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State of Marketing:

Middle East North Africa

The Middle East and North Africa went through an unprecedented growth period until late 2008, which honestly did not require effective communications as everyone was successful and every marketer and adman could brag about business results going through the roof. So basically any strategy worked for a while provided nothing was offensive to local cultures (basically staying away from religion, politics and sex).

At the first Effies in 2009, we started seeing a positive trend: The coming of age of “the insight”. Until then Insights were talked about a lot but hardly ever seen in action. They had more to do with Marketing Directors’ wishful thinking. Insights hardly ever came from a deep consumer understanding. Most of the 2009 Effies were based on a strong insight. This includes the 2009 Grand Prix runner up, Etihad Airways. It strongly leveraged the quest for a bride as a key insight for the Indian audience and tied it to travel offers from the airline.

The other new trend that we have recently witnessed is the power of creative ideas to build business. Again until very late, there was a clear dichotomy between creative ads which were mainly scam ads used for creative awards (and I include in those what agencies call “proactive ads” which are aired once very late on a TV station or published once by a magazine for free etc..) , and business building ads. In the latest Effie Awards the MENA Market has finally witnessed an award winning ad, earning a business effectiveness award with Coca Cola Egypt.

Today the region may have come to the understanding that insights are to be leveraged along with truly creative ideas. This may sound obvious, but it is very far from being systematic here. I feel that marketers do not want to spend the money required to better understand consumers, and at the same time are terrified of anything that actually has a creative idea. The current crisis may actually force the change as competitors may start learning the hard way from the success of the ones who have applied these two simple rules: Strong Insight + Creativity. Those that don’t realize the importance of a strong consumer insight are bound to fail, as

markets are becoming closer to what we could witness in say Europe, in terms of competitiveness.

As a matter of fact I do not believe that Arab consumers are any different from the rest of the world.

Once you have overcome basic cultural barriers and taboos successful strategies will be in line with what we see in the rest of the world:

- Engage the whole market by addressing customers and non customers alike as well as the people who influence them (vs. opposing users to non users, lapsed users etc...). This strategy has been proven successful worldwide (“Marketing in the Era of Accountability” Binet & Field 2007) and there is no reason why this should not apply to the region. As a matter of fact all Effie winners in 2009 were fully in line with that strategy.
- Unleash creativity to build an emotional bond. Kevin Roberts refers to it as “Love Brands” for a reason: we now know that most of our purchase decisions are based on emotional thinking vs. rational thinking, but for some reason this information has not yet been fully processed in the region with the notable exception of Egypt. However, I am quite confident, that as our markets are becoming increasingly competitive, and marketers will be forced to take that into account to survive in the future. Those who don’t will fail and will see daring and challenging brands crush them. Indeed, in the MENA region, brand positions in the market are not as stable and as well entrenched as in the rest of the world. Whoever says that our consumers are not ready has still got his/her head buried in the sand (which is quite abundant over the MENA region!) and will miss the wave!
- Film ads are key. First, TV is not dead, as shows the evidence from the latest world cup ratings across all age groups! It is still the best means to leverage the much needed emotion to build business! I still see too many brands in the region expecting miracles from print campaigns, because they just do not want to spend on TV production. Second films can be used on the internet incorporating longer and alternative versions that will be shared to make a brand FAMOUS, the ultimate stage of business effectiveness. Nonetheless, developing a TV ad is not the end. Integration has to follow in a much smarter way than the current cutting and pasting of a key visual with a common corporate Identity across all media and marketing channels (typical, unproductive and very common behavior in the region). Today channel planning has to evolve into behavioral planning. This is especially true with the rise of digital can help achieve much more effectiveness as each channel can interact with the consumer by presenting a different facet of the brand including the needed rational arguments vs. emotional arguments at some point.
- Turn creativity into Social Creativity. To be effective in today’s world a brand needs to be talked about and its communication should become a social currency that people will be playing with, and pass on especially with the widespread use of broadband internet. That’s what we call ShareValue at DDB. This is even more true in the MENA region as our culture is historically based on communities, tribal relations and storytelling. I am amazed that nobody is tapping into that local DNA to bring brands to fame which is the ultimate stage of creativity and business effectiveness. Today in the Middle East, we are sharing brand content that was designed for Europe and North America as evidenced by DDB’s “Fun Theory” for VW that came from Sweden and that was widely shared in the Arab world. This is probably the highway to effectiveness that is bound to happen at some stage in the region. The brands that will be the first to tap into social creativity will revolutionize the market in the very near future. If you need any further evidence just check on facebook what branded content Arabs are sharing! Right now no locally generated content is truly worth sharing for a brand!

Today to succeed in the MENA region a strong insight combined with a real creative idea are more necessary than ever but not enough. The way of the future is Social Creativity which requires yet another level of creativity and boldness to take a brand from a “well known” status to Fame. Consumers are ready; the only question is whether local marketers are ready to jump on board, and whether local agencies are ready to deliver such ideas. The ones who will, will revolutionize the market in terms of effectiveness.



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- Regional Managing Director of MAC DDB (Doha Qatar, Amman, Jordan)
- Formerly head of Strategic Planning and Research of Impact BBDO in Dubai.
- Has worked in the MENA region for the past 5 years with major multinational clients (P&G, Pepsico, Mars, Fonterra, Henkel), Arab international brands (Emirates Airlines, Etisalat), and major regional brands (QNB-banking, Qatari Diar, Tatweer, Dubai Properties-real estate, Qtel-telecommunications, Dubai One-TV.)
- Prior to coming to the Middle East, held key positions , including Managing Director, in major global networks in France (Saatchi & Saatchi, Lowe Lintas, McCann, Publicis) and worked on blue chip accounts (Reckitt Benckiser, P&G, Unilever, Nestle, Johnson & Johnson, MasterCard, Renault).
- Has contributed to help MasterCard and Johnson and Johnson (Nett feminine Hygiene) win Effie awards in Europe.
- Work on Automotive distribution published by Esomar and featured in WARC (2008): Turning “point of sales” into an image and sales accelerator” ESOMAR Automotive conference Geneva March 2008
- Education: Juris Doctor Duke University, Durham NC, USA