



SURRENDERING TO THE DIGITAL AGE

After resigning as CEO of Arab Media Group, Abdullatif Alsayegh embraced the world of digital media. He tells GC why.

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Abdullatif Alsayegh has become synonymous with ground-breaking media projects in the UAE. Twelve years ago, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum asked him to build a portfolio of media assets for the Government of Dubai, which included three daily newspapers, eight radio stations and three TV stations. Amongst them were Emarat Al Youm, MTV Arabia, and Al Khaleejiya Radio Station – Arabic, favourites that are still going strong.

Shifting Focus

Alsayegh moved from a government-owned organization to run a digital media agency in 2010; a timely shift considering publishing firms have been struggling to sustain their businesses.

He says media companies need to evolve to become content providers, not just publishers. "TV might not exist in its current platform (in the future), but the content is going to stay. Media, such as radio or TV, are only enablers – a way of transmitting the signal. You can now consume the same TV content on your iPad, mobile phone and other devices. We should start switching some terminologies, because soon they might not exist."

The Real-Time Factor

While many think of social media as having a fan page and followers, fully exploiting digital media requires much more, says Alsayegh. "You must have a strategy behind it and objectives. There's crowd-sourcing, tone of voice, crisis management, PPC campaigns, search engine optimization. So it's not just about starting your Facebook and Twitter pages and the rest will happen," explains Alsayegh, whose clients include Dubai Islamic Bank, Abu Dhabi Police, and Dolphin Energy, to name a few.

At the end of the day, there are two things we have to accept, he explains: "Anything that can be transferred into digital format is not going to last long; not just newspapers and magazines, but whatever you can think of – content, tapes, videocassettes – anything that can be beaten and eaten."

Moving Fast

When Alsayegh was with Arab Media Group, he launched projects within a very short time span. Emarat Al Youm newspaper, for example, was established in just six months, when it usually takes a newspaper 1-2 years to get off the ground. Minimizing essential yet time-consuming processes that are part of setting up a business can be risky, but can also be rewarding. "The process of recruitment can take one month or it can take a week. There are people who like to call candidates for several interviews just to make sure they are the right ones, and then there's people like me who decide during the first interview."

Taking a big picture approach is important to setting up a business. "I wouldn't just start putting the place together first, then recruit, then look at processes, and the content," he says. "Instead, I'll do everything in parallel. Rather than 'starting from here and finishing there,' I'll start from everywhere and finish faster."

When asked about "sailing against the waves," as he once stated during a speech, Alsayegh's eyes light up.

"There's nothing such as 'this is how business is done'. It's all about different styles, formats and experiments, until you come to your conclusion of what works. And whatever you apply today might not work tomorrow because the business environment keeps changing," explains Alsayegh.