

Specialisation: The evolution of advertising

Elie Khoury has seen and done it all. Having literally worked his way up the proverbial ladder from the bottom rung, this advertising executive is the quintessential success story. Khoury took time out of his hectic schedule to speak to AcademiX and explain the continuing shift in advertising toward media specialisation.



Academic Profile: Elie Khoury

I graduated from the American University of Beirut with an MBA and started my career in advertising some 20 years ago. Working my way up from trainee to director to managing director at BBDO, a creative agency within the Omnicom Group, I have worked in various countries at various client management positions. I was responsible for such clients as Master Foods, Wella, Pepsi and Fromageries Bel, and contributed to the accounts of several others. In 2001, I set up OMD (Omnicom Media Group) to integrate regional media resources and established the new entity as the group's media specialist arm. With the development of our offering in the region, I became the regional managing director of Omnicom Media Group, the regional holding for OMD, the leading media network in the region, as well as PHD, the media specialist launched last year as part of the network's global expansion, and several specialist units.

We have heard that there has been a significant shift toward specialisation in the advertising industry. Can you explain what this entails?

The advertising industry started with the full service model, where one agency would provide all the marketing and communication services a client required. This primarily meant creative development and media placement, but new services were bolted on over the years, adding PR, direct marketing, online and so on. As markets developed, with changing consumers and increasingly complex



media offerings, the increasing need of clients for specialisation led to the creation of dedicated units that, over time, have become more and more independent from the traditional ad agency.

Media specialists were born in the 1990s in Europe; here in the Middle East they've been around for about five to eight years. They were created out of the need for a specialised focus on a brand's media investments in order to capitalise on the opportunities created by the changing media landscape and new technologies. The same logic applies to other marketing disciplines, such as direct marketing, digital media or public relations.

Rather than working with full service agencies, clients now have access to different specialist groups or networks.

These are organised within communication holding groups such as Omnicom Group, WPP, Publicis Group or InterPublic Group. These holding groups own advertising networks, media or communication planning networks, PR networks and a host of other specialist agencies at the local or international level.

Together with the brand or creative agencies, media specialists lead the development of a brand's communications plan. In short, while a creative agency formulates the message for the brand, a media agency will ensure that message is received by the right people, at the right time, in the right context and in enough time to be absorbed.

After analysing consumers, sectors and media landscape, they recommend the way forward for a brand to communicate in both traditional (TV, print, radio, outdoor, cinema) and more recent forms of media, such as digital media (mobile phones, Internet, e-mail). This also includes new formats within all forms of



media, as well as other ways for a brand to communicate, such as events or movies.

Besides creating the communication architecture, planners also define the technical aspects of a brand's communication. Based on the strategy they've defined, they optimise their plans to ensure the most effective allocation of their clients' investments in media. Buyers also play a major role in ensuring plans are executed in media in an optimal fashion, managing communications activities from negotiating to booking and from execution to tracking.

Another key function of a media specialist agency is research. Planning teams rely on their researchers to provide them with meaningful insights on consumers or media, for example, to create an effective strategy, as well as provide them with accurate data to assess the effectiveness of the plan against set business and communication goals. This makes them all a crucial part of a brand's advertising.

Another way to look at this would be to

liken us as a doctor who listens to a brand owner's predicament, establishes a diagnosis based on his analysis of the symptoms and then prepares a prescription to drive the brand to a healthy condition. Our role doesn't stop there though, since we also provide the medication, which we have negotiated at the best rates possible. As would any good doctor, we also assess our patient's 'recovery' on a continuous basis and make any necessary changes over the course of the treatment.

With the media landscape becoming more and more complex in terms of both quantity and types of communication channels, media specialists have become the cornerstone of brand communications, acting as the interface between brand owners, creative agencies, media owners and consumers.

Some of our biggest clients include: Dubai Holding, Pepsico, du (telecom), Emirates Airline, Henkel, Arla Foods, Chrysler, Kellogg's, Nissan, Savola Group and Wrigleys, among others.

Is the evolution of MBUs (Media Buying Units) primarily a result of an abundance of media in the region?

More than the abundance of media, it's the proliferation of choice in communication channels and the need for accurate investment management that have led to the success of media specialists. In fact, because an increasing proportion of media investments are actually moving away from 'traditional' media channels, our role today is best described as communication planning agencies.

This role requires specialised knowledge and understanding, as well as analytical power, through expertise and systems. In addition, scale plays a major role in deriving the most value from our clients' investments. These are very significant and clients want to make sure these are judiciously managed.

Was it difficult to find the necessary advertising professionals for such a major shift in direction within the industry?

A recent article in the Economist showed

that talent scarcity is a worldwide problem affecting many countries and industries. This is also the case in our industry and our region.

A key factor is that we are growing rapidly and the current staffing level is not keeping pace with this growth. Ideally, there would be enough newcomers to our industry to help sustain that growth, but here too, the numbers are not sufficient. This is partly explained by a limited understanding of what we do in the larger context of advertising and the lack of dedicated focus in the region's academic courses.

Within our group, we have therefore had to develop our internal educational program to serve not only our current staff in order to nurture their own growth, but also our clients and indeed students. The OMD Academy supports our drive to attract talent, both through internships, placements, tailor-made sessions in partnership with local universities, as well as the training of fresh graduate recruits. It is a great asset for us in the development of the future leaders of our industry.

Have you approached universities in the region in order to implement specialised courses in the curricula to better prepare students for the new realities of advertising?

Indeed, we have developed strong links with the academic world as part of the OMD Academy. Having realised that marketing and media courses are somewhat too generic, with limited exposure to the 'real' world, we have worked with several universities to incorporate real case studies in their curriculum. In fact, we actively cooperate with the American University in Dubai and Zayed University in the UAE. We intend to develop this further still, including geographically because our requirements across the region are significant.

What type of internships do you offer?

We have offered internships for students in the past and plan to continue. These help us identify young talent and future stars. We encourage students and universities to approach us since there are opportunities across our regional network.

Beyond these, we have also pioneered new ways to enhance our training. The first one is implanting OMD employees within our clients' organisations, where they work as part of their team. After a year or so, they come back enriched, which enhances their ability to appreciate the priorities and specific concerns of our clients. We also offer exchange programs within our international networks. Selected candidates are sent to other offices around the world and we welcome overseas executives, which benefits both parties by exposing them to local practices in a foreign country. This has proven very enriching and an eye-opener for all those involved, an incredible way in which to develop truly international talent and an opportunity to develop and spread international best practices.

Do you hire recent advertising graduates?

We do indeed, since it is a priority for us to increase our industry's talent pool. We have recruited from several universities' graduates across the region, often from institutions offering an American education. But, while the universities and system used are important, what truly matters in our recruitment process is the quality of the graduates, their ability to adapt to our industry and our requirements, as well as the way they integrate our teams. It's ultimately a people business and our people make the difference, with their skills and their personalities. We value both. 🍀