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# Empowering Arab filmmakers

Interviewed by Heba Hashem

Ever since the US-based ArtistShare was launched in 2003 as a business model for creative artists, hundreds of crowdfunding websites have sprouted up worldwide, generating a staggering **US\$65 billion in 2014, according to statistics by Fundable.**





*Aflamnah's founder Vida Rizq*

But it was only in 2012 that the concept finally reached the Middle East, thanks to Aflamnah, a platform dedicated to supporting creative ventures in the Arab world.

Having managed the film fund Enjaaz at the Dubai International Film Festival (DIFF) for over two years, Aflamnah's founder Vida Rizq witnessed the large number of applications and rejections. "I could see that when people applied for funding, they either got rejected and I had to send those letters, which I didn't enjoy very much, or they were funded but didn't get everything they needed some of the time."

### Arab films neglected

Already captivated by the concept of crowdfunding, which was booming in the West, Vida, together with her husband Lotfi Bencheikh, realised it was time to set up a similar platform in the Middle East. "We needed a platform focused on the Arab world; Arab projects from what I could see were not really shining the way they should be on Western platforms." As soon as Aflamnah went live, it gained a momentum of its own. "It just snowballed," says Vida.

Unlike global crowdfunding giant Kickstarter, which adopts an 'all or nothing' funding model, Aflamnah sends the collected money to the idea

owner regardless of whether their target has been reached. "At the end of the day, if they can't keep the money they managed to raise, it would be a barrier," explains Vida.

### Surpassing targets

By mid-2014, just two years since launching, Aflamnah had raised over US\$300,000 and hosted 70 projects, many of which exceeded their targets. For example, Annemarie Jacir's feature film *When I Saw You* had a goal of US\$5,000 but raised US\$10,100. The film not only raised double its target, but also received more than 10 international film awards.

Similarly, *Searching for Saris* achieved its goal of US\$11,000 in 11 days, before stretching the amount to US\$19,100, and again reaching it. "The film addressed an emotive topic," remarks Vida. "Even after the campaign finished, people still wanted to contribute. It galvanised the Palestinian community and spread through social media quickly."

More recently, Bilbaal, an online platform that connects pro-bono resources and volunteers with Palestinian philanthropic initiatives – and the first website to crowdfund on Aflamnah – succeeded in raising US\$31,200. However, the project struggled with the reward structure, according to Vida. "The only reward they

could offer was a 'thank you' on their site. You could pay US\$10 for that or US\$1,000, so the rewards were all the same. That was an interesting way of acknowledging that they didn't have that much to offer; you had to decide how much you thought the initiative was worth to you."

### Giving back

Rewards play a crucial role in the success of a crowdfunding campaign. Along with the ability to spread the word, project owners need to come up with creative ways to show their appreciation. So far, filmmakers on Aflamnah have offered executive producer credit, tickets to the premieres, DVDs, and posters.

Others have been more creative, promising rewards like an A1 original pencil drawing of the main character, a chance to play a minor role in the film, and an invitation to visit an Emirati family's farm.

Vida recalls Emirati filmmaker Nawaf Al Janahi's campaign, through which he raised US\$8,570 to bring an Emirati Cinema roadshow to all seven emirates. Among the rewards he offered was the chance to buy one of the branded bicycles used during the tour. Two were sold, at US\$1,000 each.

The main challenge facing Aflamnah now is a cultural one. "People in this region don't feel comfortable giving a small amount of US\$10, and that's a barrier we're trying to break down, because the idea is that a lot of people give small amounts, rather than a few giving lots of money."

There also tends to be a feeling of embarrassment around asking for help, as Vida points out. "We generally love to help in our culture, but it's difficult for someone to offer to help unless you ask."

Crowdfunding, she says, takes away that feeling from both sides, because it legitimises the entire process. "It can make it fun, emotional, quirky, or whatever your project lends itself to." 🍷



*Annemarie Jacir – Director*