





Seeing the big picture

Communication has come a long way since the first letters of the alphabet. What about the Middle East region? Where are we in terms of corporate communication in general?

The missing link

From the seals and armories of ancient kings to the über-sophistication of Web 2.0, communication has gone through various stages: pamphlets in revolutionary times, a wider reach thanks to Gutenberg in the 15th century and, in the 20th century, a level of development that had not only to match the needs of a consumerist world, but also to walk at the same pace as the information society.

Strategy and long-term planning

Corporate communication in the Middle East region is uneven, not only geographically but industry-wise also. We note for example, that the financial sector enjoys full-fledged communication departments in most Middle Eastern countries, whereas in many other sectors, the visual identity (sometimes summarized to its primary, though essential, component: a logo) exists but a structured communications department does not. This deficiency is due to the very nature of communication itself that provokes a false perception: since the audience only sees the end result (a logo, a press release, a website, a publication or an event...) communication comes across as producing scattered tools with no link between one another: a step to take when you need it without an underlying strategy. Well, no. Communication is a strategic component of an organization that will help the company or product build an image of its own, to be perceived in a specifically desired way and to communicate with a target audience using the tools and the channels specific to reach that

target audience. Thus, a long-term communications strategy will set the ground for a harmonious image and, accordingly, a positive and solid perception of the product or company in question. In the Middle East the strategy and long-term planning aspects are absent for many of the companies or products. This is due to several factors.

The bigger picture

In general, companies will go for the deliverable they're after – a logo, a website or other. But in order to achieve the communication goal they're seeking, whether for a logo or a website, both deliverables should be part of a bigger picture. Brainstorming sessions debating the objectives sought from the chosen communication channel should occur: what is the purpose behind this deliverable, is it consolidating an existing brand, launching a new product or company? Whether a visual identity, literature, internal communication or a website, all should contribute to giving a predefined image and perception of the company and should answer the question: what impression do we want to make? With the help of communication and design agencies, decision makers are asked to define who their target audience is and what are the messages they want to instill. In light of the answers to these questions, a logo will have a careful thought-of shape, select colors and specific usage guidelines. Decision makers will be asked to reflect on a series of items directly related to image and perception: from answering the phone to office decoration, to the website and the literature and as far as corporate social responsibility. When questions on objectives, perception, impression, image, target audience and messages are answered and when deliverables are part of a bigger and longer-term plan, the product or company will enjoy a solid, consistent and harmonized image in the market.

Communications and Rol

But communication is not always considered as strategic as it should be, despite all the time spent on communication tools. Should a crisis occur, the first department to suffer budget cuts is the communications department. Executives tend to think that it is superfluous to communicate in times of crisis whilst communication professionals agree that it is vital to keep a presence in the market and to always be present, ready to tap on the first opportunity that arises. This vulnerability is tied to communication's (again false) perception of having no return on investment (Rol). You can measure what a salesman brings to the company and hence the value of Human Resources but you will always wonder what is the Rol of a logo. Brand your booth at an event and count how many people will visit

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Companies across the Middle East will have to pitch in for the full picture view.



it. Display proper publications and distribute them and count how many people pick up a copy and ask you questions and out of these, how many leads will be generated. You could embed yardsticks for ROI in e-communications, Public Relations (PR) strategy or publications but it cannot sum up to sales only as PR, for example, is the equivalent of free advertising. Exposing your identity to your target audience in repeated ways, through various channels, is a means of engraving your brand in their minds and building a reputation for your company or product. When a strong reputation is built, your brand will have a strong value on the market: a huge ROI on your communication efforts.

Communication education in the Middle East

What does not add as well to the image of usefulness of communication and to its specialization and specificities is a general absence of communication degrees offered by universities in the Middle East. Looking at the curricula in the field of communications in the region, we have a focus on PR, a strategic component of communication, or a graphic design degree or an audio-visual one. In the United States, for example, a degree in communications (which is offered at the Ph.D. level even) is very thorough: it examines all the aspects of communication from theory, persuasion, psychology, social sciences, perception, semiotics, strategy conception and development to measurement and much more.

Communication in an IT challenged area

An external factor hindering the development, growth and sophistication of communication in the Middle East is also related to computers and Internet access, both of which do not benefit from economies of scale in the Middle East. Not all the members of the population can afford a PC. As for Internet access, on top of not always

being cheap, it is sometimes technologically challenged due to inadequate broadband. If we look at smartphones, here too, prices are not at the reach of each and every one and the cost of the service can hamper massive usage. Whereas in other countries, you can change your status or share a thought or a link on your iPhone, in the Middle East not everyone can do that. Elsewhere, professional communications associations are debating on social networks, Human 1.0[®] and how to make the best use out of this new communications channel. In the Middle East region, we still have some way to go before we reach full Human 1.0 level.

If you're not communicating, you're inexistent

Communications has become so intricate and complex that you need to be using the right tools through the appropriate channels to reach your target audience. This cannot be done as simply as before: strategic thinking and long-term planning are needed. Your company might be very notable and might enjoy a reputable brand through word of mouth and history but in the age of information, if you're not communicating in a consistent and strategic way, if you're not present along the various communication channels, you're either creating confusion or you're absent – much to the advantage of the competition.

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(i) Human 1.0: hard-wired human characteristics and reflexes such as reciprocity, fairness, herding and desire for status in *The hyper-social organization*, Ed Moran and François Gossiaux.