

Communicate

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PUBLIC RELATIONS

Distant relations

Saudi Arabia has long been an advertising goldmine, but its marketers are only starting to spot the sparkle in PR. Staff, clients and media are all beginning to improve as the industry grows. (Page 48)

BRANDING

Faces to names

Virgin has Branson, Apple has Jobs, and EasyJet has Stelios. But few brands in this region have well-known personalities behind them. *Communicate* asks why, and finds that a little anonymity isn't always a bad thing. (Page 50)

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DMA Media's Rob Beynon headed up BBC Persian when last year's Iranian election sparked rioting and became a Twitter phenomenon. He tells us how user-generated content and traditional media can work hand-in-hand. (Page 58)

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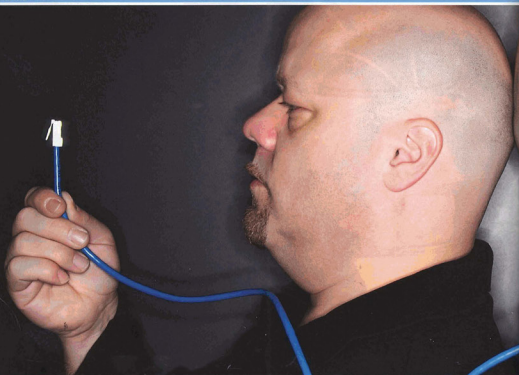


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GOOD SPORT

Communicate's guide to keeping your sports marketing on track and ahead of the competition





Socially awkward

Use of digital networks is on the up among Lebanese consumers, and those who are online consider themselves experts. So why are marketers not doing more to connect with them? *by Ibrahim Nehme*



ALEXANDRA TOHMÉ

"I haven't noticed any marketers in Lebanon jumping on the social media bandwagon."



AYMAN ITANI

"Most marketers are still on the sidelines watching and observing."



MONA CHAMMAS

"Agencies are not fully educating the client because they are not educated themselves."



PERLA RICHIA

"It's our responsibility to educate the client as much as possible."

In an age of social media, corporate communication relies more and more on two-way, real-time conversations and crowd-sourced content. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, and other online tools enable collaboration, sharing and networking, and are helping redefine consumer behaviors, but Lebanon's businesses and marketing communications aren't necessarily moving at the same pace.

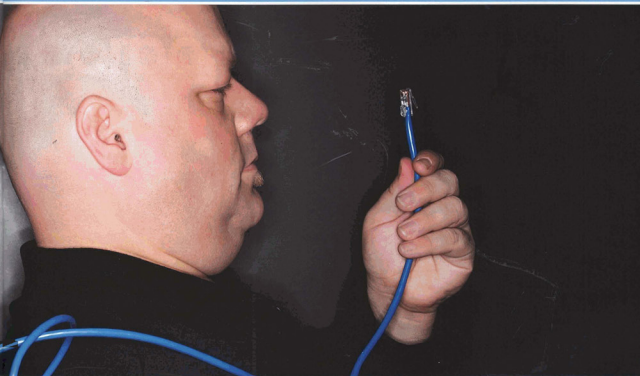
Alexandra Tohmé, who holds the very 2.0 title of "community builder" at Zawya Beirut, an online business portal, says social media gets rid of as many barriers between a company and its end users as possible, leading to a direct conversation between two parties. Advertisers can be present as silent participators, hosts or observers (but to intrusively peddle their wares is a mistake).

Jessica Dheere, co-founder of the Beirut Social Media Exchange, or SMEX, which trains corporate clients to use social media, elaborates that digital-community marketing needs to be all about listening to customers, clients, and constituents. "It's about having a conversation with them," she says, "not broadcasting your message and shouting at them through a series of billboards lining the Dora Highway."

Lebanese digital marketing might still be at the shouting stage – if that – but it's making tentative steps to join the conversation.

"Marketers in Lebanon are gradually recognizing the importance of social media and the role it can play in enhancing their clients' image and improving community communication," says Ayman Itani, director of Telephone.com (a site that allows users to send and receive SMS from their computers) and a professor of media, culture and technology at the Lebanese American University. "They are curious about it and some are dabbling with it; however, most are still on the sidelines watching and observing as this new medium continues to unfold."

BE AWARE. Mona Chammas used to be a digital strategist at Impact BDDO Beirut. Now she has relocated to Canada to work as a digital consultant. She says agencies and clients in Lebanon are aware to a degree about social media, but not as much as they might be. "There is not enough awareness to move major advertising dollars away from traditional media into digital," she says. The digital marketing that does happen lacks sophistication. "If you call slapping up a Facebook group and asking



fans to vote on a piece of content a tap into new media, then yes, they are tapping away."

Zawya's Tohmé doesn't even go that far. "I wouldn't say I have noticed any of the marketers in Lebanon jumping on the social media bandwagon," she says. "I also haven't noticed any particular presence from them in terms of content."

Depending on whom you ask, this slow uptake can be attributed to a number of factors, including a tradition of offline PR, slow Internet speeds, and skepticism about online measurability.

Traditional forms of PR still dominate the Lebanese market with only a little digital thrown in, says Chammas. This is because digital marketing simply doesn't have the reach. "There is an increasing amount of user engagement on networks other than Facebook, such as Twitter, and blogs, however not enough to make an impact on or substantial changes to current PR practices," she says.

The limited number of marketers who are using such networks are often there for show, Chammas adds. "In my experience, they have jumped on the bandwagon simply to conform. They have heard that social media is fast becoming the way to reach consumers on a deeper level – note the word *heard*, not *understood* – and want to be the first to offer this service, however small, to their clients."

Perla Richa, Lebanon country director for PR agency Impact Porter Novelli (IPN), agrees that marketers still predominantly use traditional media, "mainly because both agencies and clients have grown accustomed to it." Digital PR is perceived as "a little bit risky."

In addition to the difficulty of getting online, Richa says that digital PR is not seen as being fully quantifiable, which makes it difficult for agencies to transform clients into believers. Clients still invest in traditional media because it "safely guarantees results," she says.

BACK SEAT DRIVER. Tohmé says the reason social media is still confined to the back seat in Lebanon is the traditional nature of the communications market, where there has always been one person or organization that distributes and controls information and how it is used.

An underdeveloped infrastructure also hampers the spread of online information. "Lebanon is plagued with terrible Internet speed," says Chammas. And, with only 30 percent of Lebanese connected to the Internet, she believes there are not enough users online to encourage advertisers to pitch social media to clients. By contrast, the UK and the USA both have around 75 percent Internet penetration.

On top of this, Lebanon's Internet is costly. "The price is prohibitively expensive," says Dheere. "And add to this the volume caps. We have a connection that allows us 8GB of uploads or downloads; it's \$200 per month."

But even despite these hindrances to getting online, the Lebanese are switched on, even if they are not all plugged in. "They are highly familiar with mobile phone technology, are avid social media users – mainly via Facebook – and spend an appreciable amount of time on the Internet," says Itani.

A recent survey by recruitment Web site Bayt.com revealed that 40 percent of Lebanese respondents consider themselves Internet experts, the highest proportion out of 14 Arab countries in the poll.

PRIME TIME. Chammas says those Lebanese consumers who are online are not being primed and exposed to online content fast enough to be motivated to stick around.

"Media and PR agencies are not fully educating the client on social media and new forms of media simply because they are not educated themselves, and digital agencies are too few to make an impact," says Chammas. "Traditional agencies should step up to the game and set a new standard."

This is starting to happen, but slowly. "PR practitioners have recognized that blogging and social networks are fast emerging as communication platforms among consumers and audiences alike," she adds. "However, they are not responding to this trend in leaps and bounds."

IPN's Richa agrees. "It's our responsibility to educate the client as much as possible," she says. "What we have been doing is presenting alternatives to clients, away from traditional PR, and highlighting the budget benefits, as it is less costly. We also present them with case studies as often as possible and conduct training in order for them to grow accustomed to digital PR."

Luckily for proponents of Web 2.0 as a marketing tool, its use seems set to rise. If marketers are savvy, they will use those networks to keep in touch with their online consumers. ■