

## The End of Branding as Usual in the Middle East

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+ “Logos and taglines cannot adequately communicate what a company stands for or why anyone should care about it.”

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For all the talk about the power of branding to drive progressive corporate culture, innovative product development, and unwavering customer loyalty in the Middle East—there are precious, few examples of brands that have committed much beyond a logo and tagline—and as a result, few are reaping any real benefit from their investment other than a bit of visual recognition.

So why, with the increasing presence of world-class branding agencies, more and more managers and junior executives earning advanced degrees in marketing, and the imperative to brand more strategically in the wake of financial crisis, is the lack of commitment to more strategic branding initiatives considered acceptable?

Why is the bar set so low? Why isn't the intent to build more differentiated, relevant and credible brand experiences realized? Who or what is responsible for the flatness of the Middle East's brandscape?

### Are the agencies at fault?

One phenomenon that has led to considerable confusion, specifically in the Gulf, has been perpetuated by advertising agencies that diligently provided campaigns for regional clients during the formative years and, in some cases, have since broadened their capabilities to include brand consulting.

All too often clients will add “branding” to an ad agency's deliverables due to perceived efficiencies, cost savings, or just genuine naiveté. The differences between a product brand that fights for attention on a store shelf supported by a few months of campaign messages and a strategic corporate brand platform that guides everything an organization says and does has not always been communicated effectively or been clearly understood by either clients or the agencies themselves.

Even when a branding brief escapes the clutches of the “Ad Men” and finds its way to an actual branding firm, results can still get diluted. Depending on how long a given brand agency has been active in the region and how embattled its client relationships have been in the pursuit of regionally relevant world-class solutions, the energy to fight the good fight in support of good work can wane in even the most seasoned brand strategist, creative director, or relationship manager.

Succumbing to this agency fatigue is often rationalized with an attitude of submission, believing that if the client wants to pay for compromised work—so be it. This is usually accompanied by denial based on the notion that the work, though not adequately positioned to perpetuate the brand's potential, is “good enough” for the Middle East market. This creative complacency moves neither the client nor the agency forward.

### Is the Client the culprit?

Upon receiving a Request for Proposal or project brief in the Middle East, agencies can often assume that it has been sent to, not two or three carefully vetted brand consultancies, but rather six or eight candidates with varying capabilities. It would not be unreasonable to expect that in addition to some high-profile brand firms there might be an ad agency, an events specialist, a web developer and a print production house...all being asked to provide a branding proposal.

The fundamental misunderstanding of how to tender a branding initiative can obviously lead to imperfect partnerships. This, combined with the unfortunate perception of a brand consultant as a vendor, can also compromise the focus and productivity of a working relationship.

For example, when a procurement manager is charged with evaluating branding proposals solely on price and with little understanding of the branding process, it can make for a slippery slope just getting a project to the starting line.

Once a contract is signed, business as usual presents considerable challenges when it comes to truly strategic brand development. In a process where project ownership, executive commitment, and professional objectivity are essential to consensus-building, it is crucial to know who is responsible for the key decisions that will move the work forward with focused momentum.

Most people who have experienced a major branding exercise in the Gulf region will tell you that the most productive client teams are small, informed, and aligned groups of senior decision makers...unfortunately this is rarely the case. Antiquated protocol structures often keep client-side brand managers from committing to anything that may be challenged by a senior executive in a barrage of subjectivity, no matter how well the work aligns with the business objectives of the company.

Ultimately the work that does reach the CEO or the board is diluted to the point where it could not possibly meet with disapproval no matter how out of the loop the decision makers have been. The effort to satisfy the personal preferences of uninformed executives coupled with seemingly contagious discomfort with accountability ends up compromising the brand's ability to provide relevant customer experiences and drive business performance.

### **Can we blame the economy for this, too?**

Well the economy certainly can't be blamed for all the one-dimensional brands that were churned out over the past six or seven years—the boom that launched a thousand logos and a handful of strong brands. No, I think we can put some of the responsibility for the miles of monotonous banners, uninspired images of handshakes and office towers and other misguided displays of corporate vanity on the early opportunists; those seeking to take advantage of an immature yet very fertile market.

It is also worth mentioning the creative contributions of the VP's teenage son who just happened to have a Mac computer loaded with the latest design software. This devaluation of brand consulting services and professional design talent is not new but can be more tempting, and most damaging, when budgets are under scrutiny.

Since last year the financial crisis has left no region unaffected and that includes the Middle East. Clients have tightened the purse strings as if by reflex. Though the M&A lawyers and PR damage control specialists are doing just fine, most every other sector has felt the pinch including the branding, marketing, and advertising industries.

In a downturn, branding initiatives are often at the top of the cuts list while companies scramble to reprioritize, reallocate, and restructure. While focus is on defensive strategies, the prospects that quite markets present can be missed .

When the competitive landscape is clear of clutter, it is arguably the optimal time to make an investment in defining and differentiating yourself as a business.

### **Getting over it...**

Regardless of who or what is to blame for past miscommunication, misunderstanding, or missed opportunities, the future of branding and the value it can bring to businesses and organizations in the Middle East holds great potential.

The first step in realizing this potential is understanding how important the branding process is to any business and committing to a strategic approach. This is a vital decision for any major brand undertaking, including those for established companies in need of repositioning or sub-brand alignment, newly formed brand composites resulting from mergers, acquisitions or joint ventures and of course sizable startups.

The strategic path to uncovering a company's unique and enduring value is holistically approached, taking all its aspects and dimensions into consideration from the very beginning. Finding the clear, compelling, and credible story, or promise that defines and differentiates an organization is critical to building a world-class brand. The story—before the logo, before the tagline—is the most important brand asset.

Getting to and expressing a company's brand story is a comprehensive process involving several phases of development. Starting with research and validation of positioning territories, the ideal process continues through naming and brand architecture, identity creation and proprietary visual vocabularies, brand guidelines including visual systems and brand voice and messaging, brand training and alignment, quality control across production and rollout of all communications, and ultimately measuring the impact of the brand on business results.

The above process, when undertaken between a qualified, strategically driven branding agency and an informed, committed and engaged client can lead to powerful results that resonate with all audiences from management and employees, to investors and partners, to B2B customers and retail consumers.

Every day the Middle East market becomes more competitive...customers are more savvy and responsive to simple, smart, brand communications... broadened digital media channels and experiential brand touchpoints are leading to richer more targeted customer engagement. The possibilities for well-considered, strategically sound brands to influence preference and behaviors are many.

It has become increasingly obvious that logos and taglines cannot adequately communicate what a company stands for or why anyone should care about it, let alone compel customers to choose their product or service over a competitor's. Branding as usual will not serve the businesses and organizations poised to lead the Middle East into its bright future.

Those willing to embrace the value of truly strategic branding will be positioned to realize their potential while those that are not will be relocated to the world of roadside banners and customer apathy.