

The recent uplifting of economic sanctions on Iran ended a 10-year exile for one of the largest countries in the MENA region. Although the news was met with mixed emotions throughout the world, the Iranian President Hassan Rouhani described the day the sanctions were lifted as a 'golden page' in his country's history and something that could transform its economy. Apart from being one of the major players in oil exports, Iran is also viewed as one of the largest open markets for digital and media agencies.

Even before the sanctions were uplifted, many had started to conjecture what this will mean for the media and marketing agencies in Iran. Sir Martin Sorrell, CEO, WPP had commented on this situation in the middle of 2015 emphasizing that Iran might in fact be the 'last great untapped market' for his business. Publicis Groupe had also eyed Iran as an interesting opportunity for global investors.

Some agencies have already started their work in Iran. Dentsu Aegis had formed a partnership with the International Communications Agency in 2015. Havas Worldwide also worked with clients in Iran from its Dubai offices before the uplifting of sanctions.

From a global holding company standpoint, there is no doubt that the presence of 'early birds' in the region, and the restrictions of some of the US-based agencies such as Omnicom and Interpublic to operate in the region, might have a lasting effect on the agencies that might dominate in this region. However, Iran might not only be an untapped industry, it might also offer an excellent challenge to the marketing agencies to delve into.

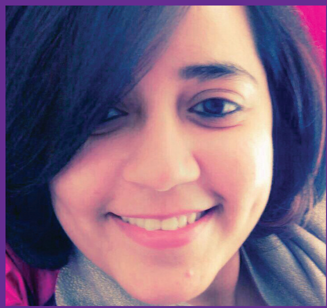
With its different set of restrictions and perhaps with different needs, the adaptability and evolvabiltiy of marketing agencies may be key quality that will determine their success in this market. As experts have pointed out, one of the major points to keep in mind for agencies will be the distinction between the Arabic and Persian cultures, and understanding the requirements of the latter. In this struggle between the different marketing agencies, early impression will be critical for success.

However, besides the need to better understand the market, the agencies will also have to move with caution, given how the stability in the Middle East region is still elusive. This would imply that most agencies would reduce their risk factor by perhaps taking small first steps, which in turn would limit their marketing options.

With these obvious obstacles for marketing and digital agencies, one thing that would work in their favor is the presence of a large youthful population that is well-educated and tech savvy. This would mean that properly implemented ideas would be embraced more openly. Whatever lies ahead for these marketing agencies, it is clear that the marketing in Iran tale will be engaging enough in 2016.

CLUTTER-BREAKING CONTENT CALLING

SANA**SCOPE**
BY **SANA MAHMUD**



With all the conversation on content in the year gone, it was not particularly surprising that two prominent agency initiatives in the first few days of 2016 were focused on content and all aspects surrounding it. But it was strange.

Mindshare and Initiative had put together full day events marked with some very interesting talking points. The agencies had called in their global experts and invited their clients to delve on the subject alongside some of the region's sharpest on what the way forward should be. That is not the reason why it was strange. For me, the takeaway ultimately was – so much talk of content only signifies that despite all experts around, it is still an area that marketers and the industry at large are not getting right. Which begs the question – why.

I do not know the answer. There is no denying that the content marketing space has greatly evolved in 2015 to become an important tool for brands to include in their marketing strategies, especially in digital. However, with excessive content overflow, and the essential rise of 'infobesity', marketers need to keep evolving the strategy from creating great content that can spread like wildfire on its own to finding innovative ways to distribute and amplify content. Not to mention to the right audiences as well.

The whole evolutionary processes aside, the one point that was widely discussed was to narrow content ideation and creation down to what users want. Oldest marketing principle if there was one – giving consumers what they want. And in that, needless to say, the entire gambit of conversation was about social media. Discovery on social platforms has become more important than content throwing up on search.

At some level, this makes sense.

Search has become hygiene, isn't it? The industry joke of the best place to bury something never to be found is on the second page of search results is, unfortunately, not a joke. If thinking beyond search is indeed the thought process, then the focus on social is taking forward an ongoing conversation. Leaders, chiefs, the big picture people essentially, get it. The disconnect, if that is the word for this, is among those who are actually doing the job. In the offline discussions that followed, it was abundantly clear that for people in the 'content marketing team', hygiene was not a place to worry about. The focus on witty, smart, chic, tear-jerking, emotion-evoking, clutter-breaking film that would go 'viral' took dominance over anything else. Perhaps that is the right way to operate. Sharability is a mark of success and users have quite a bit to share from these days, even the most connected are choosy. But is digital, that was once suffering from silo-mentality, creating sub-silo mentalities. Should content creation become part of the integrated digital plan that few do follow?

There are indeed many ways to look at how the industry is tackling its need to approach content, and how things will change some more. There may be too many things one is not sure about but I am quite certain that we are going to hear a lot more about content creation, content distribution, innovation in content, and the famous 'content is king' quotes in the year ahead. I am looking forward to it all. Who, in this business, does not like good storytelling?

Curated by **Asma Wangde**

DISH Arabic's 'Arabi' Combo Punch

Falafel or Falefil? Shawarma or Shawrma? Why not both, asks Dish Network Arabic TV ad commercial 'I Say Arabi'. The 'Arabi' rap created by Leo Burnett Beirut is reflective of the co-existence of Arabic and western culture, most typically in the younger audiences. Using humor and music as its key ingredients, Dish has created the campaign to sell a combination package that includes both Arabic and American TV channels.

Good Notes With Good Intentions

Lebanese supermarket Bou Khalil and a local NGO, along with the support of J. Walter Thompson Beirut, have introduced a currency they call 'The Good Note'. The aim of this currency is to provide homeless children items of daily necessities, without the risk of funding any unpleasant trade or the money being misused. All profits from this project will be used by the respective NGO to improve the lives of street children in Lebanon.

UNICEF, 180LA Put Light On Syria's 'Unfairy Tales'

The animated movie made by UNICEF and 180 LA, calls attention to the difficulty of the millions of children suffering in the Syrian refugee crisis. The tear-jerking two-minute video, 'Malak and the Boat' shows the story of a Syrian girl crossing the Mediterranean to escape civil war. The film is part of 'Unfairy Tales', a series from UNICEF and 180LA, which pairs the actual journeys of displaced Syrian children with animations like the one in Malak's story. The tagline of the video, 'Some stories were never meant for children' drives home the point – no kid should have to go through this.

Hardees - Leave It To The Professionals!

Following multiple teasers, Hardees Arabia along with Hug Digital introduced the Memphis BBQ Angus Thick burger. The campaign shows different people talking about their cooking disasters, the way it affected their lives, and how they finally destroyed their BBQ sets to enjoy the burger only made by "professionals".

SHORT LIST

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