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## MIDDLE EAST



# THE WAY FORWARD

How **startups**  
and **SMEs** can navigate  
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WHY REMOTE WORKING  
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THE CORONAVIRUS  
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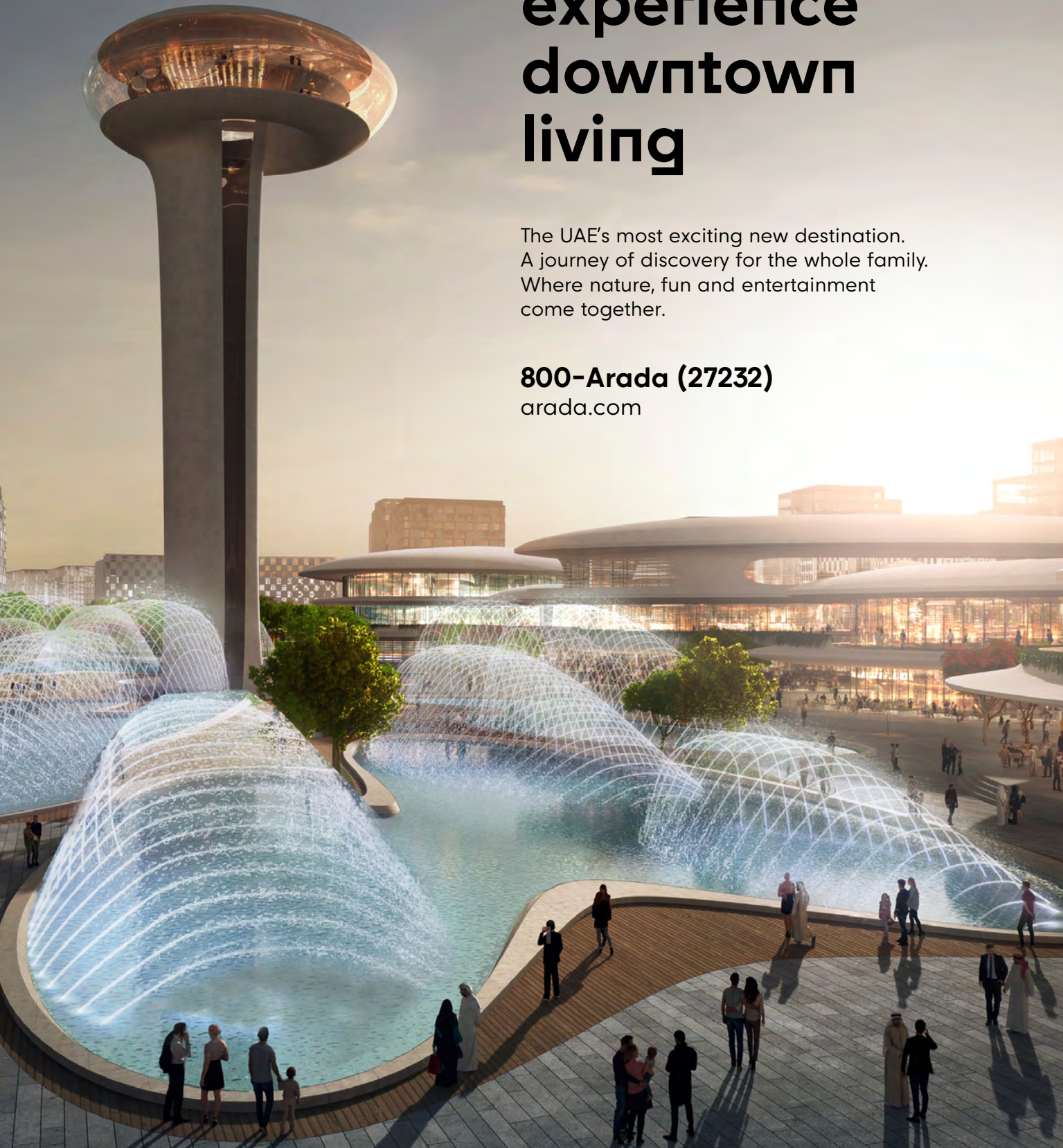




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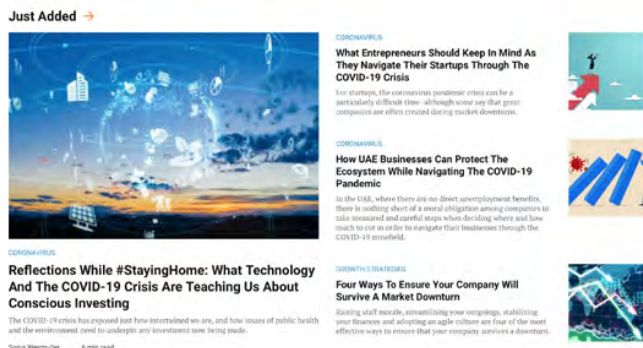
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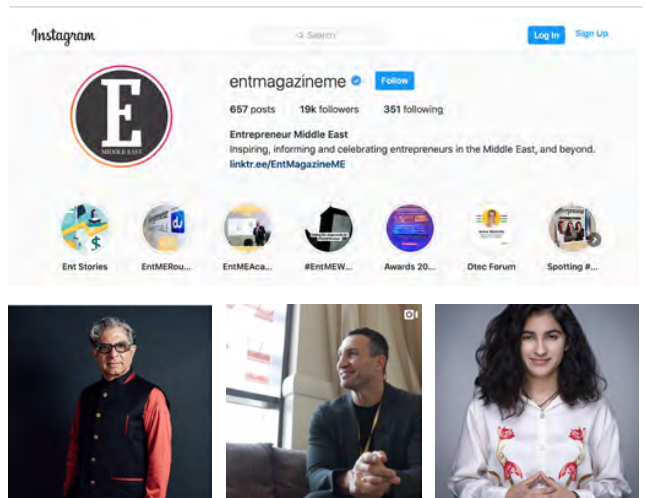
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It's only been a few weeks since we in the Middle East began to feel the impact of the global coronavirus pandemic, but in this fairly short period, the economic slowdown it has effected on our business landscape has been nothing short of monumental. And it's safe to say that it's been especially felt by those of us who are a part of the region's entrepreneurial ecosystem.

For us at *Entrepreneur Middle East*, besides being privy to a multitude of stories about enterprises that are struggling to keep themselves afloat amidst this crisis, we've also found ourselves tackling the same challenges as our peers. After all, we are a young business too- we only celebrated our sixth anniversary in February this year. But, at the same time, as an entity that has long called itself "the voice of entrepreneurship" in the region, we've decided that, despite all of what's going on with us as a business,

## This too shall pass

BEHAVIORS TODAY WILL HAVE RAMIFICATIONS TOMORROW

we also have to continue to stay true to our role within this ecosystem.

And that's why we've kept our heads down and focused on our work, which, in our current setting, has meant us bringing together everything from insights to resources that can help MENA entrepreneurs navigate a way out of this unprecedented situation. So, from thoughts on how to keep a team motivated even while their salaries are cut, or tips and tactics to how to keep our wits about us, and, well, not *lose it*, we've been seeking (and pushing out) stories and solutions that will help our community of entrepreneurs, startups, and SMEs get through this crisis.

I must admit here that I've been more personally invested than usual when we embarked on this content plan for *Entrepreneur*, and I feel it's because I've bought into this sentiment of "we're in this together." While arguably clichéd, that statement carries a lot of significance in times like these. I believe that if we try to operate selfishly now, be it as businesses or individuals, then we're almost certainly headed down a path that won't work out in the long run. Because as alarming as this crisis may seem, we must remember that it is most definitely a temporary one all the same, and as such, what we do now will well be remembered in the future.

With that in mind, think twice before you, as a corporate, drop all of your contracts with startups and leave them

high and dry. Rest assured that your reputation as a business partner has already taken a hit in the community at large. Similarly, think of the ramifications of your actions when you, as a business leader, choose to let go of your staff, so that you can continue with your luxuries. (You'll have this on your conscience when you run around spouting "I am nothing without my team" to everyone after this crisis has passed.)

Now, all of this is not to discount the tough decisions many of us have to make when going about our businesses in extraordinary circumstances like these- but let's be very careful about people who pass off poor choices as "things they *had* to do because of the crisis." At the end of the day, it's good to remember that one's behavior in the worst situations is often the best indicator of how one *really* is, and that's something to keep in mind for now- and for later.

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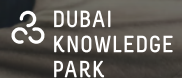
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# THE WAY FORWARD

How **startups**  
and **SMEs** can navigate  
the **COVID-19** crisis

by HISHAM FAROUK

**T**he COVID-19 pandemic developed as a health crisis, moved on to becoming an economic concern, and now has transformed into a recession hard to stave off. The current climate has particularly stopped the music for the VC ecosystem, startups and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Indeed, small to medium size businesses are at the front line of the battle, with the repercussions being especially severe for them, due to higher levels of vulnerability and limited resources.

To navigate through the current turmoil, it is vital for businesses to be agile to respond to today's changing environment in a timely manner. As such, SMEs are advised to identify, focus, and swiftly address the key vulnerable areas to ensure their survival and business continuity. These main areas are finance, operations and business models, people, and processes- here's a primer on how to go about these:



## 1/ FINANCE

Cash is king, and now more than ever, is needed for survival. Here are external and internal ways to improve, prolong and avail liquidity.

**INVESTORS AND VCS** With the stock markets taking a significant hit, the private equity and venture capital markets are also heavily impacted. There is going to be a considerable dip in startup valuations, as well as total rounds raised during 2020. The appetite for investment and the availability of funds has shrunk, and it continues to move downwards. Investors are either selling their current shares at a loss to prevent further financial damage, or they have gathered their resources to focus on their current portfolio and support its survival. On the other side of the spectrum, there are a few outliers with disposable funds who are taking advantage of below-the-market prices to diversify and expand their investment portfolio. That being said, it is not wise to rely on external resources, as all economies are in a volatile state. The best solution would be to direct the focus on internal resources and capabilities.

**ALTERNATIVE SOURCES OF FUNDS** In order to minimize the reliance on traditional funding, the following avenues can be explored:

**PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES** The global implications of the outbreak have brought both people and businesses closer than ever, making it the best time to take a step away from traditional funding, and move towards partnerships and alliances. The market demand patterns have been disturbed, with extreme plunges in some classes and an upward surge in others. Thus, SMEs need to form complementary alliances by leveraging on each other's resources and capabilities, and transform into a stronger entity that can cater to the current market demands with agility. This will assist with their commercial survival while using minimal funds, as well as helps serve their communities and create positive PR.



### FOR YOUR BUSINESS TO SURVIVE, AND TO POTENTIALLY GROW, THE RIGHT ENABLERS MUST BE IN PLACE, FROM A PEOPLE, PROCESSES AND TECHNOLOGY PERSPECTIVE.

**BOOTSTRAPPING** Back when entrepreneurship was not a popular concept, and investors were not keen on buying startup shares, many entrepreneurs started and grew their ventures by bootstrapping. It is time to take a page out of that old book, take a proper look at the business' internal cash reserves, and stretch the existing runway to leverage all that is available. Entrepreneurs need to start by identifying their incurred costs, and conducting negotiations to minimize the direct and indirect costs as much as possible. They also need to explore ways to rearrange their cash from idle facilities into their essential working capital in order to improve their short-term liquidity.

**GOVERNMENT AIDS** Government grants have come available at a global scale, prioritizing SMEs, startups, and entrepreneurs. This is the best non-equity class of funding for these businesses to take advantage of and inject internally.

their current business models to reflect the caused change, prioritize business continuity, look for opportunities to gain competitive advantage from, and ensure minimal disruption overall.

**RE-EVALUATING THE EXISTING BUSINESS MODEL** Entrepreneurs need to separate their focus from the crisis anxiety, and re-evaluate their propositions and business models instead. It is true that a number of SMEs, given their line of business (mainly B2C and digital) are less impacted, or in some cases, have experienced higher profits, regardless of the current crisis. However, it is a common need to revise and redo the old plans, and create new ones as well. Businesses can do so by researching the change in the market demand, identifying the changes in consumer behavior, as well as the possible gaps and opportunities for them to leverage and benefit from. They need to revise their revenue goals and product timelines, create a new business model along with a matching operating plan, and ensure clear and constant communications with the market and their investors.

## 2/ OPERATIONS AND BUSINESS MODEL

The world today is no longer the same as it was a moment ago, and it is likely to change further and for the worse. Entrepreneurs need to stay flexible and adapt accordingly. They can do so by adjusting

### IMPROVED AND NEW PROPOSITIONS

SMEs need to guarantee churn by developing honest and constant communications with their current clients, adjusting payment terms to encourage early transfers, and >>>

## THE GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE OUTBREAK HAVE BROUGHT BOTH PEOPLE AND BUSINESSES CLOSER THAN EVER, MAKING IT THE BEST TIME TO TAKE A STEP AWAY FROM TRADITIONAL FUNDING, AND MOVE TOWARDS PARTNERSHIPS AND ALLIANCES.

developing new price points on current supplies. Entrepreneurs are advised to then move on to explore innovative, and at times, even radical ways to secure new customers, and deliver added value to the market. This can be realized by restructuring the internal resources and capabilities to fine-tune and tailor the current services, as well as to come up with new lines of offerings created for the current demand. As stated previously, building alliances and joining forces with other SMEs will also help cater to the new market dynamics, and prepare the grounds for potential long-term partnerships.

**GO-TO-MARKET STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS** Once the newly adapted propositions are created, it is time to develop the go-to-market strategy, as well as the relevant marketing plans and communication channels. At times of crisis, communication should be at the forefront of any entrepreneur's strategy to maintain a steady and honest stream of messages with its market. Keep in mind that all efforts should lead to increased credibility and fundability- it is not the survival of the fittest, but the last one standing.

Your adaptability is not limited to ensuring liquidity and market offerings. For your business to survive, and to potentially grow, the right enablers must be in place, from a people, processes and technology perspective.

### 3 / PEOPLE AND PROCESSES

**PEOPLE** First and foremost are your people. Entrepreneurs need to take the necessary measures to ensure their teams' safety, health, and by extension, productivity, in the new context. Active and transparent communication is the most important ingredient between the entrepreneurs, investors, and their staff: the necessary platforms need to be built to encourage mutual and constant conversations between all stakeholders. Maintaining a weekly dialogue between the CEOs, VCs, and employees allows for the exchange of valuable guidance on the portfolio and the overall business, and helps with making collective and smart decisions moving forward.

**PROCESSES** The right internal tools and processes must be available, so that the above adjustment and

changes are realized and take effect. The entrepreneurs need to equip their business and their team members to implement the needed changes and stay adaptable. The first step is to create the environment wherein the team members feel safe and encouraged to put in the extra effort. The leaders themselves play a crucial role in enabling new ways of working: trust, empathy, and availability of leaders are a key enabler for the workforce to feel empowered and committed. In addition, adjusting the existing culture helps with aligning the people's mindsets to welcome the new changes and to be able to operate in the new environment in a productive manner.

The second step is supplying the tools needed to implement the required changes and help with business continuity. Digital gadgets that avail remote working, telecommuting, and enable all internal and external communications are a great example. Investing in an agile and resilient infrastructure might seem like a forced decision now, but it is in fact, a long-term investment that safeguards businesses from any turbulence that may come.

### DECISION MAKING PROTOCOLS AND SCENARIO PLANNING

Once the new infrastructure is in place, the entrepreneurs need to develop various scenarios and forecasts, and test their responses and strategies accordingly. Given the ever-changing nature of the cur-

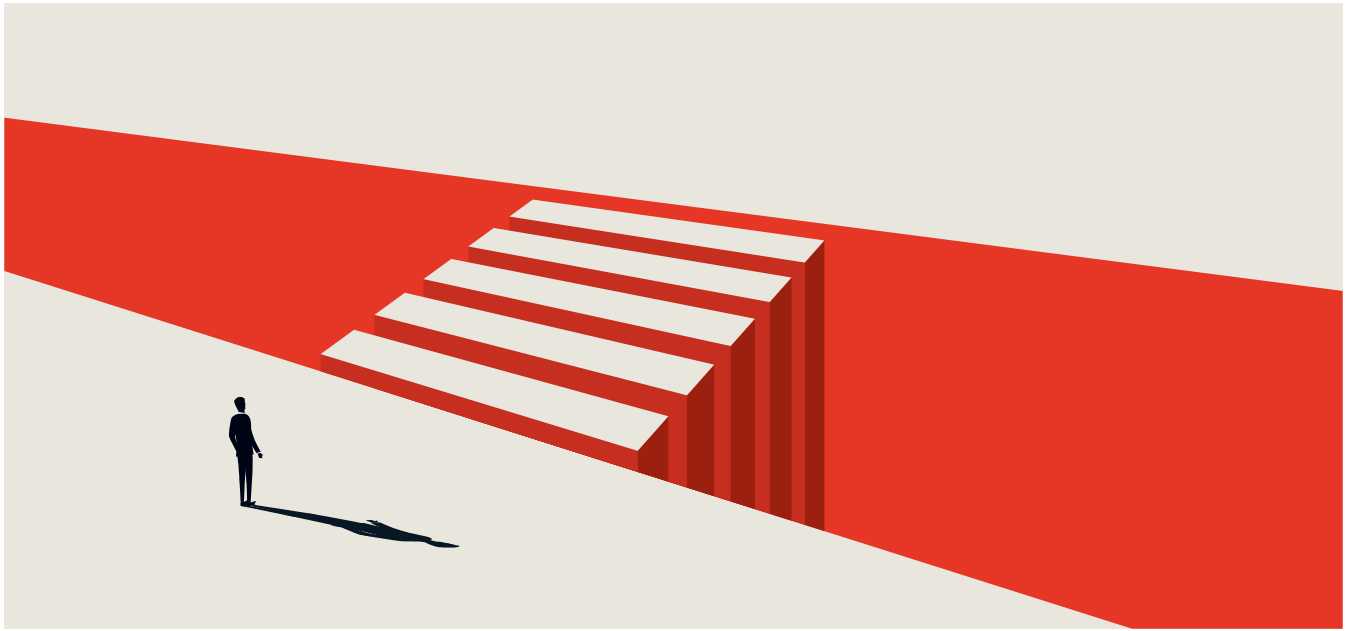
rent crisis, and the limited available resources in SMEs, leaders need to develop and implement decision making protocols to be able to remain agile and respond swiftly to any changes that may arrive and with minimum involvement.

Now, theories to survive a crisis is not hard to come by, however, the success relies on a tailored plan and its correct and timely execution. At Grant Thornton UAE, we can help you navigate through the current crisis, and construct the building blocks for your survival and your future growth. History has witnessed some of the best companies to have been created amidst the worst crises- Apple, Disney, IBM, and Microsoft are a few examples. That said, it is definitely a possibility for SMEs and entrepreneurs to not only survive the current circumstances, but to grow and prosper from it. Considering market and industry changes, developing a plan to scale the business, and transforming the operating model and existing processes are great places to start. Investing in a mindset of agility and a structure that supports it creates the best foundation for small businesses to grow big, and to remain strong. ■



Hisham Farouk is the CEO of Grant Thornton UAE. With over 20 years of experience working with some of the largest groups in the region, Hisham is also a member of the Board of Governors for Grant Thornton, driving the strategic direction of the brand globally as well as in the Middle East. Hisham is well known within the region as being a specialist within this business arena. He advises numerous financial institutions in the UAE in relation to regulatory and compliance matters and has supported many firms in dispute resolution, acting as an expert witness on a number of arbitration cases across the industry, in particular hospitality, real estate and construction, aviation, and FMCG. [grantthornton.ae](http://grantthornton.ae)





## Break through

WHAT YOUR BUSINESS SHOULD FOCUS ON AS IT NAVIGATES THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

by MIKE HOFF

While it is critical to manage your P&L account by reducing any unnecessary operating costs, improving margins, and payroll cost, nothing is more critical to your business than the oxygen that we know as cash, which will be under tremendous pressure as revenues dry up during the economic slowdown we are being subject to today owing to the coronavirus pandemic. With this being the case, here are three key areas I'd recommend businesses to focus on in these unprecedented times.

First up would be your cash conversion cycle, which is a reference to how fast cash moves through your business, and into your bank account. In these times, when a lot of businesses are moving to an online environment, think of ways to speed cash through your business by improving your sales cycle, reducing inventory to free up cash, improving ways to deliver your product or service, and finally, improving your billing and payment cycle as well. The second area to focus on would be an analysis of all products and services that you provide, rank them in order of profitability, and then remove the least profitable from your portfolio.

The third area is to fine tune your labor's productivity. This is known as a labor efficiency ratio, where you calculate how much gross profit you earn per labor hour spent. The aim here is to increase this number by either increasing your gross profit, or reducing your labor cost. Finally, regarding cash, ensure that you are checking your cash balance daily, and have a rolling 12-month cash flow forecast in place consistently. This will identify any future time where cash may be short in supply.

Now, it is highly likely that your current business plan is completely redundant at this time, and this has a very paralyzing impact on any business as the leadership tries to work out what to do. Given the current remote working paradigm that many companies have put into place, it's now time to run your first virtual business planning session. This can be easily achieved by using platforms such as Zoom or other video conferencing apps.

The agenda for this session should be broken down into where do we want to be in December 2020 in terms of results and initiatives, then breaking this down into monthly targets. In order to achieve this, you must identify only the top 3-5 priorities that you will focus on during this time. Once these priorities have been set, it's very important to put the right key performance indicators in place to keep you on track, as well as to communicate these on a very regular basis with your team.

My final recommendation would be to establish an effective communication rhythm, and I'd suggest a morning virtual huddle with your team where you will celebrate successes from the day before, track your key numbers, identify each members priorities for the day, and flag areas where people are stuck and require support. This should take no more than 15 minutes every day.

Weekly hour-long virtual team meetings should be held, ideally at the beginning of the week where you will track your performance against the KPIs identified, share feedback from customers and suppliers, and use the rest of the hour solving the biggest issue facing the company that week. By forming these habits, you will not only ensure you will navigate these storming waters in a more controlled way, but it will also establish good routines for when this current crisis passes- which is the one thing we can be certain of. ■



Mike Hoff is CEO of MHC Consulting and Regional Group Manager of The Alpha Group. [mhc.consulting](http://mhc.consulting)



# THE ROAD AHEAD

How your small business can survive the COVID-19 pandemic **by SHAHZAD BHATTI**

There's no doubt that small businesses will be the hardest hit from the current COVID-19 pandemic. The bigger businesses have a better chance of surviving; however, small businesses tend to live only with a few months of cash flow (at most), so when something as significant as this hits, it can be devastating not only for the small business owner, but also for the employees they support. So, how can small businesses survive the turbulent times coming ahead in 2020? There's no easy answer; however, here are a few points to start implementing and planning at least for the next three months.

## **1/ Don't panic, take care of yourself, and keep calm**

This can be difficult especially when cash is running out, but remember to take care of yourself in a way that works for you— for instance, eat well, and try to get some exercise in. Taking care of yourself will help you to keep calm, which in turn will also mean keeping your staff calm, and ultimately, a healthier mindset for everyone to come up with innovative

ideas to move forward. If faced with some difficult decisions, take time to balance yourself and your mind before taking any drastic decisions. In what is a very dynamic and rapidly changing situation, sometimes taking a step back to reassess, asking for trusted opinions, and also keeping perspective will help. Things will get better, and you aren't in this alone. Ask for emotional support where you can, and when you need it.



**WHEREVER POSSIBLE, TRY YOUR BEST TO KEEP YOUR STAFF— THEY RELY ON YOU, AND IF YOU HAVE MANAGED A GOOD TEAM, THEY SHOULD BE SUPPORTING YOU. YOU COULD TRAIN YOUR EXISTING STAFF ON ADDITIONAL SKILLS, WHICH COULD MAKE THEM MORE PRODUCTIVE AND EFFICIENT, RATHER THAN HIRING MORE STAFF.**

## 2/ Tap into resources provided by government and financial institutions

Governments around the world are already putting together initiatives to support small business owners, and this is something that is evolving on a daily basis. Be up to date with how your governments can help cut costs, as well as other important institutions, such as banks who also have a social responsibility. If you're registered in more than one market, explore support options in both markets. For example, you can find out more about the UK government support for small businesses there, and we are also waiting to hear from the Dubai government about a stimulus package to support SMEs in Dubai, which should be announced shortly.

## 3/ Make a three-month financial plan

Every small business usually has the same key expenses, which include employee salaries, office rent, and utility bills. Further expenses range from industry to industry. Speak to who you need to pay in the next three months (landlord and suppliers), and find out what options you have to spread out the costs. Chances are they may already have options in place, or will be understanding, as it's in their interest to keep your business. Always be careful when you come up with payment plans with other small businesses, as they also need to keep afloat too, so this should be fair for both of you.

Look at your personal finances, and speak to people you may support to have a realistic discussion on how to control your personal spending for the next three months. What costs are necessary, what can be put on hold? If you have a partner supporting you as you grow your business as the breadwinner, have an open and honest discussion with them about your immediate and long-term plans for the business. Also, look at ways you can cut costs. But use this as a last measure after we have seen at least two months of damage from the COVID-19 pandemic. Your biggest costs would usually be your staff and your office rent. You could perhaps freeze hiring any more full-time employees, and instead work on a project basis with freelancers. You could also consider downsizing your office, and using a co-working space to have more affordable and flexible payment terms.

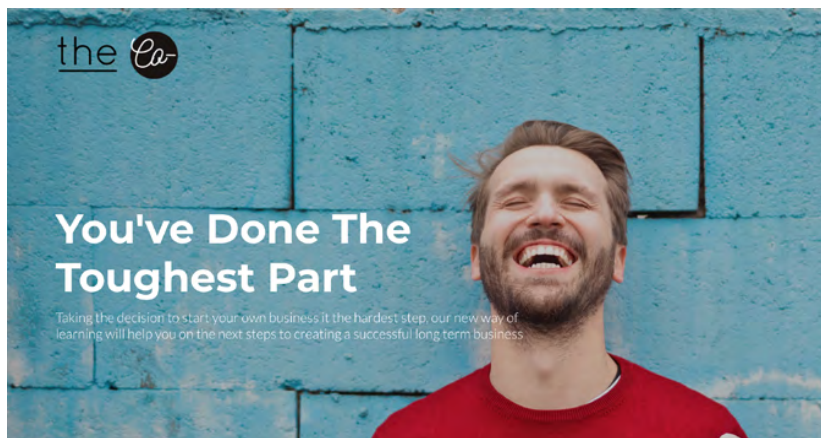
## 4/ Find the opportunities

It's never nice to capitalize on events such as this, but they can also be a wake-up call to reconsider how you have been doing business. In this case, is your business model able to survive the changes that will come from the COVID-19 pandemic? How do you expect your customers to behave moving forward? What will and won't matter

to them, and how can you accommodate who will likely be a new type of customer? Can you digitize any of your products or services, and start offering them online? Can you implement technology to balance any loss of earnings by offering new ways to connect with your customers?

## 5/ Upskill your staff

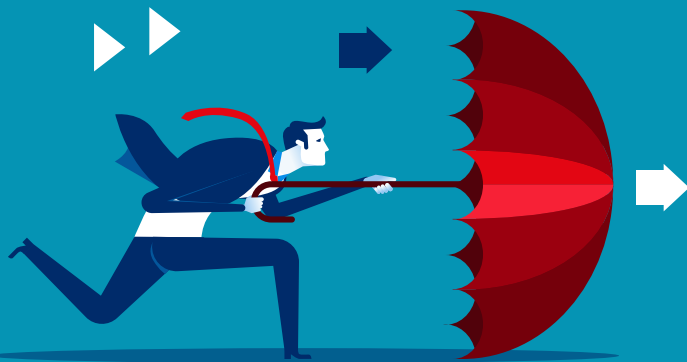
Wherever possible, try your best to keep your staff— they rely on you, and if you have managed a good team, they should be supporting you. You could train your existing staff on additional skills, which could make them more productive and efficient, rather than hiring more staff. There's plenty of online courses that are very affordable, and these will allow them to focus on other areas of the business when their department is down— for instance, your sales team could perhaps also help out the marketing team. We at The Co-Dubai top 3-5 have launched an e-course on digital marketing for small businesses that is a great way to learn how to create digital marketing strategies and implement them, and it can be done from home while you or your team is self-isolating. Look for courses and resources similar to this that most match your needs and also your budget during this time. ■



# ADAPTING TO A NEW REALITY

HOW LEADERS CAN WEATHER THE IMPACT OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ON THEIR BUSINESSES

by LAHCEN HADDAD



**T**he whole world is groaning under the impact of the rapid spread of the coronavirus (COVID-19), which has struck more than 160 countries and killed thousands of people in China, Italy, Iran, and Spain. The virus is, as we speak, aggressively spreading in France, the UK, and the United States, while other less affected countries (in Europe, Asia, MENA, Africa, and elsewhere) are rushing to take draconian measures to thwart the rapid outbreak of the epidemic. The World Health Or-

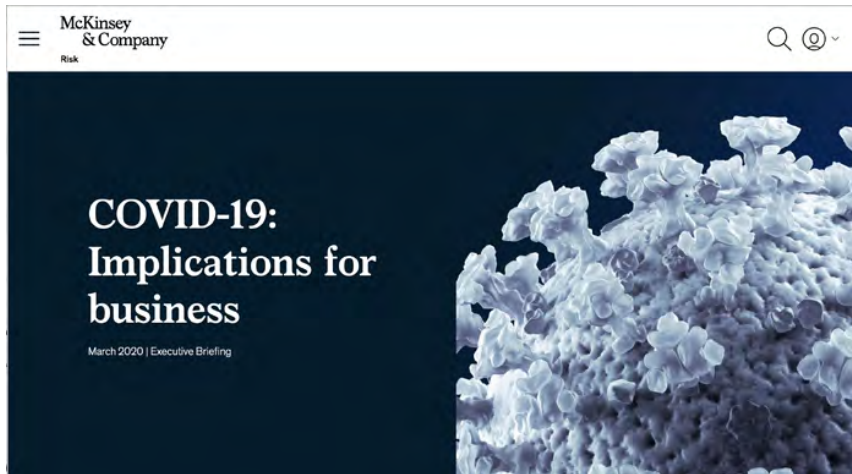
ganization (WHO) considers COVID-19, which has affected large numbers of people on several continents, a pandemic.

No one knows as yet the extent of the economic impact of the pandemic. What is certain is that the paralysis of air traffic, the shutdown of tourism activities in almost all markets and destinations, the disruption of supply chains originating from or going through China, the rush to purchase goods in anticipation of health curfew restrictions, and the possible disruption of the labor market in many countries, all of

these will have a resounding negative impact on production and consumption and on global economic growth in 2020 and even in 2021.

Most businesses worldwide were totally unprepared for such a cataclysmic disruption. It is quite possible that some of them have plans to deal with crises that may arise in relation to public opinion or customer behavior, or to deal with a legal situation or a crisis of confidence in the brand, etc. But none had ever imagined a generalized as well as a large paralysis of world economy everywhere and at the same time. >>>





By Matt Craven, [Linda Liu](#), [Mihir Mysore](#), [Shubham Singhal](#), [Sven Smit](#), and Matt Wilson



Unprecedented times need well-thought solutions. Below is a set of precautionary measures to adapt to the reality of the pandemic and its impact on businesses and the economy, while waiting for the avalanche of bad news to settle down and allow us all to assess the damage. This advice is based on what we now know in late March 2020. The pandemic is still raging as we speak, and nobody can predict when and how it will end, or say for sure now what its impact is or will be. What is certain, at least as far as I am concerned, is that it will inevitably

**THE FIRST THING TO DO IS TO GET EVERYONE INTERESTED IN POST-CRISIS WORK. STAFF SHOULD REMAIN IN CLOSE CONTACT WITH CUSTOMERS AND EXPLAIN THE MEASURES YOU HAVE PUT IN PLACE, AND KEEP LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN WITH THEM THROUGHOUT THE CRISIS.**

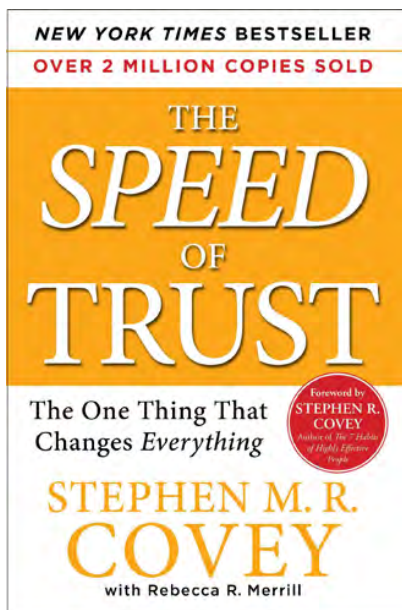
lead to an even deeper recession than the one caused by the 2008 financial crisis.

First, stay calm. Of course, it is difficult to control your nerves if you are the general manager of a hotel in Dubai, Paris, Marrakech, New York, Cape Town, Manila, or Barcelona, and you see reservations vanish like thin air, while the occupancy rate is nosediving at high speed. However, it is in times of crisis that your leadership is tested. You are the leader, and leaders, like pilots in times of turbulence, speak in a calm voice, to reassure, to inform, to lead, to set the example. Charles de Gaulle once said that "faced with crisis, the man of character falls back on himself. He imposes his own stamp of action, takes responsibility for it, makes it his own." Be the man or woman of character for the situation at hand. It's daunting for sure, but you will come out of it stronger if you lead with force and fortitude. Remember

Doe Zantamanta's famous saying: "It is only in our darkest hours that we may discover the true strength of the brilliant light within ourselves that can never, ever, be dimmed." Seek light within you and let it shine on your surroundings as hope; be the beacon that leads the tribe out of troubled waters.

However, as Arjen Boin, Sanneke Kuipers and Werner Overdijk have argued in an article called *Leadership in Times of Crisis: A Framework for Assessment*, leadership does not just mean taking symbolic action, but focusing on real issues through communication and critical decisions related to work management, production, relationships with customers, suppliers, and the public at large. Start by protecting yourself, your collaborators, your staff, and your customers. The advice of health authorities should be followed to the letter. You can rely on the WHO note, *New Coronavirus (COVID-19): Advice to the General Public* to establish clear protocols that apply to every transaction or contact within your business. It is true that employees, customers, and collaborators will not change their behavior overnight; therefore, the extent to which the instructions are followed should be assessed daily, and regular drills should be carried out so that health safety rules become an integral part of daily work management.

Set up an ad-hoc committee to monitor the situation. The committee should include representatives from all relevant departments. The composition of the committee varies from sector to sector, and new members can be included as needed. The mission of this committee is to collect data, monitor the evolution of the situation on a regular basis, and inform top management decisions. Assessment must be regular and continuous, especially that government decisions, affecting your business, change on a daily basis. As Edwards Demming once said: "3% of the problems have figures, 97% of the problems do not." Getting data for the problem is your best way to monitor the situation and to make informed decisions. >>>



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Work to build confidence in times of crisis. As Stephen M.R. Covey explains in his famous book, *The Speed of Trust: The Factor That Changes Everything*, creating a culture of trust requires behaviors and attitudes based on transparency, honestly facing reality, laying the groundwork for mutual loyalty, correcting errors, good management of expectations, and a sense of accountability. In times of crisis, it is imperative to reinforce these attitudes on a daily basis, especially that employees and customers experience anxiety and fear as they live through the unnerving experience of shutdown, restrictions, and lower productivity. The toll on confidence may be far-reaching if you don't act on reinforcing trust. Even if you make difficult decisions about staff, it should happen in an atmosphere of openness, transparency, and mutual trust.

Communicate regularly. Tell your staff, your partners, collaborators, suppliers, and customers all the news. Give them a real sense of the damage. There is no use in hiding or delaying the publication of some news, as everybody knows that businesses are bleeding. Make sure everyone is informed of the decisions you have taken, no matter how painful they are. Keep everybody informed as the situation unfolds. Be the first to tell your bad news and your good news. Own the situation, despite the fact that COVID-19 is not of your own making. Remember that "rumors,"

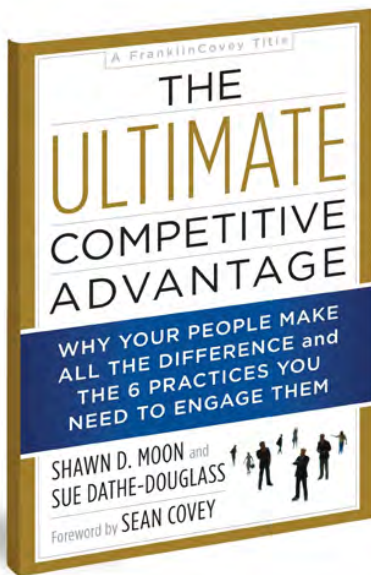
as Paul Barton said, "are created to fill the information void." The "void" is a space that is normally yours, but you choose to leave it empty for others to occupy, if you do not communicate. Make sure also you tell all stakeholders of your plan for recovery once the storm settles down.

Keep your employees, don't fire them. At times of distress, the values of solidarity must prevail. Preserving employees' livelihoods at a time when job opportunities are almost non-existent is an ethical question, of course. But it makes good business sense as well. Protecting human resources is an investment in the future. If you downsize and things go back to normal in a few weeks, you will be wasting valuable time looking for new talent at a time when what you need are people with already a good knowledge of customers and products to help you quickly restore your position in the market. Always remember the famous saying by Doug Conan, former President and CEO of the Campbell Soup Company, "to win in the marketplace, you must first win in the workplace." To come out of a crisis ready to "kick back," keep and protect your best ambassadors to your customers, i.e. your employees.

Shawn D. Moone and Sue Dathe-Douglas in their book, *The Ultimate Competitive Advantage, Why Your People Make All the Difference and the Six Practices You Need to Engage Them*, said that Western Digital faced a real crisis when a devastating and prolonged flood struck Thailand in the summer of 2011 and almost destroyed the Bang Pa-In Industrial Park north of Bangkok where its production units were located. While most companies downsized and waited for the waters to recede, Western Digital mobilized all its staff to use their hands and any kinds of tools they could find to clean and

prepare for the post-flood period. Some staff members rowed on boats to report to work and help with the cleaning. When the waters receded a few months later, Western Digital was ready to go to business, its workforce more motivated than ever before; they were proud they did not give up when their company did not give up on them.

Create a flexible plan that takes into account all possible scenarios. The McKinsey Institute, in an article called *COVID-19: Implications for Business*, describes two scenarios for epidemic development based on how different governments are managing the spread of the pandemic. Either a progressive control of the pandemic by mid-April starting from East Asia, then Europe and North America, or the pandemic worsens and the situation remains unchanged until May or June. On this basis, McKinsey experts have developed two different scenarios of the economic impact of the pandemic. First scenario: "large-scale quarantines, travel restrictions, and social-distancing measures drive a sharp drop in consumer and business spending until the end of Q2," which, in turn, will lead to an economic recession. Low consumption and plummeting consumer confidence will continue through Q3 of the year, and it will have a negative impact on business and could lead to workers layoffs





## “IN A CRISIS, BE AWARE OF THE DANGER- BUT RECOGNIZE THE OPPORTUNITY.”

JOHN F. KENNEDY

(ibid.). Central bank interventions will continue with "quantitative easing" (buying guaranteed bonds to infuse money into the market), but their effect will remain limited.

The second scenario is prolonged recession throughout the year, and a sharp drop in demand, and the emergence of a deep crisis in the labor market (due to massive layoffs), and persistent and sharp volatility in the financial markets. Only the banks will be spared this time because they have a good capitalization and are subject to strict prudential supervision (ibid). You must therefore clearly study the impact of these possible changes on the sector in which you work and develop an adequate plan. The first thing to do is to get everyone interested in post-crisis work. Staff should remain in close contact with customers and explain the measures you have put in place, and keep lines of communication open with them throughout the crisis. You should also take advantage of the period of low demand and production to repair internal systems, straighten value chains, perform internal reconfigurations, and prepare everybody for the recovery period.

John F. Kennedy, who lived through the Bay of Pigs (1961-62) crisis that almost developed into a nuclear war, had said that “the Chinese use two brush strokes to write the word 'crisis.' One brush stroke stands for danger; the other for opportunity. In a crisis, be aware of the danger- but recognize the opportunity.” It is at the time of crisis that you get ready for the post-crisis period; when things get back to normal, it will be too late to plan and prepare.

Study your needs in capital and insurance coverage. The American Small

Business Association published a note called *Coronavirus: Guidelines for Small Business* containing a series of recommendations, consisting of assessing the need for capital to compensate for the lack in liquidity, reviewing insurance contracts to fit the new reality created by COVID-19, and assessing the risk of disruption in the supply chains. The disruption could come from customers as well. In so many countries, consumers have rushed to market stores in huge numbers “overbuying” in fear of a possible shortage in food and other consumer goods. This could put you under pressure as a producer, distributor, or service provider (hotel or restaurant) whose business depends on the same goods coveted by nervous citizens these days. You must diversify your sources of supply to be able to make up for shortage or meet temporary higher demand for your products.

Finally, as Martin Reeves, Nikolaus Lang, and Philip Carlsson Szlezak confirm in an article published in *Harvard Business Review* called *Lead Your Business Through the Coronavirus Crisis*, you should now think about the lessons you could learn from the crisis, and prepare already for the next crisis. It means not only psychological and intellectual preparation, but a real planning for the possibility of it happening at any time. In 2017, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates, in an op-ed in *Business Insider*, warned that the next epidemic could be “a super contagious and deadly strain of the flu,” and said that epidemics are the biggest challenges the world would know in the next few years. The international community should devise mechanisms, tools and protocols to deal with pandemics without shutting off the economy; the same goes for businesses; they must consider epidemics an inevitable risk, just like other risks. Are you epidemic risk-ready? ■

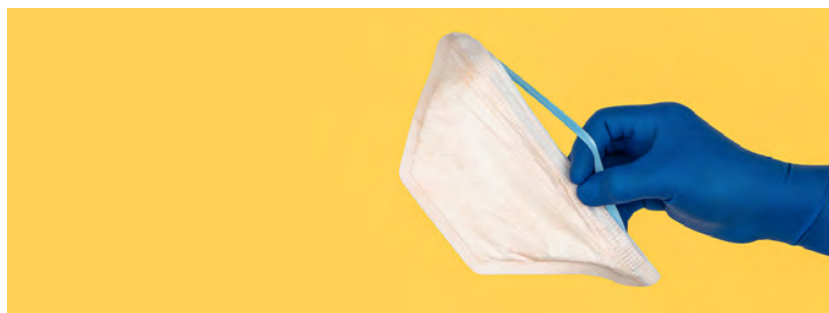
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## Lead Your Business Through the Coronavirus Crisis

by [Martin Reeves](#), [Nikolaus Lang](#) and [Philipp Carlsson-Szlezak](#)



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Lahcen Haddad has been Minister of Tourism with the Government of Morocco between 2012 and 2016. As Minister, he has overseen the shift of Morocco towards becoming a leading destination in the Mediterranean, Africa and the Middle East and a reference country with regards to sustainable tourism. Before joining the government in January 2012, Dr. Haddad worked as an international expert in strategic studies, democracy, governance and development, and as a certified expert in strategic planning, monitoring and evaluation, diversity and entrepreneurship. His involvement in programs and

studies of national and international importance endowed him with a mastery of geostrategic issues, economic development, public policy, international relations and issues of governance at local and international levels. Haddad also taught as a university professor for over 20 years with institutions such as Indiana University, Saint Thomas Aquinas College in New York, the School of International Training in Vermont, Mohamed V University in Rabat and Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane. At the World Learning School of International Training, he was for ten years the Academic Director for the SIT Morocco Program and area thought leader for the Academic Directors community.



For most, the idea of remote working is just that- an idea, never put into practice. Some businesses will have already adopted flexible working as standard, in line with changing lifestyles and a more switched-on world. In the US alone, there was a 159% increase in people working remotely from between 2005-2017, with more sectors opting into this kind of culture. Still, there will be companies now struggling to pivot, having lagged behind in adapting their strategies in the past, or belong to a sector that is primarily front-facing, such as those in the food or fitness industries.

For the latter, there will be a different set of obstacles instead of archaic management structures to face, yet, we've already seen examples of businesses getting creative when working at a distance. Personal trainers have filmed online sessions and webinars, whilst food hubs are creating do-it-yourself (DIY) kits or offering free delivery, so everyone can still enjoy the experience at home. Prior to lockdown, this may not have been a core part of their business model, yet, their active response is likely to be well remembered by their consumers once this crisis is over.

Still, one thing is certain- it won't be an easy transition, but with every challenge lies an opportunity, and as the majority of offices move online, we have a chance to implement effective remote work protocols that go beyond a knee-jerk response to the outbreak, and instead lays the foundation for a more digitally-minded future. Ultimately, it's up to us all to create a framework that brings remote working to the forefront, not as a last resort or even as an alternative option, but perhaps even as the primary way to work moving forward.

If that sounds too bold or daring, consider the circumstances that have led us here, and what we all now face on a global scale- things have to change. Whilst the future of work has long been a topic up for exploration (a welcome keynote at each World Economic Forum Summit), few could have predicted how this pandemic would light a fire under the discussion. The fourth industrial age is here, and with it, the tools and technology we

# Going the distance

Why **remote working** is the key to a flexible future **by CARLA SALIBA**

**T**here are few things in life that can make the world stop and take a collective pause. I can recall only a handful of incidents during my lifetime, like the horror of 9/11, or the fear that accompanied the financial crash of 2008. But the coronavirus pandemic- this is something very new and different. The outbreak, and our subsequent handling of it, will fundamentally change our working lives as we know it.

Mass quarantines, closures, and cancellations are forcing our hand, challenging the working world to adapt, and adapt fast. At times such as this, it's helpful to remember that we're all in this together. All facing the unknown. All uncertain of what will come next. Remote working on this scale will undoubtedly be a challenge, but there is no longer a choice for compliance- it's essential we get to grips with this sooner rather than later.



Carla Saliba is the founder of Infographic.ly, a data-design and visualization agency based in Dubai, supporting companies communicate data to its stakeholders clearly and effectively. [infographic.ly](http://infographic.ly)



## EVEN BEFORE THE CORONAVIRUS FORCED THIS CHANGE, THE WORKING LANDSCAPE WAS ALREADY BECOMING MORE DYNAMIC AND FLUID; THE 9-5 OFFICE LIFE NO LONGER CONSIDERED THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY TO MEASURE PRODUCTIVITY.

need to move the conversation forward, putting safeguards in place so that if we were ever to face anything like this again, we'd be better prepared as a nation.

Even entrepreneurs and SMEs, who are arguably more agile than the big corporates, have an opportunity here to better hone how they work. They are also best placed to guide others on making the shift to remote working more successful, especially as the lines between work and home will continue to blur into normality, at least for the foreseeable future. In my company, Infographic.ly, we adopted a partial remote working culture from inception, opting to become 100% fully remote/flexible a few years ago, so for companies like us, our operations have remained intact, albeit with a reduced output as a result of the current economic climate.

What's clear to me is that there are always lessons to be learnt in times of distress. It's when we as the human race rally and adapt as we have done throughout history. As the dust begins to settle over the coming weeks, we'll see efficiencies start to come under the microscope, with businesses realizing that for the most part, "office life" can still continue in a virtual setting. We've all seen that meme on social media about meetings that could have been emails, and beyond the humor here, there's truth to these words. We should take this time to really review our working structure, and identify ways in

which we can all be leaner in our operations. Arguably, without everyday distractions, this is when we can be at our most creative, free from the general monotony of life!

Even before the coronavirus forced this change, the working landscape was already becoming more dynamic and fluid; the 9-5 office life no longer considered the most effective way to measure productivity. Over the years, we've been fortunate to work with some great global clients (BCG US, for one) and our communication has always been managed remotely. We've never met face-to-face, and yet we operate as an extension of their office through online chat or email. It's an effective and efficient way to work that allows companies to extend their reach, without having to have a physical presence in each market they are active in.

This same principle ex-

tends to the workforce too. A survey done by Buffer in 2019 reported that 99% of employees questioned would like to work off-site for at least one point in their career. In our case, 60% of our employment network is based in Lebanon, and in times such as these, we're able to double down on supporting talent in the region and create new opportunities, because we already have this culture established. We're seeing this thinking become more of the norm for new mothers too, who often struggle with the work/life balance when they start a family. Two of our designers have found that remote working has afforded them the best of both worlds, with everyday life just running concurrently in the background. And, if I'm honest, a cute toddler entering the chat frame now and again is only going to improve your mood.

At the end of the day, no-one will come out of this unscathed or unchanged. There's a serious humanitarian issue at the heart of this pandemic, and we all need to be aware of how to flatten the curve by minimizing our contact with others. The economic ramifica-

tions are already happening as this situation unfolds, but I believe on the whole, we will come out of this stronger and more resilient than ever before. "Business as usual" no longer applies in today's climate, so we need to find a new, more relatable way to operate and grow our companies; an opportunity that remote working can afford us, but *only* if we go all in. Don't think of this as a stopgap solution, think of it as the next evolution of the working world.

2020 is already going to be remembered as the time when humanity went into lockdown, but I think it should stand for something else, something much stronger; the year that we turned the working world on its head and emerged in better shape than ever. Who's with me? ■

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AS THE DUST BEGINS TO SETTLE OVER THE COMING WEEKS, WE'LL SEE EFFICIENCIES START TO COME UNDER THE MICROSCOPE, WITH BUSINESSES REALIZING THAT FOR THE MOST PART, "OFFICE LIFE" CAN STILL CONTINUE IN A VIRTUAL SETTING.





# CRISIS COMMS

A four-point checklist for **effective brand communication** through the coronavirus outbreak by **ANASTASIYA GOLOVATENKO**

**T**he coronavirus outbreak has put almost every country in the world on alert impacting businesses and economies.

Brands are faced with tough decisions in the wake of the global health crises, forcing individuals to adapt to evolving conditions. In the wake of a global crisis, effective communication strategies are more important than ever, and providing transparent and consistent communication is key.

Timely communication during a crisis goes a long way, and it can spell the difference between a brand's survival -even enhancement- and its irreversible tarnishing. The best example for this would be the 1982 case of Johnson & Johnson's immediate response on the death of

seven individuals after consuming their best-selling painkiller, Extra Strength Tylenol. The company established a set of best practices for communicating in a crisis, including speaking early, often, and directly with its consumers, resulting in the company to regain 95% of market share within a few months, and ultimately enhancing the company's reputation.

Here's a quick checklist for brands on how businesses can sustain their brand voice, keep the communication channel open with customers and other stakeholders, while also maintaining their calm:

**1/ CONDUCT A SWOT ANALYSIS** Assess the various risks associated with your business in times of a crisis, and identify functional leaders

from across the organization to prioritize the issues that need to be communicated to relevant stakeholders. Businesses should communicate relevant updates from various verticals such as supply chain, human resources, operations, health and safety, and more. Ask yourself these important questions: what processes do you have or need? What emergencies should you plan for? What are your strengths and where is the weakest point? Prioritize issues of urgency, and address the impacts of the circumstances on the industry. At this stage, it is important to identify what value can be provided as an organization to the wider community. During the crisis outbreak, it is now more crucial than ever to keep an eye on updates related to the industry

as well as monitor government announcements. Set up keywords monitoring to be aware of the latest news 24/7; this will help your business respond fast to any changes on the market or in your sector.

**2/ CONDUCT A MARKET AND AUDIENCE ANALYSIS (AND GO ONLINE)** Review your audiences' needs and assess what value can your brand provide. Segment your audience to communicate the information based on their priorities and needs. Communicate regularly with customers, partners, staff, and be proactive with communities. Live streaming is now an option, and webinars are becoming even more popular. It is important to share facts in real time, and approach all efforts individually based on the current scenario. Armed with industry insights, it is now more important to develop a communication plan that covers what you will do, when, and how. Define key messages for a number of scenarios, and be prepared to handle any incident that may incur. It is important that every brand is able to handle the crisis, and is backed up with reliable facts, media-trained spokespeople, and the right channels for delivery.

**3/ BECOME AN AUTHORITY IN YOUR SECTOR** Produce expert-level content that carries insightful and useful info. Remember, everyone is looking for a measured, reliable, and authoritative voice, whether in print, video, live or online. This voice will need to provide advice on reason, and bring calm to the storm. Tailor your message to your audiences and utilize digital and social media channels available to



Anastasiya Golovatenko is an accomplished PR professional and business advisor who leads a Dubai-based communications consultancy Sherpa Communications. With more than 12 years of expertise developing and executing all aspects of public relations and marketing campaigns, she provides senior counsel to brands of any size and structure, helping them achieve business objectives and meaningful results through the strategic use of communication. [sherpacomms.com](http://sherpacomms.com)



you: website, LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube. Social media is an indispensable source of vital information— we live in a 24/7 news cycle world. Social networks have matured in terms of their functionality, and consumers are jumping on to social media channels to look for directives, making it the easiest way for brands to reach their audience. But do remember, with the amount of fake news circulating on social media, businesses need to deliver content that is credible, backed up by data and facts.

COMMUNICATE REGULARLY WITH CUSTOMERS, PARTNERS, STAFF, AND BE PROACTIVE WITH COMMUNITIES. LIVE STREAMING IS NOW AN OPTION, AND WEBINARS ARE BECOMING EVEN MORE POPULAR.

#### 4/ RESHAPE THE WAY HOW YOU CONDUCT BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

Conduct webinars to educate, share expertise, reconnect with business partners, clients, and vendors. Consider public service sessions, such as streaming live sessions solo or with experts who can legitimately discuss the topic. Such online activities are a safe way to interact with your industry network and consumers while supporting them with valuable advice and keeping that retention level high. To keep your business communication efficient, dive into the diverse world of business apps like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Screenflow (video conferencing tool for remote communication), Slack, Twist, Google Chats Hangout (messaging apps for the whole team), while project management can be carried out using Trello, Asana, and Monday. ■

## CONTENT COMES FIRST

### A PR checklist for entrepreneurs dealing with the COVID-19 crisis

by LOUISE JACOBSON

What can entrepreneurs be doing PR-wise in this time of crisis and uncertainty? Many companies in the region have had to make budget cuts across all lines of business, so I hope this checklist at least helps someone who maybe doesn't have PR support right now.

**1. DO A STAKEHOLDER SENSE CHECK** You're probably on this already, but if not, talk to all your stakeholders involved with comms and decision making as soon you can. Garnering their collective viewpoints will ensure you have everyone's input from the start, and it will help shape your new strategy and make next steps easier.

**2. DEFINE OBJECTIVES AND STRATEGY** Your objective may be survival right now. Or it could be looking at attracting a new audience. Either way think strategically about opportunities that can make a difference, and align PR and comms to it, but whatever you do, do not benefit from this situation and people's misfortune. A phased PR strategy is a solid idea. What do you need to do right now? And what will you do when this is over? Because it will be at some point.

**3. RE-EVALUATE YOUR PLANS** The comms plan you had last month, or even last week, is now defunct. Relook at all your plans now, get a new one in place, and keep refining it as often as you can. Things are changing all the time and you need to make sure you're adapting in all areas of marcomms.

**4. BE HUMAN** Your overall positioning and tone of voice should be one of safety, empathy, all delivered in a human way. Soften language, banish corporate jargon, and ensure sensitivity. Now more than ever, your audience wants to see and hear from human beings.

**5. SHOWCASE STRONG LEADERSHIP** You need to show this now more than ever. Ensure clarity, empathy, and strength via all communications. Have you spoken to all your clients and re-assured them? Are you checking in daily with team members working remotely? Could you look at some video content to convey your message in a more human way to inspire confidence with your stakeholders?

**6. PREPARATION IS KEY** Ensure you have statements prepared for all possible scenarios you can think of. Have you prepared for an employee contracting COVID-19 and it escalating to media? Have you got social media Q&As for customer concerns on hygiene? Handling this correctly is vital. This is where brand trust can be won and lost in an instant.

**7. KEEP COMMUNICATING REGULARLY** Don't go quiet. Even if your business has been impacted, keep talking. Government directives are changing daily, and you have a duty of care to reassure people that you're complying with them and will keep them updated as things develop. Keep talking and listening to your audience and customer base, the beauty of social media is that you can have a two-way conversation.

**8. BUILD CREATIVE CONTENT** A content-led approach is a great strategy for your marcomms right now, and it can be very cost-effective— all you really need is a decent smartphone and internet access. Remember this isn't a time to benefit, it's a time to show you care— e.g. if you're a management consultant, could you release some content on how organizations should be temporarily re-structuring their businesses, or give some practical tips on working from home and keeping employees motivated? Get creative, but in an empathetic and authentic way.

**9. GIVE BACK** We all need to help each other get through this, so what can your business do to make a difference? Can it donate money to charity? Could your manufacturing facility produce garments for those on the front line of COVID-19, or can you help with the distance learning movement? If you make a positive impact right now, you will generate brand affinity, and people will remember it. Whatever you do, please make sure it's within legal guidelines.

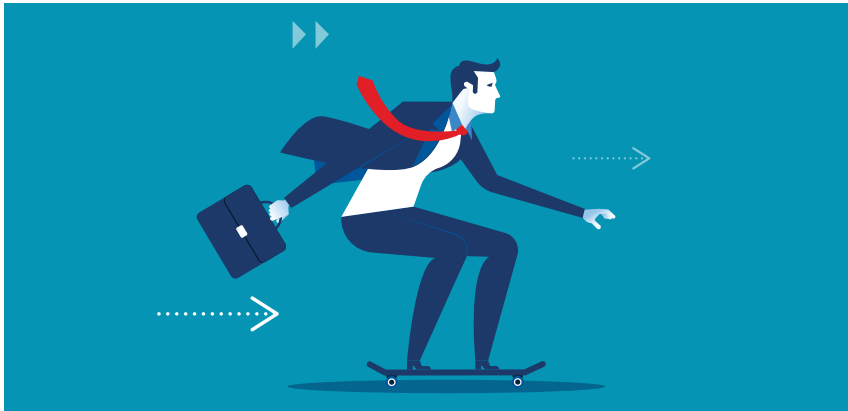
#### 10. STRESS ON MEASUREMENT AND ANALYSIS

This is still fundamental to ensuring what you're doing is working in the right way. Yes, the quantitative metrics are still important, but more important are the qualitative ones, bearing in mind it's all about humanization of our activity right now. Looking at the comments on social media posts and getting feedback from stakeholders will ensure that you stay on track.

Stay safe, stay strong, and remember, this too shall pass. ■



Louise Jacobson is the Managing Partner of Brazen MENA, a MEPRA and PRCA MENA Small Consultancy of the year 2019 and 2020. She has 18 years of experience across all sectors of PR and has worked in Europe and The Middle East. Louise is a MEPRA Strategy Board member, Global Women in PR MENA member and industry awards judge.



**Can be refocused in meaningful ways to be relevant today**

If you have a campaign that naturally lends itself to being re-focused to fit the current crisis situation, then you have yourself a plan. Don't force relevancy if it doesn't naturally exist, and don't provide any misleading or sensational information.

**Cannot be explicitly refocused, but can still be relevant today**

If your campaigns can't be refocused, no problem. There are many journalists right now looking for ethical, positive stories to add variety to their news coverage. Just be mindful of remaining empathetic with the current situation.

**Cannot be refocused, and is not relevant at all today**

For campaigns that simply don't have a place right now, keep them on the backburner, and maybe you'll even have time to refine them further, and prepare for an epic launch when the time allows for it.

# Hit the ground running

Seven steps for PR professionals to take in times of crisis **by LAMA ABDELBARR**

In times of crisis and uncertainty, we find ourselves asking a lot of questions about how to cope. Humans, by nature, seek comfort and order. So, to shape up when the going gets tough, here's a list of seven steps that PR and communications professionals can start taking right now:

**1/ IMPLEMENT (OR PUT TOGETHER) YOUR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

Ideally, you should have a crisis comms plan in place for your business or your clients. If not, it's not too late to start putting one together using a plethora of useful templates available online and by following the below steps. Set up real-time alerts to monitor relevant mentions, news alerts, updates, or guidelines that your team and company should be aware of. Not only is this important to stay informed and shape your reactive communications strategy, but it will also help you with the following two steps.

**2/ COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND CONSISTENTLY WITH STAKEHOLDERS**

Create safety and security through empathetic and consistent communication. Make sure you're speaking to both your internal and external stakeholders as you navigate through changing times.

**Internal stakeholders (employees)**

A successful company is built on its people, before anything else. Make sure you are communicating with them regularly, transparently, and swiftly.

**External stakeholders (clients or investors)**

Again, be clear and transparent about the changes your business is inevitably undergoing. Update them as regularly as needed. Share concrete details about how this will impact them. Have your hours of availability changed? Are your offerings changing? Invariably, clients and investors will have changes on their side too, and being honest and forthcoming is the best way to navigate these changes to reach a middle ground.

**Media** Believe it or not, during times of crisis, the media doesn't just want to cover the crisis. Diversity in news is always welcome and the media recognizes that their audience would appreciate positive news too. More on that below.

**3/ REVISIT YOUR PLANNED CAMPAIGNS AND OUTREACH**

Revisit any digital PR campaigns you had planned, and decide which of the three below categories they fit into:

**4/ FIND WAYS TO ADD VALUE**

This is not the time to upsell or take advantage of people's needs. Rather, this is a time where you can put (actually meaningful) corporate social responsibility strategies into place, or simply showcase the human side of your brand. Helping others is one of the most selfish selfless acts available to us, and during times of crises, we all need to feel a little good about ourselves, and share some positivity! If there is a way to balance between helping out and serving your business needs, that's lucky. If not, don't force it. Prioritize empathy.

**5/ STAY AGILE**

Yes, your daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly plans and forecasts will have to change. So will your yearly ones. This is the time to practice what we preach (or what we write on our CVs at least) about being agile. Start thinking about ways you can adapt your strategy, and accept the fact that there are a lot of variables and moving pieces. Can you reallocate your events or offline media budgets to online activities that can benefit your business? This is not to say that you should overthink and worry about worst case scenarios- but just start putting



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some initial thoughts on paper. Having a tangible starting point can do wonders to relieve stress and anxiety. Focus on your short-term plans and goals too to make sure you come out of this as strongly as possible.

### 6/ FOCUS ON ONE THING YOU CAN GROW FOR THE BUSINESS

How many times have you pushed the deadline on a nice-to-have but not essential project? How many times did you wish you had more time to streamline tasks, improve strategies, embellish templates, expand media and influencer lists,

etc.? Guess what? If your day-to-day work is slowing down, this could be the time to get these things done. This is also the right time to invest in your online offerings- enhancing user experience can be more important than ever right now.

### 7/ FOCUS ON ONE THING YOU CAN GROW FOR YOU

It's easy to think that the time freed up by reduced commute and social obligations should amount to many ticks on a seemingly endless personal to-do-list. But we are quickly starting to see that the sheer novelty and scope of the cur-

rent situation is taking a toll on our ability to focus and move forward. And that's okay. Set a realistic and achievable goal of one thing you would like to improve or grow during this unique time, so you can allow yourself to later enjoy the feeling of accomplishment. It could be as simple as reading a book, or as exerting as following through with a personal project, or signing up to an online course. Brushing up on new industry research and trends is also a good way to fill up slow days, and can help you feel better equipped to hit the ground running once order is restored. ■

## MONEY MATTERS

### HOW TO FINANCIALLY SUSTAIN YOUR BUSINESS OVER THE COURSE OF THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

by **NICHOLAS JOE CORREIA**

With the coronavirus pandemic tightening rules and restrictions around the world, it's natural for entrepreneurs and businesses to see a growing concern rise with respect to surviving this market. During these rough times, it is vital to take some time and understand the financial position of your business, and plan for multiple possible scenarios expected. If you are worried about the outcome of this slowdown, there are some financial moves you can make to protect your position. Here's how:

**1. IDENTIFY WAYS TO CUT BACK** The time for a cleanse is now. Dig into your ongoing expenses, and identify the ones you can eliminate. In this modern age, apps and softwares help us with our day-to-day tasks. It's a blessing and a luxury. But this is a time to ask yourself: "Do I need this?" Cost-cutting is not built for comfort. You will go through changes within your business, but every little effort will help you improve your financial health. Take it as an exercise to identify necessity, and cut out luxury.

**2. PLAN FOR EVERY OUTCOME** There is a best-case scenario, a worst-case scenario, and everything that falls in between. You cannot avoid the outcome, but you can prepare yourself for it. Run various scenarios through your cash flow projections. Revenue will take a big hit during this time. Payments will be slower than usual. Cash inflows will become a burden. At this moment, we cannot predict when this pandemic will end. As such, if you have devised a protocol for all possible outcomes, you'll be ready to let it take motion when the time comes.

**3. REVIEW YOUR DEBT** As uncertainty grows, so will the inquiries on debt settlement. Identify your current cash position, run through the numbers, and create a payment plan. At times like this, it is essential to maintain a cash flow balance. Do not pay out more than what comes in. Pay once you get paid. It may seem plausible to clear your

debt today. However, it may not be the best decision right now. Also, do not hesitate to reach out and ask for an extension. Everyone is in the same position as you are. We will all get through this together.

**4. FIND NEW SOURCES OF REVENUE** A change in the way businesses operate is not necessarily a bad thing. It opens the doors to a new opportunity. Ask yourself: "How can I operate a business and offer customers our services in this new business lifestyle?" Adapting to the changes in the economy is how businesses make it through difficult times. It is a new opportunity for your business to evolve in a new, unfamiliar market.

**5. PROTECT YOUR CASH FLOW** Cash is the oxygen to a business. It flows in and out, keeping the company alive. As long as you have it flowing in, you can make it work. You cannot have a business without cash outflows. A well-balanced cash flow maintains an equal and controlled level of cash inflows and outflows. Engage in new payment options to encourage cash flow. Offer early payment cashback if possible. Survival is the key element here. Always protect your cash position in this market.

**6. MAKE THE MOST OFF CURRENT CLIENTS** It is a time to support one another, and not gain off of the situation. Treat this as an opportunity to build loyalty with your clients. Offer them special rates to get through this. Be by their side, and maintain the relationship. After all, loyalty is the best investment a business can have. It protects future income and influences new ones.

These are the times to protect our financial position. Take every measure possible. At the end of the day, there is no definite way for a business to protect itself from financial difficulties, but it all boils down to taking smart decisions early on. Good luck! ■



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# THE NEW MARKET LANDSCAPE

The coronavirus pandemic versus the digital economy:  
the pitfalls and the opportunities by JAD HINDY

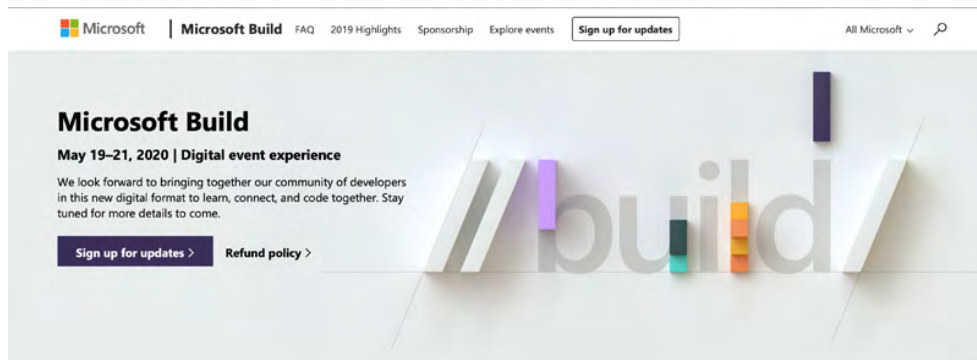


Several high-profile marketing events have been canceled due to coronavirus concerns. Unfortunately, many businesses won't see that money back. **But even in the wake of a pandemic, there could still be a silver lining for marketers.**

**W**ith businesses closing their doors and governments urging their citizens to stay home, the coronavirus has had a profound global impact. At MRM, the company I work for, we have shifted to working from home, and so far, we are still delivering on our projects, and keeping our promises to our clients. However, we can't deny that companies, particularly those dependent on marketing and advertising, are experiencing some of the biggest challenges. Several high-profile marketing events, including Mobile World Congress Barcelona, Facebook's Global Marketing Summit, F8 conferences, SXSW, Salesforce Dubai Basecamp and others have been canceled due to coronavirus concerns. Unfortunately, many businesses won't see that money back. But even in the wake of a pandemic, there could still be a silver lining for marketers.

**THE SHIFT TO DIGITAL**

According to analysts, Google will likely see a 15% decline year-over-year in travel ad revenue in the first quarter, and a 20% drop in the second quarter due to the coronavirus epidemic. Despite that, there is still good news. Not everyone sees budget-cutting as the answer. Tim Jensen, Campaign Manager at Clix Marketing, offered his insights on Search Engine Land: "As the tradeshow



circuit dwindles, some exhibitors are looking for other ways to fill their sales pipelines. I just talked with one client who is seeing several tradeshows get canceled, and wants to put more into digital to make up for the lost leads they usually pick up at events."



Tim Jensen, Campaign Manager at Clix Marketing

Another marketing shift is toward virtual events. Even Microsoft decided to turn its biggest event of the year, the Microsoft Build, a developer conference, into a virtual event. This trend presents an opportunity for virtual events startups like Hopin, which combines Twitch-style live streams of keynotes, Zoom-style video conferencing for groups, and one-to-one conversations. Even the banking industry is turning to digital. One example is South Africa's Nedbank. Nedbank plans to accelerate the rollout of its digital strategy across Africa as customers avoid face-to-face banking to reduce the risk of coronavirus. Its long-term target is for 75% of sales to be through digital channels, and for 70% of all its clients to be digitally active.

**"Better utilization of data and technology to drive more individualized consumer experiences is where this battle will be won or lost."**

But the shift to digital will only become stronger, as Stuart Mackay, General Manager at Reprise Dubai puts it: "This is the most significant health-related crisis that has fortunately happened in a truly digital age. During dark and uncertain times like these, it's imperative that organizations adapt quickly and seek out new growth opportunities. The realities of changing consumer behavior in the digital age presents a huge opportunity for retailers. The optimization and simplification of product lines, business models, customer engagement, and sales channels can all be

achieved through the introduction of digital technologies and e-commerce. Better utilization of data and technology to drive more individualized consumer experiences is where this battle will be won or lost."

**THE E-COMMERCE OPPORTUNITY**

In parts of China, major retailers like Starbucks, Nike, and Apple have temporarily shuttered their stores, while smaller retailers are being hit hard as foot traffic declines. Across the globe, the reduced in-store activity is driving increased e-commerce activity. For example, >>>



consumers in China are turning to online grocery shopping. According to French retailer Carrefour, vegetable deliveries increased by 600% year over year during the Lunar New Year period. JD.com, China's largest online retailer, has seen sales of everyday household items quadruple over the same period last year. As more consumers continue avoiding crowded public places, they'll increasingly turn to online shopping to get their essentials.

Of course, this could still bring strain to businesses who need to deal with potentially delayed deliveries or out-of-stock items because of increased demand. If you sell products on Amazon, for example, it is imperative not to run out of items to avoid being punished by Amazon's organic search and advertising algorithms. If a product is out of stock for over 30 days, it will be treated as if it has no sales history once it comes back in stock. This means that the product's ranking for its most important keywords will drop significantly and show up much lower in search results. The key thing for business owners is to keep products in stock, and be transparent with consumers if there are going to be any delays.

**ESPORTS TO FILL THE GAP**

With experts urging social distancing to combat the virus, one of the most obvious areas to be affected are sporting events. This represents a big blow to marketers and advertisers in terms of lost ticket sales and ad revenue. In the space of one day, every major sports league in the U.S. suspended operations for the next several weeks in response to the growing pandemic. Even esports are being affected, with the League of Legends Champions Korea (LCK) being canceled as more cases of coronavirus were confirmed in South Korea.

The flip side may be that esports could also step in and help fill the gap. For example, the start of the 2020 F1 season has been pushed back in the wake of the coronavirus outbreak, with the Australian Grand Prix canceled late last week, and the Bahrain and Vietnam races postponed shortly afterward. But that didn't stop F1 driver Lando Norris from taking part



in esports to satisfy the void. Norris, footballer Thibaut Courtois, and Formula E driver Stoffel Vandoorne competed against esports professionals and YouTube stars in a virtual Australian Grand Prix.

Joe Zoghbi, an esports expert who's the founder of Divine Vendetta, says "Esports was born digitally, and while it was paving its way in 2020 to more on-ground events, it is a step back for sure, nonetheless, the consumption of online gaming and esports events viewership will dramatically increase now, as we noticed in the current PUBG Mobile PMCO event. Currently, esports events are realistically the only source of live entertainment out there, new crowds will jump to take part of the action, and one way or another, brands will take notice even more and realize sooner rather than later than it's a must to be part

of this ecosystem." Unlike soccer or rugby, the billion-dollar world of esports doesn't require social gathering. With more live sporting events being suspended, there may be an opportunity for esports to attract a new audience.

**LESS COMPETITION = MORE MARKET SHARE**

During an economic downturn, you'll find that you will have less competition. In some cases, this means you'll be able to get deals- like a potential reduction in pay-per-click advertising. If the market continues to decline, many companies will struggle to pay off their debt, which means they could go bankrupt, get bought out, or get bailed out by the government. If you have cash on hand, this could be the best time to buy out other businesses- especially media companies. Because the more traffic you control, the more power you will hold in the future. Look at Neil Patel, co-founder of Neil Patel Digital. When he bought the KISSmetrics website for US\$500,000, they had over a million unique visitors a month. The moment he merged it into the NeilPatel.com site, he increased his lead count by 19%, and recuperated his investment in less than a year. In other words, now is your opportunity to capture market share.

While the coronavirus presents business risks in some areas, it also offers opportunities in others. As a marketer or entrepreneur, the key is to acknowledge the potential threats while exploring the possibilities. ■



Jad Hindy is currently the Regional Managing Director at MRM. Jad is a seasoned executive with over twenty years of experience in business setup, startups, marketing, communication and brand building across the Middle East and North Africa region. He has advised some of the biggest brands in the MENA region like Saudi Telecom, Jawwwy, Ooredoo, du, Etisalat, P&G, Virgin Mobile, Red Bull, Unilever, Qatar National Bank, McDonald's, Atlantis the Palm, Uber, EmiratesNBD, Aspire, Careem, Qatar Museum Authority, and others. Jad is also a serial entrepreneur with several successful exits (123vouchers, Netzency, ColNewMedia, Engaged Brands), and he is today a charter member and board member at *TIE Dubai*.

IMAGE © LANDO NORRIS / KISSMETRICS.COM



# Experience matters

HERE'S HOW (AND WHY) YOU SHOULD GET YOUR ENTERPRISE'S CX READY FOR A POST COVID-19 WORLD **by AMOL KADAM**



A team member today mentioned to me that we must approach a local grocery store chain to fix its customer experience, and that made me start thinking about this being a widespread issue among enterprises in the region. After all, if you were a business in the region, looking forward to 2020 with amazing hopes and plans tucked in your marketing armory, I am sure that, by now, all of those would have gone for a toss. If not, then give it a few more weeks- this invisible enemy called the coronavirus pandemic is taking a heavy toll on global consumer brands, especially on physical stores.

Some of you have already responded to this situation, and quickly resorted to digital channels to offset losses offline. It's also worth noting that in the place where the breakout started, China, brands are already leading in digital innovations on customer experience, while everywhere else, brands are catching up. As a business, if you were earlier finding excuses like "My customers aren't demanding (or ready for) online orders and fulfilment" to keep away from investing in a digital presence, you can rest assured that your clientele will most certainly be wanting that now.

Brands that have adopted digital and human-less experiences are the brands that are leading excellent customer experience during this period. So, while the priority is health and safety, business leaders have also been thrown another challenge in that they must consider how this growing pandemic will impact their customers and their experience with your brand. And this starts with an understanding of customer experience (CX), which is all about knowing and responding to customer's needs and expectations to improve (and encourage) their experience, satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy.

In usual times, many brands find it challenging to understand what drives this overall experience, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, loyalty and disloyalty. But in these unknown situations, where unexpected, extreme, and significant circumstances have been inflicted on the world, your customer's needs and expectations can evolve in rapid and surprising ways. Consider the Lunar New Year period in China, which saw a 25% rise in smartphone screen-time versus the same timeframe the last year. In Italy, the country most hit by the coronavirus pandemic after China so far, brands are already seeing increases in online traffic to their sites and social media. Brands must thus prepare for

increases in internet time and higher customer expectations of digital platforms and online response times. To capitalize on this change in customer behavior, and to maximize traffic conversion, brands must improve their digital/online experience. But, at the same time, it's imperative to adapt for this new norm where touch-free interfaces and touch-free customer experience will drive CX. For many brands in China, prioritizing digital investment and strengthening e-commerce offerings has been the primary solution to compensate for lost business. Amid this crisis, L'Oréal China moved all offline advertising budgets to only online, and saw its online make-up sales rise in February. >>>

**AS MOST OF US STRUGGLE, BRANDS DELIVERING AN OPTIMIZED, PERSONALIZED, AND TIMELY CX WILL GAIN STRENGTH. IN THE COMING WEEKS AND MONTHS, YOU MUST WORK TO PRIORITIZE YOUR ONLINE TOUCHPOINTS,**



## CONSIDER A CHANNEL IN WHICH A HYBRID CHATBOT CAN ADD A HUMAN TOUCH.

VIDEO INTERACTIONS, REMOTE ADVISORS, AND HUMAN-ASSISTED ONLINE SHOPPING, ARE JUST A FEW WAYS ON HOW WE CAN STILL KEEP HUMAN EXPERIENCE RELEVANT.

At this juncture, depending on your brand's category, you might think that your primary focus should be your supply chain, and not the changes in customer preferences, attitudes, or behaviors. Of course, it's sensible to plan for any interruptions to your supply and operations, but true customer-centric organizations will also

prepare for how their customers' questions and needs will change rapidly in these coming months. The first step is to consider likely and possible changes to customer needs and journeys- and yes, it's as basic as that. But most brands even today do not know or have the customer journey documented.

One might say that all brands are in this together, so that the impact will have very little influence on your brand's CX, satisfaction, loyalty, and advocacy, relative to the competition. Yes, today's pandemic was unforeseen just two months ago, and with the news developing daily, your brand, just like all brands and your customers, are caught in this rapidly evolving situation. This is the real *unknown*. This event, just like any other event that could change consumer expectations, activities, and motivations, will impact the customer perception of different brands/industries in different ways.

Our opportunity to succeed (or fail) for customers is most significant when emotions and needs are running high versus in regular times when things are going as expected. As such, today's *unknown*, without a doubt, may be the biggest challenge thrown at marketers and CX professionals, but this might also be the most significant opportunity- indeed, a catalyst- to finding ways to ignite and maintain a customer-centric approach in the face of the unexpected. Here are a few ideas on how you can do just that:

### 1/ DOCUMENT THE CHANGES TO CUSTOMER'S NEEDS (AND THEIR JOURNEY)

In pre-corona state personas, needs and journey used to change slowly over time. But post-corona, we are seeing customer awareness, pain points, expectations, and reactions, along with their needs, are changing rapidly. Add to that the ever-evolving government directives and restrictions, and that makes it clear that CX teams need to carry out efforts to build these scenarios and use the data they already have about their customers to understand the impact on their needs, perceptions, and priorities. One can start with drafting the current shift, and then forecasting the future shift away from existing journeys on how your customers are affected today in their homes and workplaces. Also note down potential changes in their journey, and the touchpoints that may be most important to them in these times. The key thing to remember is that it's about being proactive, rather than being caught unawares.



## 2/ DON'T WAIT TO BE ASKED; GIVE INFORMATION

If you wait for customers to be concerned and start wondering, or worse, start demanding information about your brand or services, it's already too late. From emails you have got in your mailbox by now, you can see most proactive brands have already started communicating. What should you communicate, you may ask. Think about questions they may have for your employees, or monitor your support calls and gather queries they are requesting. It can be as simple as how to keep yourselves safe in this pandemic, or what precautions you, as a brand, are taking for hygiene. Consider the category/industry you are in, and again, refer to the user journey mapping you have done to get these communication points.

## 3/ REMEMBER THAT SEGMENT YOU CONSIDERED TO BE "NOT YOUR TARGET"

For most brands and CXers, there were always customer segments (e.g. non-tech savvy, not digital users, Generation X, baby boomers, etc.) that you always considered as a secondary segment. Guess what? Now, all these customer segments do not have any other option than going digital. In today's situation, where health and survival are dependent on being online or human-less channels, everyone has to follow the online queue. This segment/persona, while transitioning from the conventional offline/human experience to this new human-less channel,

is going to be edgy, reluctant, and somewhat lost. But the need is to look at this as an opportunity, and as an addition to your online customer base. So, start treating them with the utmost care and personalized attention. By now, if you have not drafted and studied their customer journey, it's time to do so. Understand their pains, expectations, and perceptions about your brand, and you will be able to serve them and enhance their experience.

## 4/ KEEP LISTENING

The need to understand how the customer feels, what he expects, and most importantly, how swiftly all these attributes change is the key to crafting an excellent customer experience. In these times, those changes are going to be more frequent and drastic. Their attitudes, expectations, and perceptions are bound to change very rapidly, so there is a need to monitor these in real time. As

it stands, your week- or two-week-old information is already old and irrelevant, given the changes that are happening day-to-day and will continue to happen in the coming weeks and months.

## 5/ HUMAN EXPERIENCE TO HUMAN-LESS

UberEats, Amazon, Zomato, Deliveroo, Talabat, and other digital services are helping to ensure a safe virus-free environment with their online experience that removes the need for human interaction. We need to learn from this, but you don't need to develop this capability independently. What you need to build is the experience that is less dependent on touch or human interaction. Remember that it's not just for your customers- a large percentage of the workforce will be working from home in the coming months. Loneliness and productivity are other factors you need to consider in your equation.

A recent report found that up to 20% of remote workers are lonely due to a lack of human interaction. It just illustrates the need to infuse online or remote interactions with human touchpoints in a non-evasive way. Consider a channel in which a hybrid chatbot, where a chatbot with a mix of both automated and human intervention, can add that human touch. Video interactions, remote advisors, human-assisted online shopping, online concierges, consultations through video calls, etc. are just a few ways on how we can still keep human experience relevant.

## SO: WHAT'S YOUR ONLINE CX STRATEGY?

Since 2018, I have used a slide from a Gartner report in many of my talks, which goes: "80% of brands say their companies will compete on the basis of CX in two years." When this pandemic subsides, brands that will come through for customers now will be the ones that will be remembered, and they will create long-lasting loyalty- and you can rest assured they'll also be the first to come to mind if such a crisis reappears. At the end of the day, one thing is guaranteed. As most of us struggle, brands delivering an optimized, personalized, and timely CX will gain strength. In the coming weeks and months, you must work to prioritize your online touchpoints, so that your brand does not follow the same direction as many publicly traded stocks these days. ■



Amol Kadam is the co-founder of RBBi, the region's first specialized user experience (UX), user interface (UI) and digital performance marketing agency, operating in Dubai since 2011. Coming from a strong creative & usability background spanning more than 16 years, Amol has conceptualized,

designed and managed the production of several digital projects for a global range of clients from banking, hospitality, travel, real-estate and more.

Amol's areas of expertise include user experience, usability, online branding and strategy, information architecture, interaction design, online and offline interactive media, digital media. Among other strategic tasks within the agency, his role involves creating usability and UX road-map strategies for interaction media. Amol is the holder of a master's qualification in HCI. He is also a certified usability professional and a registered member of Usability Professionals Association Worldwide. [rbideas.com](http://rbideas.com)



**IF THERE'S ANY REGION IN THE WORLD THAT CAN BOUNCE BACK QUICKLY, AND TAKE ADVANTAGE OF NEW WAYS OF DOING BUSINESS THAT WILL SURELY PREVAIL, IT IS THE MIDDLE EAST.**

umes. This will have a month or two of lag before it starts to show, but when it does, it will be when the economic impact will really begin to bite, for all companies in the region. And the impact of this for the low income migrant workers and their families, who rely on the flow of remittances, will be enormous.

The financial markets have reacted with sheer panic in early March. Such crashes are underpinned by human psychology rather than fundamentals, as shown time and time again from the crashes seen in the US in 1929, the dot-com bubble of 2000, the financial crisis of 2007, the crypto bubble of 2017, and right back to the Dutch tulip bubble of 1637. Have a look at graphs of asset prices in each- the pattern is remarkably similar.

NOW Money is a venture capital funded business. These venture capital investors, whilst having a much longer-term view than stockbrokers

## FIRST PERSON

**The impact** the coronavirus pandemic is having on our startup, our customers, and our MENA region **by IAN DILLON**

**T**hese are unprecedented times globally. Seldom in human history has there been an event that affects every person wherever they are in the world to quite the extent that the coronavirus pandemic already has, and will continue to do so in the coming months and years. As a founder of a fintech startup, NOW Money, I'm having a unique perspective on the way in which individuals are reacting, and how the world of business will be reshaped for the coming years.

Firstly, our customers. We provide accounts for low income migrant workers in the

Gulf to receive their salaries, and allow them to make remittances to their home country directly from a smartphone app. We have seen continued growth through the coronavirus pandemic and oil price crash- in the year to date, the trend towards using smartphone-based services, the issues at traditional remittance providers like UAE Exchange, and our continued product development and improvement have led us to see strong growth in remittances: 31% month-on-month growth in January, 46% in February, and 20% in March to date.

The bulk of the impact of the pandemic for us, and all

individuals in the Gulf, will start to show through in the coming months. As businesses see a slowdown, employees will be put on unpaid leave or laid off, which leads to reduced salaries, spending, and, for us at least, lower remittance vol-



Ian Dillon is the co-founder of NOW Money. Ian was educated at Cambridge and Exeter Universities. Whilst at Cambridge, he started a successful e-commerce business, which has recently been sold. Ian's former banking career was spent at HSBC, working in retail and corporate banking and FX, before taking a management role within investment banking capital markets. In 2015, he co-founded NOW Money, an accounts and remittance service for the unbanked population of the Middle East. He was honored with the "UAE Fintech Founder" award at the Fintech Abu Dhabi 2019 Awards. [nowmoney.me](http://nowmoney.me)



and traders, are not immune from panic and worries about the future uncertainty that the coronavirus crisis brings. Whilst all of our investors have been supportive and wanting to help wherever possible, they have clearly been rattled by the market turmoil.

At the same time, our staff have been amazing at NOW Money. In our hiring process, the values we look for above all else are grit, ability to do anything, and independence. As a nimble, fast-moving, and lean startup, we don't have the budgets or the ability to have large, wide-reaching HR teams, and benefits packages- we have to rely on hiring responsible, mature people that we can pay well and let them support themselves far more than a larger corporate would. While this narrows down the hiring options we have in the good times, in adverse scenarios like this, the policy really comes into its own- our staff have calmly and diligently adapted to working from home, and turning their hands to different tasks. Our people are the main reason why we'll come out of the other side stronger, however that may look!

Finally, the region as a whole- it's fair to say that the impact the coronavirus pandemic will have is going to be massive and far-reaching. However, if there's any region in the world that can bounce back quickly, and take advantage of new ways of doing business that will surely prevail, it is the Middle East. We are part of a young, tech-savvy, and ambitious population, and we have strong leadership that has acted decisively to support the residents of their countries. At NOW Money, we are excited by the progress we will make whilst others slow right down, and we believe the Middle East more widely will similarly capitalize on the opportunities as the world recovers. ■

## Four ways to keep your team committed (when your enterprise is in a crisis) by MIKE HOFF

There is no denying leading a business is highly stressful at the moment, exasperated by the uncertainty of when restrictions made because of the coronavirus pandemic will be lifted. This uncertainty is placing a great deal of stress on a company's leadership team trying to keep the business viable for the months ahead. At the same time, this situation is also placing a great deal of stress on the company's employees, which can take their focus away from the roles they are needed to perform, which, in turn, are needed to keep the business on track.

However, to help ease cash flow pressures, business leaders may be forced to take the drastic step of reducing salaries for employees, or in the worst case scenario, they may even be asked to take unpaid leave. But if you are implementing such measures, how can you still keep your team focused and engaged, ready to perform when they are needed? Here are four tips to help keep your team committed:

### 1. Communication is key

The team needs to know what you are doing, and what you need them to do to help. By communicating why you took the decision you have taken, you are likely giving them a feeling of relief that the company is doing all it can to keep their jobs alive. Keep the communication flow going daily, hold daily virtual huddle meetings with those still working, focusing the message on positive steps forward. For those that are on unpaid leave, create a WhatsApp group for the team, where they can ask questions and concerns. Communicate update messages on the chat, and answer all questions as honestly as you can. Keeping the communication flow moving means that you can quickly enable the team again when restrictions subside.

### 2. Ask for suggestions

It's fair to assume that your team is closer to the day-to-day operations of the company than you are. As such, they may be able to see cost savings that the company can quickly implement, which will make the company more agile going forward. Ask them to contribute ideas and suggestions in this regard.

### 3. Focus on your company culture

Culture is important. If you have a culture where employees enjoy coming to work, and are fully involved/consulted in the company's growth plan, then they will be more committed to seeing the company perform and survive in any situation. If your



culture is poor and the team is not involved in how it operates or its performance, then keeping the team committed to you is going to be difficult in any situation, and only amplified in a crisis. If you have a poor culture, then now is the time to urgently change this. Create cultural team leaders within the company, and ask them what you need to do to keep the team engaged with you and the business. Ask for advice and ideas, and quickly implement their suggestions. Now is not the time to procrastinate.

### 4. Celebrate success

Even in crisis situations, there are times to celebrate. The size of the success may be small, but any step forward needs to be a time to celebrate. Call out those members of the team that have done something amazing, the team members that have come up with an idea that makes a difference. Now is not the time to criticize or manage poor performance- these judgement calls can wait until you are able to get back to work and reflect, but all successes need to be celebrated as a whole team. ■



Left to right:  
Rami Shaar and Jad Halaoui,  
co-founders, Washmen

"OUR EARLY GROWTH WAS FUELED PRIMARILY BY WORD OF MOUTH. WE BUILT A BUSINESS THAT PEOPLE WERE EXCITED TO USE AND TO TELL THEIR FRIENDS ABOUT. THIS LED TO HUGE GROWTH BEYOND THE TYPICAL DIGITAL MARKETING ACQUISITION CHANNELS, BUT **IT WAS THE RESULT OF LOTS OF HARD WORK AND GOOD MANAGEMENT!**"

and launched the "Wash and Fold" concept, which has been very successful in solving a problem customers have that was previously unaddressed by retail laundries. We were also able to leverage the safe environment we are in to launch "at door" pick-ups/drop-offs, which further widened the convenience gap between an at-home and in-store service. Multiple innovations like these propelled us to the forefront of the market, and I firmly believe it's because we came in new to the industry, with no status quo bias.

In the beginning, there were a few challenges for us to overcome in the laundry business. Our biggest challenge when we first started was the fact that we thought being asset-light was the best way to operate. After all, the same business model, which was being lauded as the future due to the likes of Uber, Airbnb, etc., was being taken and applied across all industries. However, we found that in the laundry industry, whilst it meant lower capital requirements, it led to lower quality control, and an inability to innovate, despite partnering with the best laundries in the country. As such, our transition into a vertically integrated laundry was the single biggest driver of our ability to provide the ultimate customer experience.

Another challenge was the market itself. It's crowded with low quality providers who provide "a service" at an ultra-low price point, cutting corners each step of the way. Educating customers that "if it's too good to be true, it probably is" applied to laundry was, and at times still remains, a challenge. While we operate as an app-based concept, I don't believe it is a guaranteed way to generate more clientele than a solid storefront would. I don't believe just

# Growth trajectory

Reflections while #stayinghome:  
lessons from the development (and expansion)  
of my startup, **Washmen** by RAMI SHAAR

The entire world is currently in the throes of the coronavirus pandemic, and while we heed the global call to #stayhome, this time spent away from external distractions has allowed many among us to self-reflect- including me. In my case, I've been thinking about my startup, Washmen, which I launched with my co-founder Jad Halaoui in the UAE in 2015.

Until Washmen, there had been no tech intervention in the UAE laundry industry- digitizing the customer experience as well as the supply chain gave us a clear edge over the rest of the industry. Also, the fact that we were new to the industry allowed us to think of problems from a completely new lens, unbiased by years of doing things the way they'd always been done. We credit our success to this oversight. We noticed a similar

theme in other geographies too- one of the best laundries we've seen globally is in China, and it was started by someone who had been an architect for 35 years before turning his attention to laundry.

We started Washmen with a clear tech advantage over our competitors, and we then capitalized on this- our ability to see problems from a new lens allowed us to innovate. We identified gaps in the classic value proposition of a laundry





## Washmen® Dry Cleaning & Laundry Service

in Dubai & Abu Dhabi

PLACE ORDER



having the business based on an app, instead of a brick-and-mortar building, has changed our business methods or productivity in anyway. It's actually a lot more than that.

Apps, physical stores, drive-through restaurants- my ethos is that it doesn't matter what establishment in which your business is run from. At the end of the day, the customer is looking for a value proposition that they believe is worth parting with their hard-earned cash. They will only find this to be true when they are offered a service that is one, or many, of convenience, high quality, reliability, value, etc. I truly believe that having an app in itself means nothing. Does this app allow you to do something in a shorter time than you would have otherwise? Does it make you feel comfortable that this task is being handled in the best way? Does it allow you easy access to talk to someone if you ever have any worries or concerns? Is the service behind the app actually being completed to a high-quality level? Do you feel like the company on the other side of the app listens to you when you have something to say? These are the things that make a difference in the success of not just app-based businesses, but all B2C enterprises.

When it comes to growth, in terms of our business model, whilst being asset light posed its own challenges further down the line, it did allow us to incubate and grow an idea into a fully-fledged business with relatively little capital. As for our management style, ours is one that is close to the ground. We're hands-on. We stay close to our customers, close to our laundry partners (when we had them), and close to our employees as

well. This allowed us to iteratively optimize our offering and achieve a product/market fit, whilst solving our employees' and partners' pain points simultaneously. This, in my mind, has led us to understand the full value chain of the laundry industry better than most, including those who have been doing this far longer than us.

While growth is a painful process both in business and in life, it must be done naturally. I don't think there is such a thing as a hack to business growth. Our early growth was fueled primarily by word of mouth. We built a business that people were excited to use and to tell their friends about. This led to huge growth beyond the typical digital marketing acquisition channels, but it was the result of lots of hard work and good management, so I wouldn't necessarily call it a hack. As we prosper, our focus is

to cement our domination in the UAE in 2020 courtesy of a number of new and exciting things we're developing, as well as ramping up our marketing efforts. After that, the UAE will become our innovation hub, and we have exciting plans for expansion.

Once we do expand beyond the UAE's borders, I feel there will be some challenges to expect with such growth. Understanding the nuances of product-market fit in other geographies will undoubtedly be a challenge. Our business model is not cookie-cutter, as every market has unique characteristics i.e. disposable income, population density, costs, etc., but luckily, the intrinsic that have been key to our success here, as well as our developed expertise in cleaning, are universal. While I have plans in place for international expansion, I can't reveal much at this stage- however, the next two years are shaping up to be very exciting for us. Stay tuned! ■

**"WE STARTED WASHMEN WITH A CLEAR TECH ADVANTAGE OVER OUR COMPETITORS, AND WE THEN CAPITALIZED ON THIS- OUR ABILITY TO SEE PROBLEMS FROM A NEW LENS ALLOWED US TO INNOVATE. WE IDENTIFIED GAPS IN THE CLASSIC VALUE PROPOSITION OF A LAUNDRY AND LAUNCHED THE "WASH AND FOLD" CONCEPT."**



# #TAMTALKSTECH

GADGETS AND DOODADS THAT YOU MIGHT'VE MISSED OUT ON, SOURCED BY A TECH AFICIONADO.  
YES, IT'S OKAY TO WANT THEM ALL... AND NO, IT'S NOT OUR FAULT.

## THINK ABOUT IT

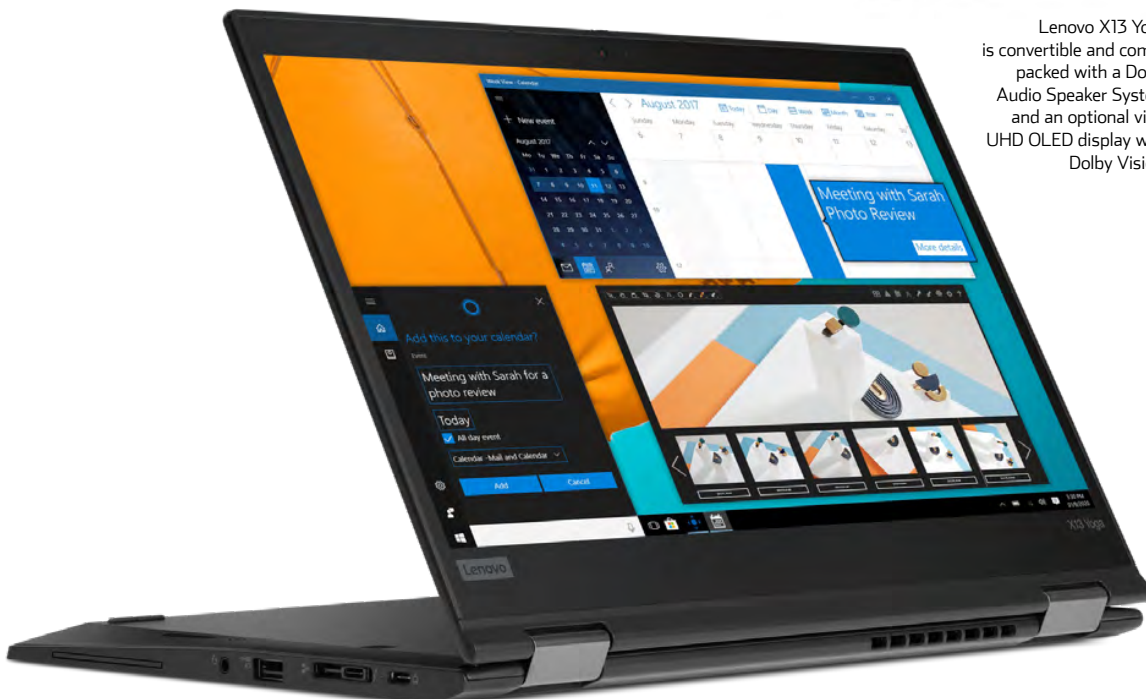
### LENOVO THINKPAD X13 AND X13 YOGA

Designed to give you superior functionality in a smaller, more portable package, the latest X series of laptops by Lenovo include many smart PC innovations like Modern Standby always-on technology, and Wi-Fi and unified communications functions that allow you to take calls while on the system. Both X13 and X13 Yoga can be configured with clever privacy features, which includes the full HD 500 nit PrivacyGuard

ePrivacy display with PrivacyAlert that helps protect your screen from over-the-shoulder glances. X13 Yoga is convertible and comes packed with a Dolby Audio Speaker System and an optional vivid UHD OLED display with Dolby Vision. ThinkPad X13 Yoga and X13 are both powered by 10th Gen Intel Core vPro processors, and you could also outfit ThinkPad X13 with AMD Ryzen PRO 4000 Mobile processors.



Lenovo X13 Yoga is convertible and comes packed with a Dolby Audio Speaker System and an optional vivid UHD OLED display with Dolby Vision.







### WATCH THIS HONOR MAGICWATCH 2

MagicWatch 2 by Honor runs as long as you can with a 14-day battery life and a Kirin A1 Chipset. Equipped with industry-leading health and wellness monitoring technologies, MagicWatch 2 gives you precise health insights when you need it, while keeping you fully con-

nected. This wearable device has brilliant features including dual satellite positioning, a heart rate monitor, built-in speaker and microphone, and access to smartphone functions as well. Plus, the stainless steel design and stylish accessories keep you looking good.

### OH SNAP! HONOR 9X PRO

Honor 9X Pro is designed to help you focus and make the most of your smartphone. It has a 6.59-inch FullView



Display and a full camera that's hidden away in the body of the phone. When you need it, the camera pops up, snaps a selfie in one second flat, and automatically retracts. How's that for a wow factor? It sports a 48MP triple rear camera with AI Super Night Mode to get the perfect photo in low light. Powered by a 7nm Kirin 810 AI Chipset, Honor 9X has a smooth back panel designed to create a glimmering X-effect to dazzle onlookers when they see the device in use.

### A NEW WAY TO LEARN ACER FOR EDUCATION

Technology has long been integrated in education and workforce solutions, but the world is more reliant on devices now than ever before. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, schools across the globe are closing physical doors in favor of virtual classrooms, and Acer is here to help with that. Through Acer for Education, the company provides end-to-end educational support to schools and institutions through superior products and adaptive software solutions. As kids around the region embrace e-learning, the team at Acer have shared some helpful tips to ensure efficient learning during this period:

1. Clear out a space that's demarcated specifically for studying. Make sure your computers and laptops are cleaned and sanitized regularly, and all supplies are within reach. It is also

helpful to prepare the school bag as one normally would for each school day.

2. Invest in reliable technology and high internet speed, and make sure all devices are charged and ready to go! It is also imperative to ensure applications are up to date at all times.

3. In the evenings, review the recordings of online classes as homework with the kids. This will not only help ensure the course material has been fully absorbed, but also prepare them for next day's classes.

4. Maintain a regular routine, and ensure everyone gets enough sleep, so they are fresh in the morning.

5. Be patient with your kids, and instill confidence. Be encouraging and rewarding, so they embrace e-learning to its greatest potential.



**#TAMTALKSTECH** Tamara Clarke, a former software development professional, is the tech and lifestyle enthusiast behind *The Global Gazette*, one of the most active blogs in the Middle East. *The Global Gazette* has been welcomed and lauded by some of the most influential tech brands in the region. Clarke's goal is to inform about technology and how it supports our lifestyles. See her work both in print regional publications and online on her blog where she discusses everything from how a new gadget improves day-to-day life to how to coordinate your smartphone accessories. Visit [theglobalgazette.com](http://theglobalgazette.com) and talk to her on Twitter @TamaraClarke.

# 'TREP TRIMMINGS

# THE EXECUTIVE SELECTION

From better goods to better wardrobe bests, every issue we choose a few items that make the approved executive selection list. In this issue, we present our picks from the Digel Spring/Summer 2020 range, a timepiece for the adventurer in you, and a luxury jewelry collection worth checking out.

## MIX AND MATCH

### DIGEL SPRING/SUMMER 2020

For this season's collection by Digel, the focal point for the brand is in interchangeable individual garments for a comprehensive look. Jackets, waistcoats, and trousers are offered separately, and they can be matched for business and leisure looks. Their common factor? The checked, striped, and plain materials are all based on the same yarns, and perfectly attuned to each other. For one, the checked jacket suits well with the striped waistcoats and plain-colored trousers. Digel plays with two different palettes that sets the tone: navy accents in smoky grey and cool blue, as well as light, feathery grey and bright beige ranging towards chocolate brown. Linen is also evident in the collection, with comfort being an underlying characteristic of the brand. And once again, with Digel's ethos being on "real life, than artificial constrictions," the collection is portrayed not by professional models, but by renowned personalities, with this campaign's focus being on New York architect Drew Seskunas. [digel.de/en](http://digel.de/en)



Digel Spring/Summer 2020



Digel Spring/Summer 2020



Digel Spring/Summer 2020

IMAGE CREDIT DIGEL | TUDORI | SANTONI | TATEOSSIAN





Tudor Black Bay P01

## ADVENTURE IS OUT THERE

### TUDOR

First designed as a prototype for the US Navy in the 1960s, Tudor's new Black Bay P01 is a modern interpretation of the multi-purpose watch. The original timepiece was specifically required to have a 12-hour graduated rotatable bezel, which is helpful when using a watch as navigation tool, while also allowing for elapsed time to be observed during a dive. The new version stays true to this element, but with one caveat: it's not made for just one specific activity, and instead embodies a multi-use design. Evident with the choice of the hybrid leather and rubber strap, it's suitable for the entrepreneur with a hunger for adventure as it's suited for all physical activities and all climates. Running on the manufacture caliber MT5612, the watch is encased in a 42mm steel case with satin finish and is waterproof up to 200m. And if you have an eye for detail, you'll appreciate the timepiece's angular snowflake hands—Tudor's signature design trait, which was introduced in 1969. [Tudorwatch.com](http://Tudorwatch.com)



Tudor Black Bay P01

## CREATIVE CRAFTSMANSHIP

### SANTONI

Since its inception in 1975, Santoni's vision has embodied Italian craftsmanship and creativity. With Santoni's SS20 collection, there's various styles at play to suit every man's style. From a gradient effect of light notes to desert-inspired tones, there's much to see in the range with a palette that evokes neutral, off-white, sand, and tan as protagonists of the collection, with touches of blue and orange. For the boardroom, we're eyeing the Bohemian loafer made of calfskin, which comes with tassels and is hand-colored in tones of dark brown. For your off hours, we're liking the vibe of the Carter which features a double buckle, and polished with gradient tones of blue.

[Santonishoes.com](http://Santonishoes.com)

Santoni Bohemian loafer



Santoni Carter double buckle



## EDITOR'S PICK

### TATEOSSIAN

Hate it or love it, there's always a sense of playfulness entwined with the Tateossian brand. Founded in 1990 by former city financier turned jewelry designer Robert Tateossian, the brand became renowned for its handcrafted and contemporary cufflinks. Its newest men's collection explores a wide range of accessories: cufflinks, money clips, bracelets, and more for discerning entrepreneurs.

[Tateossian.com](http://Tateossian.com)





## Real talk

Jeetendr Sehdev, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Kim Kardashian Principle*, sets the record straight on the power of influencers **by TAMARA CLARKE**

Love them or loathe 'em, social media influencers are here to stay, and not only has Jeetendr Sehdev championed this new segment of celebrities, he's also written *The Kim Kardashian Principle: Why Shameless Sells and How to Do it Right*, which has been billed as a blueprint for selling yourself the right way. Sehdev got onboard this trend rather early— in 2014, he detailed the power of YouTube stars versus traditional celebrities in an interview with *Variety* magazine, which went viral and became one of the most cited studies on celebrity branding at that time. Since then, Sehdev has become an influencer in his own right, becoming as recognizable as the celebrities he talks about. He's become widely regarded as one of the most influential global thinkers in the world of brand-

ing, known not to hold back and instead tell the unadulterated truth about what drives influence.

That can be one of the reasons behind the success of *The Kim Kardashian Principle*, which was released in 2017 and ended up topping bestseller lists around the globe. While the book is a qualified, well-founded piece of work, the title is an instant attention-grabber— which was a very clever and deliberate ploy used by Sehdev to prove a point about the influence of the second eldest Kardashian sister. "I remember coming up with the name *The Kim Kardashian Principle* quite instinctively," Sehdev recalls. "I was in New York with my agent at a coffee shop. He put me on the spot, and asked me what I wanted to name my book, and it was one of the first titles that came to mind. I've always been inspired by strong female

leaders like Kim, who march to their own drumbeat, and are unafraid of the judgment from others."

Now, while Kim Kardashian may well be a polarizing figure in the world of today, according to Sehdev, her business savvy, her shameless approach to overexposure, and her massive appeal make her a force to be reckoned with regardless of what one may think of her. Indeed, Kardashian has ended up inspiring a legion of people who've transformed themselves into recognizable brands— those who wield enough influence to pay the bills. This is true for the MENA region as well, with Sehdev pointing to the UAE as an example of a market that has social media influencers playing a key role in it. "Social media influencers are huge in the UAE," he notes. "Look at the likes of Huda Kattan, Taim Alfalasi, Abdulaziz Baz. And more than half the population out here uses social media."

But look past the legions of fans who bestow their appreciation on these influencers with likes, loves, and wows, there are also many who don't believe the hype— what does Sehdev have to say about them? "Look, where there's success, there is going to be criticism," he replies. "That's just a fact of life."



But it is sad how we live in a world that tries to bring people down instead of pulling them up. I find it exhausting. It reminds me of when people laughed at the fact that I referred to celebrities as brands. Seven years later, those exact people are writing their own stories about celebrities as brands.” In terms of advice for those of us getting this kind of criticism on social media, Sehdev suggests holding on to the ethos of letting your haters be your motivators, and thus press on and live in their truth, no matter what. After all, Sehdev believes that a world where influencers have a starring role is likely to be the new normal. “I don’t see teens abandoning their phones and heading back to TV or the cinema anytime soon,” he says. “Besides, we’re already seeing traditional celebrities adopt more of the social media influencer behavior too. So, I suppose the question should be: do traditional stars have staying power?”

Now, Sehdev might not have the answer to that particular question, but he does know how celebrities –and anyone for that matter– can position themselves to win in an ever-crowded digital world: authenticity. “Today, audiences judge you on your personal moral code, and whether you put your unique self, or the opinions of others, first,” Sehdev says. “They respond to people with a point of view, people who stand for something original, whether they agree or disagree.” According to Sehdev, being your true, unadulterated self is what helps you win in the long run. Just look at Kardashian– she has, after all, indisputably shaped celebrity culture by overexposing herself, flaws and all, to the masses, and as such, she’s a shining example of how keeping it real can pay off. ■

## The (right) way to work from home

### SEVEN DESIGN TIPS TO CREATE THE PERFECT HOME OFFICE

BY MAY ROSTOM

Working from home can be a hoot if you have everything set up perfectly. Remote work gives you the advantage of better work-life balance, and takes away endless hours of traffic stress. Given the current situation with the coronavirus pandemic, it looks like we’re going to be stuck at home for quite some time, whether we all like it or not. Here are seven inexpensive ways to create the perfect workspace at home.

**1. SEARCH FOR LIGHT** When looking for a spot to set up your home office, choose the place with the most natural light coming in. While your instinct might take you to the nearest corner or wall, facing a window or a source of light might actually inspire you to work better while enjoying the scenery outside. For those long working night shifts, invest in a warm, high-beam lamp to keep your space and light and bright.

**2. GO GREEN** Adding one or two desk plants is a great way to decorate and creating an uplifting environment. Just make sure you buy plants that aren’t high maintenance and don’t require daily watering.

**3. FOLLOW THE RULES** Ergonomic rules are there for a reason. Keeping your computer screen at eye level and elbows rested while sitting on an ergonomic chair are all ways to ensure a smoother, more comfortable work process. Position your keyboard so your forearms are

parallel to the floor. And adjust your chair so your feet rest firmly on the floor.

**4. STORE CREATIVELY** Small living spaces require extreme organization. And since you’ll be working from home, no one likes the look of piled up documents on a tiny desk. Invest in a fancy bookshelf or storage cabinet to store all your important documents. Decorate it with small ornaments and figurines to make it look like more than just an ugly filing cabinet.

**5. GO WIRELESS** As much as you can. Eliminating the hideous look of wires and cables can be very relaxing to the eye. For the devices that need cables, hide a power strip behind your desk and plug everything into that

**6. MAKE IT PERSONAL** It may sound flimsy, but a picture of your family or pet will have you wanting to sit longer at your desk. Surround yourself with things that bring positive energy to you, even if it’s just a nice frame with a meaningful picture in it or a travel souvenir.

**7. PREP PREP PREP** Before you start your workday, make sure you have everything you need on your desk. Pens, paper, snacks, all of it. By eliminating the need to get off your chair to wander around the house looking for a pen, you will have uninterrupted quality time to focus on getting things done. Get a nicely divided desk caddy to store all your office supplies, and keep it handy on your desk. ■





Jonathan Yabut at Emirates Literature Festival 2020

# THE ONLY WAY IS UP

Motivational speaker and best-selling author **Jonathan Yabut** on rising to greatness (with purpose) **by PAMELLA DE LEON**

“**M**ost of us think of life as: ‘What do I do for the next 10 years?’ I think, that approach should be, when I’ve left, what *have* I left? In the end, your wealth is determined by the people you’ve touched.” This is how motivational speaker and best-selling author Jonathan Yabut describes success to me, after he finished off a series of masterclasses at the 12th edition of the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature in Dubai in February. Assertive and articulate, Yabut ran sessions that had him talking on boosting one’s confidence and productivity, as well as about being fueled by hardships and how true grit is needed to succeed in today’s world.

Yabut certainly knows a thing or two about hard work and perseverance- he’s a multi-awarded marketer and HR professional with over 12 years of experience in Southeast Asia. He’s also the author of three best-selling motivational books, *From Grit to Great*, *Fast Forward*, and

*Single, Taken, or Building my Empire*, and he has given talks and workshops on leadership, productivity, and managing the millennial workforce in 15 countries. What propelled Yabut on this path though was him joining and winning Season 1 of *The Apprentice Asia*, a reality TV show that showcased young businesspeople competing for a six-figure salary role, beating more than 30,000 applicants in Asia. For winning the show, he served as Chief of Staff of AirAsia for one year, directly reporting under its Group CEO Tony Fernandes. Subsequently, Yabut started and launched his own marketing consultancy firm, The JY Consultancy & Ventures, which offers marketing and talent optimization services to startups and Fortune 500 companies in Asia.

His entrepreneurial pursuits notwithstanding, Yabut says that his ultimate goal, regardless of how his career trajectory develops, is to enter politics in the Philippines. “I want to be become the President of the Philippines,” Yabut declares, with his planned roadmap for this role having

him run for the country’s senate twice, then become the Secretary of Transportation and Tourism, before putting his hat in the ring for the esteemed role. “I want to have a position, because I want to help further the Philippines,” Yabut says. “They [government roles] are the most visible, and they make the most impact to a Filipino. Transportation is so important, [while] tourism is both marketing and economics. You create a better image for Philippines, you drive investments. You drive investments, you drive jobs, the quality of life increases- and the invisible hand works better.”

Yabut’s dream to join the political sphere and create systemic change in the Philippines is a result of how his own life has played out so far. Born in Tondo, one of Manila’s largest slums, Yabut remembers how he finished his studies purely on scholarships. “I know how both sides of life work, and I know the science behind people who have it, but need that extra nudge, because the opportunity just doesn’t happen to be there,” Yabut says. “I’ve been that guy. I know I had the grit. I had parents who pushed me so hard. But if it weren’t for the scholarships, I think things would be different. The same thing happens for anyone out there. You might be the best employee, but if you can’t ride the train on time, it destroys your motivation. If you provide and enable them to get things done and let them do the rest, it’s how a modern progressive society [can] work.”

JONATHAN YABUT  
THE APPRENTICE ASIA WINNER

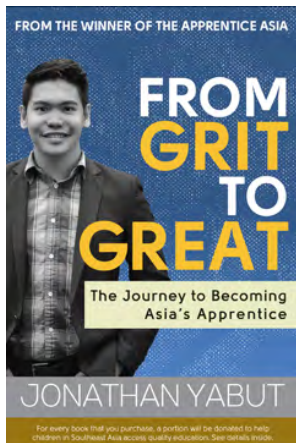
SINGLE,  
TAKEN,  
OR  
BUILDING  
MY EMPIRE

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF  
FROM GRIT TO GREAT AND FAST FORWARD



IMAGES COURTESY JONATHAN YABUT





Yabut's political ambitions have had a role to play in Yabut's move into entrepreneurship as well—climbing the corporate ladder might have slowed him down in terms of how quickly he can realize his goals. As such, Yabut used his winnings from *The Apprentice Asia* to launch his marketing consultancy firm. “When you enter politics, you should be financially stable, so that you don't get corrupted. That is the ultimate objective I want, I want to be that politician: the Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez model, driven and funded by the people, and therefore you don't owe anyone your success.” As a way to sow the seeds to his prospective presidential campaign, Yabut explicitly states this intention in his books, and his stints as a motivational and marketing speaker in a wide variety of sectors with companies such as Google, Accenture, Unilever, and more helps further this goal as well. “I chose this specific business because it still puts my name out there. The talks allow me to reach the audience as early as now, planting the seeds so that when I start running in the government, everyone recalls my name. The majority of our clients are private companies, and a lot of [their employees]

are the young ones who will eventually be the voters.”

Setting his political ambitions aside, as someone who understands what it means to persevere and realize one's goals, and further makes it his job to help others do just that, I ask about his thoughts on how one can go about sustaining motivation. Yabut replies that it starts with the mindset of understanding that motivation isn't permanent, and that its sources will not stay the same. “When you have an open mind, believing that motivation changes from time to time, you don't get stuck the moment you've lost it,” he explains. “It's not lost, it's because you have to find a new one... Most people feel like they're demotivated, because they feel that they've lost it. Instead, you simply need to change it, because your life has changed.” He also advises not to rely on only one source of your motivation. “Don't place [your] motivation in one basket. Spread your eggs, just like investments

in many places.” When it comes to Yabut motivating others, his goal is pretty simple: his audience should believe they can always be a better version of who they are. “Remember that your [glass] ceiling could be just someone else's floor. For you to become the best, don't benchmark yourself with yourself. Because if you were born with low standards, you will keep on comparing with low standards. Determine who's the best, and benchmark yourself versus that.”

My conversation with Yabut ends with him sharing the hard lessons he's learnt along his life and career so far. The first, is on managing expectations, which he learnt early on, after being tasked with a project on a three-month deadline. It turned out to be a six-month long concept, yet his pride kept him from speaking up until the last minute. “Communicate immediately. As millennials, I think we are scared of the failure, so we say, ‘I won't speak up since I can still handle it.’

But sometimes, asking for help is more important, because the cost of not raising it is going to be less than the cost of regretting irreversible mistakes.” Yabut also notes that perspective is important— it's important for one to have the ability to look beyond one's own point of view to consider another person's standpoint. Cultivating this skill will enable you to convince a team member to get a job done by considering their personal motivations. “Sometimes you have to ask the person what motivates them at work, and when you know that this is the reason why they go to work every morning, use that as a fuel, and the person moves better.” He also believes in the significance of working on what he calls one's individual “packaging.” “We buy items in the grocery stores based on how they look like, and so your choice of words matters,” Yabut explains. “The skill or ability to choose your words according to who your audience is can propel you to success. And sometimes, people promote others not just based on how good they are, but based on how good they are when it comes to communication skills. It's not about how you're smart, but how you convey the story.”

**"YOU MIGHT BE THE BEST EMPLOYEE, BUT IF YOU CAN'T RIDE THE TRAIN ON TIME, IT DESTROYS YOUR MOTIVATION."**



Jonathan Yabut at Usana National Conference with an audience of 10,000 people



WHEN CHOOSING A LOGISTICS PARTNER FOR RETAIL AND ECOMMERCE, SMALL BUSINESSES SHOULD FOCUS ON THOSE THAT CAN PROVIDE DELIVERY OPTIONS **—SPEED, COST OPTIMIZATION, AND RELIABILITY—**TO DIFFERENTIATE THEIR OFFER.

### **1/ Know your customer**

Be aware of the changing customer expectations that are driving global e-commerce trends, how they apply to the business, and what can be done to successfully adapt. Feedback from customers and shippers highlight that technology and digital transformation will continue to play a critical role in the future of e-commerce and trade. Hence, small businesses must use data and technology to continue to understand their customers' needs, expand their services, and select the right partners to meet the requirements of the demanding online shopper.

### **2/ Go global**

The advent of the virtual marketplace means consumers now research for the best price, no matter where the product is, be it in the town they live in, or another continent altogether. It has opened doors for small and medium companies to trade across borders in a way that was never possible before. Take advantage of the opportunity to trade cross borders with ease, but be sure to do it right by customizing your platforms and logistics strategies accordingly. Historically, there were aspects of cross border sales such as taxes and duties that were difficult to manage; however, today, all of those complexities can be taken care of by logistics companies. At the end of the day, SMEs that don't go global will be at a significant disadvantage in the future.

### **3/ Get your channel strategy right**

Depending on the growth strategy, SMEs may need to consider direct selling, through online marketplaces or ecommerce platforms. With an omnichannel strategy, off and online operations need to be integrated to provide a seamless experience to customers.

# COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

Five key growth considerations for SMEs within the evolving regional e-commerce ecosystem **by RENZO BRAVO**

**E**conomic diversification is critical to the future of the Middle East region. Regional governments understand that creating a knowledge and services-based economy, where businesses of a range of sizes can grow, will help achieve sustainability. As such, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) have increasing opportunities for development in the region.

Over the past decade, Middle Eastern governments have been investing in creating the right infrastructure to help SMEs flourish. Dubai, in particular, has set ambitious development goals in the 50 Year Charter including the establishment of the world's first virtual trade zone targeting 100,000 companies, as well as the transformation of universities into free zones in order to promote economic growth and innovation. These goals offer exceptional opportunities for promising SMEs. In addition, a number of measures have

been taken to reduce costs and boost business confidence. This has led to growth and increase in not just the number of SMEs, but also their contribution to the GDP of countries in the region. For example, in 2019 it is estimated that in the UAE, SMEs contributed 53% to the national GDP, up from about 49% in 2018. The UAE federal government aims to increase this rate to around 60% by 2021, underscoring the importance of this contribution in supporting the country's long-term economic plan.

Given the pace at which the world is evolving, coupled with the young, digitally mature population in the region, there are increased opportunities for SMEs. Creating the right infrastructure and opportunities for SMEs and helping them navigate the e-commerce, retail and logistics waves is therefore critical, especially for those looking to make their mark in the e-commerce industry. Here are five considerations for SMEs to keep in mind when pursuing growth in the e-commerce ecosystem:



Selecting the right application program interface (API) plug-ins and modules to enable additional options and integrate with these platforms might seem like a complicated process, which is where a reputable logistics partner will step in and guide, based on one's needs.

**4/ Focus on what you do well, let others do the rest**

Work out which partners are needed, and create a partner strategy to capitalize on the most advanced capabilities available. When choosing a logistics partner for retail and ecommerce, small businesses should focus on those that can provide delivery options –speed, cost optimization, and reliability- to differentiate their offer. The highest levels of service commitment and digital integration, along with automated back-end support, visibility, and reporting are competitive advantages to build brand loyalty. The clearance efficiency offered by the delivery partner can also be an important differentiator for small companies- one wants a partner that will ensure that correct shipping documentation, relevant approvals and authorizations are in place to avoid any delays, and ensure products are delivered in the shortest possible time.

**5/ Be ready for change**

Last but not the least, don't get locked in. E-commerce is an emerging economy that necessitates flexibility, so it is critical for SMEs to ensure they are ready to change as it evolves in order to successfully accommodate changes in customer demands and development of new solutions. From the outside looking in, one could think the world of e-commerce is fragmented and complex, with multiple risks and as yet, undefined rewards. However, with the growing number of full- >>>

# BOOSTING AN ECOSYSTEM

## THE ADVENT OF **DIGITAL ASSET REGULATIONS** IN THE **GCC** IS GOOD FOR THE REGION'S STARTUP LANDSCAPE by KOKILA ALAGH

While some might view regulations as a hindrance to innovation and creativity, in many cases, it actually supports entrepreneurs and startups to be able to innovate, create, and market their products and solutions in a legally and regulatory supportive environment. In the GCC, this can be seen through the framework of digital asset regulations that are being initiated and developed across the region.

One of the ways the digital asset regulations in the GCC is assisting startups is through the ability to increase liquidity, which is a major impediment for many startups in the region. How does this work? When startups can issue digital assets and exchange them, it allows them to bring in investment from a broader investment base, surpassing traditional investment entities, the bank-

ing sector, and family offices, but without excluding them. Digital assets issuance is also much more practical and easier than conventional securities to launch.

With this new form of liquidity comes great responsibility towards the protection of investors. Unregulated digital assets like those we witnessed in the form of initial coin offerings are a thing of the past. Today, instead of banning crypto assets, regulators in the GCC have held consultations and discussion with market players. Today, the GCC is home to some of the finest regulations in the digital asset space. Examples include Abu Dhabi Global Market (ADGM) in the UAE, and the Central Bank of Bahrain, both of whom have been leaders in this space.

ADGM's framework paves way for issuance, trading, and exchange of virtual assets, digital securities, fiat tokens, and other derivatives from the free zone. Similarly, Bahrain's framework contains the rules concerning trading, dealing, advisory services, and portfolio management services in accepted crypto assets as a principal, agent, custodian, or crypto-asset exchange within or from the Kingdom of Bahrain. Both ADGM and Bahrain have kept the costs of incorporation competitive for the startups under their framework. >>>

**TODAY, THE GCC IS HOME TO SOME OF THE FINEST REGULATIONS IN THE DIGITAL ASSET SPACE. EXAMPLES INCLUDE ABU DHABI GLOBAL MARKET (ADGM) IN THE UAE, AND THE CENTRAL BANK OF BAHRAIN, BOTH OF WHOM HAVE BEEN LEADERS IN THIS SPACE.**



service providers and technology solutions to facilitate the online journey at every step of the way, it is becoming much easier to get a foot in the door.

Now, what SMEs need to remember is that they don't need to own -or even actively manage- all parts of the e-commerce ecosystem. Almost every element of the e-commerce process -from live customer tracking, to delivery options, returns management capabilities, chatbots and contact centers, as well as localization of currencies, languages, and delivery options- can be outsourced to either one full service logistics provider, or a network of players.

**CONSUMERS NOW RESEARCH FOR THE BEST PRICE, NO MATTER WHERE THE PRODUCT IS, BE IT IN THE TOWN THEY LIVE IN, OR ANOTHER CONTINENT ALTOGETHER.**



With the right partner, they can gain advantage from the ability to overcome geographical limitations, increase market reach, and achieve scale- without having to make any bricks and mortar investments. The right partner will also provide SMEs with the agility and flexibility required to tap into high growth markets. As such, what SMEs getting into the e-commerce space need to focus on is finding the right partners with the right capabilities- this is crucial to remain competitive. ■



Renzo Bravo is Head of Marketing and Strategy for ISMEA, UPS. [ups.com](http://ups.com)

As such, today, investors are more confident in investing in digital assets issued under the guidance of these regulators. For the "once-bitten-twice-shy" category of investors who have lost their investments in the pre-regulation era in digital assets, they can find comfort in the fact that GCC regulators are treating digital assets at par with other investment models. For instance, the legal requirements of issuance of digital securities are at par with those of issuance conventional securities under the ADGM framework.

Similarly, crypto assets exchanges are treated at par with multilateral trading facilities (MTF). This means that the set-up and governance obligations for a crypto-exchange are as rigorous under the markets and infrastructure rules of ADGM as that of an MTF. My company, KARM Legal, has had the good fortune of working on multiple transactions related to digital assets, and we can safely conclude that both ADGM and Bahrain have taken a consumer-first approach, but at the same time, haven't stifled technology in any manner.

The regulators hold detailed discussions on the aspects of technology governance with the entities seeking licenses- for instance client onboarding, business continuity, disaster recovery plans, and security operating procedures. As a result, we have seen a massive surge in the sectors of tokenization of securities of special purpose vehicles, fund units, and real estate investment trusts. Different sectors like hospitality, art, real estate, and natural resources have also seen a significant penetration of digital assets-based models.

Just as regulations have allowed startups to be able to receive increased liquidity and open their digital assets to a wider range of investors, digital asset regulations in the GCC have also spurred the launch of new startups in the fintech, regtech, insurtech, compliance, digital identity, cyber security, and other areas.



This is paving the way for new startups and industries to flourish in the region. Most of the regulators in the GCC as well as other entities have also developed sandboxes to offer startups the environment needed to develop their solutions while adhering to laws and regulations. These include ADGM, Dubai International Finance Center (DIFC), and even Bahrain Fintech Bay in cooperation with the Central Bank of Bahrain.

For instance, DIFC has recently permitted capital raise on crowdfunding platforms through tokens to a few entities under the sandbox model of DIFC, and KARM has had the privilege of advising a few of such participant entities. In addition, another firm regulated out of ADGM has been able to launch the first regulated private equity financing platform and has successfully tokenized shares for six startups. Further, in order to boost startups and SMEs, ADGM has introduced a regime for digital banking to promote financial inclusion accessing untapped, unbanked, and underserved clients across markets. Digital banks focusing on lending to small and medium-sized businesses with advances in AI, data management, and analytics are enabling more risk-sensitive and timely credit decisions at a lower cost.

So, all in all, it is not just the digital assets regulations that are facilitating the startups, it's the entire GCC ecosystem that is trying to send a message loud and clear: stop perceiving us merely as oil economies. We are ready for you, and we are ready for the fourth industrial revolution. ■



Kokila Alagh is the founder of KARM Legal and STO LAB MENA. [karmadv.com](http://karmadv.com)



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Lars Johannesen is the founder of Privilee, a fitness and leisure app-based membership service.

IMAGE COURTESY OF PRIVILEE/ITP



# GOING FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH

Privilee founder **Lars Johannesen** on how he went about building “the UAE’s ultimate fitness and leisure app”

by **TAMARA PUPIC**

“It’s difficult to figure out what you are actually good at when you’re that young,” says Lars Johannesen, looking back at 2009, which was when he moved to the UAE from Denmark. Today, Johannesen is the founder and CEO of Privilee, a fitness and leisure app-based membership service offering a five-star lifestyle to everyone at affordable prices. In the UAE, its current portfolio includes more than 55 luxury resorts and beach clubs, more than 60 gyms, in addition to spas and kids’ clubs and discounts at more than 300 restaurants and bars. However, his first comment does not really fit into a usual beginning of a rags-to-riches story of a newcomer to Dubai struggling to find his place in the city. A decade ago, Johannesen was a 29-year-old digital entrepreneur with a hefty exit under his belt and plenty of time and money to be spent at the city’s beach resorts. 10 years before that, he was a factory worker discussing startups with a friend and colleague during their many night shifts. Those conversations grew into CEGO, a Danish video game developer that became the first company to gain an online gaming license in Denmark and explore the country’s casual gaming segment.

“My business partner and I started out in a basement, and had been friends for almost seven years prior to that, but we kind of grew apart,” Johannesen says, as he explains what led to him exiting that business and moving to Dubai. “I wish I had realized earlier that we were two CEOs doing the same thing, and that we needed to split the roles, as in, ‘You take care of this, I’ll take care of that.’ But I don’t regret exiting that company, because I have grown much

more over here as a person.” Exiting CEGO happened in two stages with Johannesen selling 10% of the business in 2009, and the remaining 40% in 2012, while the lessons he had learnt would prove to be even more valuable in the long run. “We went from casual gaming, with the advertising paying all the bills, to a subscription model, where you’re getting additional games and benefits,” he says. “So, we went from one day thinking that ‘the advertising was not good that month’ to introducing a subscription model, and then, all of a sudden, we started making a lot of money. I learnt the subscription model pretty well then.”

His first six years in Dubai could be described as a “Yay, retirement!” dream, as he puts it. “But I got bored,” Johannesen says. “Then, I tried a ton of things, such as importing paintings from China and selling them online in Denmark, or a charity website where you could donate to charities or you could collect money if someone was sick, or a concept I copied from here to advertise behind receipts from stores.” It was then during a trip to the Seychelles that Johannesen witnessed airline crew enjoying deals and discounts not available to the majority of people. Before long, he turned his annoyance by this situation into a business plan to >>>

**“ALL OF A SUDDEN, WE STARTED MAKING A LOT OF MONEY. I LEARNT THE SUBSCRIPTION MODEL PRETTY WELL THEN.”**



The Privilee team

purchase beach and pool memberships at luxury hotels, and then allow Privilee members to utilize them at a fraction of the cost. The first hurdle to overcome was getting hotels in Dubai onboard. “At the beginning, it was quite expensive and quite hard to get hotels to even listen to you, so it took me a lot of money to purchase memberships at a lot of properties to ensure I had enough memberships,” he

of Dubai, who proved to be repeat visitors. “For the hotels, it was tricky, because for some of the most popular venues, we used to conflict with their own in-house memberships,” Johannessen explains. “However, since the whole change in salaries and packages down here, we now fit into the market. But when we launched it, some of the hotels used to have thousands of members, and we were kind of steal-

says. “I just had to burn through the cash.”

Quite quickly, however, some of the city’s most prestigious hotels recognized the benefits of partnering with Privilee: a cash injection, year-round revenue, up-selling, and brand awareness among residents

ing them, because people got a Privilee membership for a quarter of the price. It used to cost them AED25,000, but with us, it was just AED6,000 per year. These days, the hotels love it, because they have additional revenue every day of the week in restaurants and beach clubs, which, normally, they wouldn’t have had.”

Next, Johannessen’s eyes were set on the city’s gyms in order to offer Privilee members fitness membership at a lower price and with an added benefit of access to pools and beach clubs. “I think that over the last 10 years, the gym market here has changed a lot, because there was only Fitness First before, but now there are so many different places, and they all want to attract customers,” he says. “So, it’s easier for us to come in now and to buy memberships, but we still try to protect the gym. So, every time we do a partnership with a gym, we say, ‘Okay, how do we protect your members? What is it in your business that you want to keep for your in-house members?’ So, we don’t just steal all their members, because then



The Privilee office in Jumeirah Lake Towers



there will be dull months, and we won't have a partnership. Some of them don't get it, but from the ones who do, we actually end up buying more memberships, and bringing more business to them."

Today, the Privilee product offering is a digital app-based membership that can be purchased for one-month, four-month, and annual time frames from as little as AED529 per month. Guest passes can also be purchased for one to four weeks at AED289 per week. Due to this price point for a five-star offering, Johannessen says he has been able to rely on word of mouth as the main marketing tool. Nevertheless, the Privilee team has been cautious when finding the right message to be sent out to the market. "Because the concept is not something you need," Johannessen explains. "It's a bit tricky saying, 'You should get this,' when you don't really need a beach membership, but as soon as you try it, you can't live without it. That story is difficult to tell. You can't just sell this online, because people still go, 'Ugh, do I really need that?'" And we've always been very transparent with our customers. I hate signing up people who will come two weeks later and say, 'Oh, but I can't use this on public holidays.' It's not me enforcing these things, but the hotels saying that if they have 200 guests by the pool, they can't fit in 50 more guests. People feel that it's actually okay that we're honest about what we're doing, and delivering on the promise."

The Privilee office in Jumeirah Lake Towers is housed by 25 carefully selected staff members, Johannessen says. "We actually send out job openings to our customer base, and then we get quality candidates. I used to use LinkedIn, but we got thousands of people who were not qualified. Going through that is just a nightmare. So, we work with recruiters, and we also do it in-house, but I still find it challenging, especially if you want to hire developers down here. We built this office for 25 employees, and I don't want to fit in more people. I know from the past that as soon as we go past 30, you don't connect with them personally. I don't know anything about them. It's not that fun to come into work anymore, but I know it's inevitable." The company broke even a couple of years ago, and Johannessen admits that it has taken him some time to find a fine balance between growth and costs. "I don't like the culture of just burning through cash to see if eventually we're going to make money," he says. "We are not just another aggregator, but we invest in hotels, and that's why I think we're successful, and why they want to work with us. But, as soon as I go to the media, people start calling me and saying 'Hey, can we raise funds for you?' I don't need money. 'Ah, but you do need money!' What am I going to do with it? If there was a plan that I needed to explore, I would probably see someone who could help me to raise funds, but as of now, I just need to tweak the concept before we move internationally. It's different, because I'm funding it myself."

Fast forward a few months or years, Johannessen would prefer for any partner to consider working with Privilee as a no-brainer. That said, he notes that expanding Privilee internationally will require the concept to be modified. "It



## "I JUST HAD TO BURN THROUGH THE CASH."

will not work in Europe; like in Italy, they have got nice hotels, but they don't have the resort culture," Johannessen says. "We can open up in Greece, but if you told someone in Greece to pay a EUR1,000 a year to use a sun lounge, they would have a heart attack. But this would work well in Miami, because you've got good weather, five-star resorts, but it needs to be tweaked a lot over there, just like in Singapore." When asked if his future dreams include him moving on from being an entrepreneur to becoming an investor, Johannessen confesses that he's not interested in that shift just yet. "Just because you're good at starting something does not mean that it is easy to be on the sidelines, and guide someone else on what they should do," he explains. "Some entrepreneurs are good at being investors, but that's not my skill. A lot of entrepreneurs think that 'I'll just invest in this, and I could be on the board,' but a lot of them don't realize that that might not be their skillset. They're actually good at seeing a demand somewhere and fulfilling it, or hiring the right people, or making good business deals, but it doesn't mean that they are good board members." ■



Zina Ajlouny

# The ride continues

How Careem's culture as a startup fueled the Careem Cartel by ZINA AJLOUNY

I was lucky to join Careem before the hype train hit it- before it had raised more than US\$770 million from investors, before it had cemented itself as the MENA region's first (and to-date, only) unicorn startup valued at more than \$1 billion. I joined Careem in September 2016, a time when we were still getting shut down by regulators in multiple countries that didn't know how to manage such a disruptor.

When my stably employed lawyer father asked me why, after founding a startup, after getting an MBA, and after working at the Boston Consulting Group, I would want to join a what he called a "taxi company," my answer was always the

same. I wanted to join Careem because I loved the people that I had met there. I loved that feeling I got there that I knew I could never explain to him or anyone who didn't share that same intangible feeling of belonging at a company.

I started to realize that I loved the people at Careem as I went through my final interview with our epic dealmaker, CFO Ankur Shah, in September 2016. Thankfully for me, not one question from Ankur that day was about finance. Almost

every question for an hour was centered around culture and fit. For instance: Why did I want to join a startup again? Why didn't I want to start my own company again? Why was this the right place for me in that moment? Why didn't I want to move back to Silicon Valley if I was interested in technology? Why Careem?

I knew I had joined the right place when during my first week, I met the co-founder of Careem, Magnus Olsson, and he didn't ask me once about my work experience. I will never forget it: in our first introductory meeting, he asked me if I knew what my life purpose was, and how working at Careem would fit into my life purpose. That day he also endearingly shared (and continues to share) that if I or anyone else ever felt like working at Careem was not fitting into their life purpose anymore, there would be no hard feelings, and that I and everyone else should find a place that did fit. Magnus calls this "living your true purpose-your calling."

It was through instances like these at Careem that I knew I had joined the right place. Even if we were getting shut down every once in a while -whether due to our extraordinary growth, or government-imposed restrictions- I knew that we were at least getting shut down with the best people around. Funnily enough, we still get the occasional shutdown threat from regulators, but today, we believe it to be a systematic part of the trend of technology and innovation moving faster than regulators can keep up with. Well, that was September

Zina Ajlouny is a Palestinian American entrepreneur. She was part of the founding team of Bonfaire -an e-commerce platform that was acquired by Moda Operandi- in San Francisco. She currently resides in Dubai, where she worked first as a management consultant for Boston Consulting Group, then spent three years as part of the strategy and public policy team at Careem, and is now working on a stealth startup. Zina holds a BA from the University of Michigan and an MBA from INSEAD. Her mission is to empower the next generation of female leaders and to share positivity along the way. You can follow her journey on Instagram @thepositivez.



2016, and this is March 2020. A lot has changed since those early days. Since then, Careem became the first and only unicorn (though we preferred the word 'unicamel,' because we are local like that) exit in the history of the MENA region. Humbly, we became a unicorn three times over—less than seven years after Careem started on the first day of Ramadan in July 2012 (there's even a nod to the Ramadan Kareem greeting in our name!), Uber acquired Careem in March 2019 for \$3.1 billion.

On that day, March 26, 2019, the original two co-founders of Careem, Mudassir Sheikha and Magnus Olsson, went around showing their gratitude to everyone who had made this milestone day possible. That morning, Mudassir humbly thanked everyone from Prime Ministers to Careem colleagues to Captains (which is how Careem calls

its drivers) for helping fuel this milestone achievement. There was never ever a feeling of arrogance at Careem, and this was showcased in how the founders took little credit for this acquisition. It was always a feeling of we have done so little—there is so much more left to do. It was always very humbling, no matter what the financial headlines said.

On the day of the acquisition announcement, Mudassir announced the good news in a memo to all colleagues. "This will radically and irreversibly enhance the support and funding opportunities for local entrepreneurs," he said. "Every ecosystem needs a landmark transaction, and we hope this will be ours." On that same day, I also shared this on my personal Facebook page: "I'll be betting on a Careem mafia—a la the PayPal Mafia—to help drive the next set of unicorns in the MENA region." For the

uninitiated, the PayPal Mafia refers to a group of people, who after working at PayPal, went on to further catalyze the startup ecosystem in Silicon Valley. This group includes ex-PayPal'ers like Elon Musk (founder of Tesla and Space X), Peter Thiel (founder of Palantir), Reid Hoffman (founder of LinkedIn), David Sachs (founder of Yammer), Dave McClure (founder of 500 Startups), and Steve Chen and Chad Hurley (founders of YouTube).

Now, at Careem, we hadn't coined a name then, but it seems our little mafia is today poised to play an active role in helping shape the next wave of technology and entrepreneur-

ship growth in the region. It seems that Careem alumni are creating their own (legal) mafias or cartels, staying within the startup space in the region, and moving towards catalyzing our region's startup and entrepreneurial ecosystem. And a year after the acquisition, someone (not me!) coined a name for this group too: the Careem Cartel. The Careem Cartel has moved on to major roles within the technology and broader business ecosystem, some as the founders of Careem-adjacent businesses, while others as founders of non-Careem-adjacent businesses, and a few more as key hires at growing startups in the region. >>>

**EVEN IF WE WERE GETTING SHUT DOWN EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE -WHETHER DUE TO OUR EXTRAORDINARY GROWTH, OR GOVERNMENT-IMPOSED RESTRICTIONS- I KNEW THAT WE WERE AT LEAST GETTING SHUT DOWN WITH THE BEST PEOPLE AROUND.**



A Careem team photo



Magnus Olsson, co-founder, Careem, at *Entrepreneur Middle East's* Enterprise Agility Forum

**THE CAREEM CARTEL HAS MOVED ON TO MAJOR ROLES WITHIN THE TECHNOLOGY AND BROADER BUSINESS ECOSYSTEM**, SOME AS THE FOUNDERS OF CAREEM-ADJACENT BUSINESSES, AND A FEW MORE AS KEY HIRES AT GROWING STARTUPS IN THE REGION.

chain network for food and grocery retailers that raised \$6.2M in seed investment, the MENA's largest seed round to date.

**Mohamed Abounaga**, ex-Regional Director of Careem Egypt, is currently the co-founder and Chief Commercial Officer of Halan. Halan is a ride hailing application for 2-3 seater vehicles that raised a \$20 million Series B. (10 other ex-Careem colleagues have also joined Halan.)

**Nadia Rouchdy**, ex-Director of Sustainability and Social Impact at Careem, is today the co-founder at Reel Palestine, an annual film festival.

**Mossab Hussein**, ex-Product Manager at Careem, is the co-founder and Chief Security Officer at SpiderSilk, a cybersecurity firm.

**Zach Finkelstein**, ex-VP Corporate Development at Careem, is the founder and Managing Partner of Class 5 Global, a San Francisco-based venture capital fund.

**Amr Ramadan**, ex-Public Policy Manager at Careem, is the co-founder and Project Director at Wasla, a music festival.

**Christian Eid**, ex-VP Brand and Communications at Careem joined hands with Nadia Rouchdy to co-found Ducklife, a brand advisory and impact platform. (Other ex-Careem colleagues at Ducklife include Steve Worobec, ex-Senior

Director of Branding and Marketing; Ihab Ahmed, ex-Senior Director of Social and Content; Omar Ezz, ex-Senior Regional Brand Marketing Manager; Silvia Muller, ex-Global Customer Brand Manager.)

**Ibrahim Bou Ncoula**, ex-Software Development Manager at Careem, is the Chief Technology Officer at Washmen, an online laundry service that raised \$6 million.

**Khaled Rashad**, ex-Chair of Architecture Council at Careem, is today the Chief Technology Officer at Talabat, an online food delivery platform.

**Asma Alyamani**, ex-Product Lead at Careem, is today the Head of Product at MamoPay, a mindful finance application.

**Stacey Pinto**, ex-Senior Corporate Affairs Manager, is currently the Director of Brand and Reputation at Kitopi, a cloud kitchen enterprise that raised \$89 million.

**Yamen Fakhreddine**, ex-Director of Finance, is the Chief Financial Officer at Sprii, an e-commerce platform that has raised \$14 million so far.

Whether you like the arguably obnoxious name or not, here's to cheering the Careem Cartel (and everyone else) who are fueling and following their inner purpose. We're all in this ride together. Yalla, let's go! ■

Here is a non-comprehensive list of who and what the Careem Cartel are up to now, as well as their previous roles at Careem:

**IQ Sayed**, ex-VP, Global Head of Engineering at Careem, is now the co-founder and CTO at Circ, e-scooter company. Circ was acquired by Bird, a Los Angeles-based e-scooter company in January 2020.

**Mostafa Kandil**, ex-Market Launcher at Careem, is today the founder and CEO of Swvl, a bus transportation network

that has raised \$80 million to date, the largest ever funding round for an Egyptian startup.

**Yusuf Saber**, ex-Data Science Lead at Careem, is currently the co-founder and Chief Technology Officer at BulkWhiz. BulkWhiz is a platform for bulk grocery and staples delivery that recently raised a multi-million dollar Series A.

**Belal Al-Megharbel**, ex-General Manager of Careem Cairo, is the founder and CEO at MaxAB. MaxAB is a supply





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# MIND OVER MATTER

Five daily rituals to enhance your brain health

by DR. UPASANA GALA

**S**tress seem to be an integral part of business today, and it's often been perceived as a badge of honor—something to attest to our professionalism and commitment to work. However, too much stress—especially in the times we are currently living through—can be counterproductive. Here are a few powerful, and perhaps most importantly, painless changes you can make today to enhance your brain's health, and make you more productive and efficient, all while lowering your stress levels too.

**1/ Early to bed, early to rise** A good night's sleep goes a long way to make you more productive, because deep sleep facilitates healthy brain function, builds immunity, and even repairs muscle. According to research by LiveScience, lack of sleep impedes communication between our brain cells, which can lead to temporary mental lapses and affect our memory and perception. Therefore, try and commit to a fixed bed-time, ideally sleeping between 8pm and 12am (shown to be the prime bracket for rapid eye moment (REM) and non-REM sleep) to start forging a habit and regulate your circadian rhythm. Adequate sleep improves concentration, memory, and problem-solving capabilities. And, it's

no coincidence that a huge number of successful entrepreneurs are extremely early risers. The old adage wasn't wrong!

**2/ Declutter your mind with exercise and meditation** This has been scientifically proven to be an excellent way to kick start your day. Daily meditation coupled with exercise is a great outlet to both clear your mind and help you plan for the day ahead. In fact, just a 20-minute run in the morning will go a long way in boosting your dopamine and norepinephrine levels, improving your motivation and productivity for the day in return. (And no, this does not have to be done outdoors—several fitness enthusiasts have shown this can be done even while staying home and respecting self-isolation and social distancing measures!) Furthermore, 10 minutes of meditation right after waking up allows your brain to take advantage of its creative alpha waves to start off your day right. Some great apps to help you with that include Headspace and Calm. Meditation also facilitates visualization and prioritization, ensuring that your day can be as productive as possible.

**3/ Eat the frog, and follow the 80/20 rule** The 80/20 rule, also known as the Pareto Principle, states that 80% of outcomes are a result of 20% of activities. So, prioritize

your tasks, and focus on the most important things first. Not only will you get the most pressing business done early, but you'll also spend less time on the small things, saving a surprisingly large amount of time and energy. Furthermore, this also minimizes the chances of procrastination seeping in, because handling one task at a time wouldn't leave you feeling overwhelmed, which is a nice segue to the next step.

**4/ Break it down** Big tasks can be daunting, so why not approach them step by step? Breaking a big job into a number of smaller tasks that can be accomplished relatively easily will greatly enhance your likelihood of completing it without feeling overwhelmed.

**5/ Consciously unplug from the grid** Set aside specific times of the day and plan breaks. Whether it's with reading a book, making a coffee for yourself, or a chat with a friend, it must be a total unplug. This means no checking your emails mid-read, no answering calls when you're sipping coffee, no distractions when you're catching up with a friend. Be mindful of what you're doing in the moment, and really try to switch off. You'll return to your work sharper, and with more enthusiasm.

**6/ Use hidden time** There are many bundles of time scattered throughout our day that we take for granted. Often, when we're in the process of completing a task there is a lull in our activity—this is a great opportunity to use this time to get something else done. Waiting for feedback from a client? Why not tackle some administration you've been putting off! Waiting on a delivery? That's perfect time for a stock take! Make use of hidden time; it's a marvelous thing.

**7/ Be blown away by brain training** Brain training is a powerful way to not only conquer stress and anxiety, but also improve focus and productivity. Non-invasive brain training techniques like neurofeedback use our own brain's self-regulation mechanisms to improve its performance. At its essence, it's like being able to put a mirror inside our brain, so it can see the flaws, and then go about correcting them. It's an amazing tool to enhance brain power, and make our minds sharper.



Dr. Upasana Gala is the founder and CEO of Evolve Brain Training, a neurofeedback centered institute that focuses on using non-invasive brain training techniques to maximize the brain's true potential. [evolvebraintraining.com](http://evolvebraintraining.com)



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