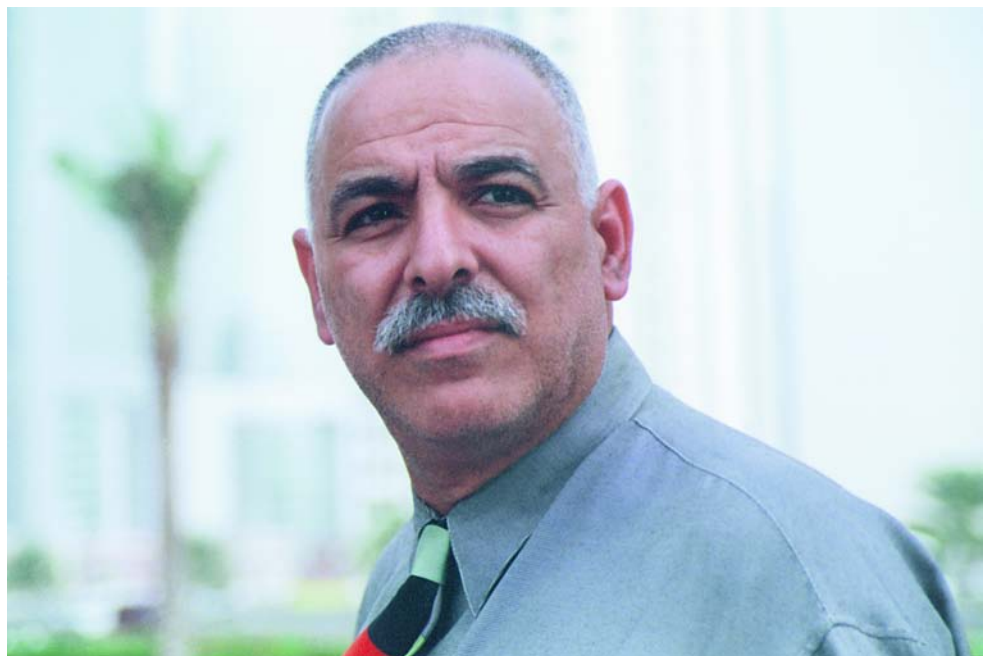


A Crisis in Communication

Mounir Assadourian on the dilemma facing the advertising industry in the Middle East

by Fida Slayman

According to Mounir Assadourian, the advertising industry in the Gulf is currently in the midst of a “communication crisis.” Having clocked in more than 35 years in the business, the majority of those as a creative director in Lebanon and Dubai, Assadourian knows a thing or two about what makes advertising in this part of the world tick.



“**B**ut be careful,” he warns, “I’m talking about communication, not creativity. The word ‘creativity’ is applied to everything these days, but actually the word people mean is ‘communication.’” The communication crisis Assadourian is talking about is one which inflicts the entire advertising “food chain,” from the universities which educate fresh advertising hopefuls, to the advertising agencies, clients, and, finally, to the consumers themselves.

Copycat advertising

The problem, Assadourian argues, starts with the universities, many of which employ “lousy teachers.” “They don’t really teach the students how to think cre-

atively.” The Middle East is a region awash with Western media, from television, to movies, to the Internet, and students have a lot of exposure to good advertising as a result. “Students here know, they can recognise good advertising,” he says, “but it’s not in them to make it.”

This difficulty is caused by the “copy culture” of the Middle East, where students latch on to a good idea and simply imitate it to suit their particular project, without taking the time to understand how the idea came about. “Teachers don’t tell their students about the importance of the process. It’s all about the end product here, and that’s where students start. If they want to be really creative and communicate well, they have to start

with an idea and develop it to the end – not the other way around.” Starting with the end products runs the risk of communicating another company’s agenda, another culture’s agenda, to the local market, a practice that diminishes the effectiveness of the message and helps to fuel the current communication crisis.

Making sense of the melting pot

Couple this with the soaring population of foreigners living and working in Gulf states, and the issue of effective advertising itself gets much more complicated. In countries where the population is comprised of mainly the same nationality, it is easier to target potential consumers. In general, they will all eat the same type of food, seek out the same type of enter-

tainment, and measure their life's success in the same ways, for example. Having parameters such as these allows advertising agencies to get really creative in putting together a campaign for their clients, says Assadourian.

But in Gulf states – Dubai in particular – there is no common ground for advertising agencies to start from. The multi-ethnic nature of this city means that advertising campaigns usually have to target a British banker the same way they would an Iranian teacher or an Indian shopkeeper. Many companies wanting to advertise in the UAE simply don't understand its market dynamics, and in trying to appeal to so many different groups at the same time, the degree of creativity and sophistication of the company's message is often diminished, resulting in a lack of campaign focus.

"This is because advertising agencies and their clients don't communicate well," Assadourian claims. As an example, he explains that agencies are unable to convince their clients that more than one version of the same advertisement may be needed in order to appeal to the different segments of society, and clients feel that their agencies are not creative enough to put together a campaign that will suit the budget they have allocated. Such miscommunication and lack of understanding between the two parties only serve to perpetuate the region's communication crisis.

Celebrity status

Assadourian points to globalisation of advertising practices as another factor fuelling this communication crisis. Effective advertising usually appeals to consumers' specific cultures in order to persuade them to invest in the product or service being advertised. Celebrities in the US, for example, are largely admired for their talent, looks and money, and private individuals often want to tap into this so that they may

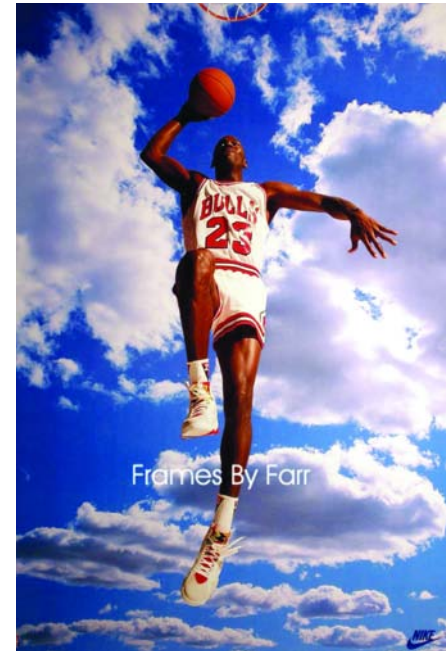
also feel talented, beautiful and rich themselves. It is for this reason that many companies use celebrity endorsements to sell their products – think Michael Jordan selling Nike or Jennifer Lopez selling Pepsi, to name but two.

Assadourian states that companies take this, and other, stock-standard models of a successful campaign and apply them to overseas markets, considering neither the peculiarities of each society and culture nor what makes those particular cultures behave and respond the way they do. Over time, this not only results in a loss of culture throughout the region, but also in a breakdown in the communication lines between a company and its target market.

Playing catch-up to the West

To make matters worse, one of the main indicators that help companies determine the success of an advertising campaign is barely present in the Middle East. In more developed markets, where the culture and practice of advertising has been in place for decades, companies have an in-depth knowledge of their existing and potential consumers, thereby allowing them to structure campaigns targeted directly towards those specific groups. In the Middle East, however, the industry is still very busy playing catch-up. Compared to the UK, the market for advertising in this region of the world is still very immature, especially in terms of transparency and market statistics, states Assadourian.

Market statistics give information on what a particular group of consumers spend their money on, how much disposable income they have to spend each month, the type of media they consume, and so on. Having this information easily available means that companies can put together an advertising campaign that will directly target the people who are likely to buy their products or services. But in a market that is growing rapidly and still getting used to the advertising practices



Michael Jordan for Nike

of the West, all this information is not so easy to get. In a sense, companies and their agencies often find themselves "shooting blind," hoping that their advertisements will communicate their message effectively, but not really having an infrastructure in place to guarantee this.

Who will take the lead?

Though the Middle East's present communication crisis can be attributed to globalisation, the increase in the expatriate population of Gulf states, and the changing social climate of the region, Assadourian says that these are also the very same factors which are fuelling progress in the region. The advertising industry is furiously trying to catch up with and keep ahead of the myriad changes happening around it, and is bound to come up against difficulties as a result. What the industry needs now is young graduates who possess an intimate understanding of the region's cultural mores and have the creativity, initiative and originality to express them to the public. If they can do this, they then have the potential to drive the advertising industry from a communication crisis to a communication triumph. 🍀