

INTERVIEW WITH VENTURE MAGAZINE 2008

1. What is the single biggest common misperception about direct marketing? How do you tackle it in your talks and presentations?

Well, there are many. To start with, most people tend to think of direct marketing as direct mail. But, it is much more than that. Direct mail is still the 'big brother' of DM as it represents 65% of total DM expenditure, but there are many additional routes - off the page advertising, emails, door drop marketing, mail order, inserts and many more.

It's all direct marketing. Remember DM, in my view, is...*"any act which creates and profitably exploits a consistent and meaningful dialogue with a company's customers and prospects"*

Any route or mixture of routes to achieve that, is good DM in my view...

I will be showcasing all aspects of DM in my Masterclass...

2. How do you cater different solutions and techniques to specific regions? In this sense, what are the most effective marketing tools that Middle Eastern companies can use?

Obviously, any marketer who knows what he/she is doing, should be aware of any cultural issues that can effect campaign activity. To do otherwise would be lunacy.

But, other than that, all the proven techniques of DM will - and do - work in the Middle East. I know, because I have proved it hundreds of times in campaigns I have written over the last 13 years in Dubai, Bahrain, Oman and Saudi Arabia.

The Middle East, in direct marketing terms, is very lucky. It's also, in my view, sometimes very dumb. In real terms, it's a new marketplace. So, marketers can take proven techniques and ideas from the USA, UK and other countries and run them in the region and for the most part, they will work.

But very few people do that. I find that marketers in general in the region do not think strategically. They think tactically. They're not interested in next month. only next week.

This, of course, is not a good breeding ground for direct marketing, which is essentially a strategic medium. Plus, there is a total obsession in the region with press advertising. People seem to be blinkered about it. I find it incredible.

3. There has been a lot of controversy surrounding “Influential” marketing lately. You declare the mass market dead on your website. Why? Do you think targeting influential people who will likely do your job for you via word of mouth is more affective? And why do you think that is?

I assume by your question, you mean ‘viral marketing’? This has originated because of the vast power of the Internet and, if you get it right, it can be very effective.

But of course, word of mouth has always been powerful. Way before the Internet was even thought of.

The mass market is dead. I know, because I was at its funeral many years ago. People have always been and will always be, individuals. Every one of us is unique, different, separate and apart from anyone else.

Mass marketing methods cannot address this.

Yet people still try. Especially in the Middle East region. Some of the advertising agencies in the area are dinosaurs.

They don’t know how to address individuality, so they continue to waste client budgets on mass media. And, staggeringly, they continue to suggest that this is the way to market, advertise and promote a product or service.

It used to be like this in the USA and UK until the late 60’s.

Then, the computer burst on to the scene. Rick Fizedale, Leo Burnett’s chairman, said, *“The database will prove to be a more powerful marketing tool than television ever was”*. This echoed John Naisbitt’s comment in his book *Megatrends*, *“The key to marketing in the future will not be primarily distribution, but information”*.

How many clients have good customer databases in the Middle East? Literally a handful. How many agencies recommend they build one? You could probably count them on one hand.

I rest my case...

What you have to remember now, is this :

- Our targets are individuals, not an amorphous mass

- We have to test, find out what works best and fine tune
- We must think strategically in marketing
- It is vital to recognise that everything in the market today is about smaller and smaller, more defined and segmented interest groups”.

That’s why mass marketing is dead...

4. In your experience, is there too little or too much spent on marketing?

There is too much spent by people who do not know what they’re doing. Our industry is in a lot of trouble because of it. So much money is wasted by charlatans, masquerading as knowledgeable practitioners.

It makes me so angry...

You need to spend enough to get the job done. And this can mean continuing fights with the FD and other boring pin stripes who don’t want to give marketers the money they need. When this happens, I always tell them to use this quote:

“Not spending enough money on your marketing programme, is just like buying an airline ticket half way to the Far East. You will spend a lot, but you don’t get where you want to go.”

5. With the advances of technology and ways to reach audiences (SMS and Email), where you draw the line between marketing and SPAM? How do marketers avoid the SPAM label?

Once again, it’s all about knowledge. It about studying. Finding out what works and what doesn’t – and why. No one studies. SPAM is a curse. It is damaging email effectiveness enormously.

I know several large clients that are pulling out of email marketing in prospect terms, completely. It just isn’t working.

SMS is a youth tool. Anyone over 25 that I know that receives an SMS, would blow a fuse. It can be effective, but you have to be very careful with it. Most people are not.

Ironically enough, it’s more popular in the Middle East than anywhere else, yet I noticed recently in Dubai, that there’s a groundswell of opinion starting to appear against it already.

6. What precautions would you give marketers to safeguard them from damaging their brand?

Hire people who know what they're doing.

And, be careful. Don't be seduced by the agency with a big name over the door. It doesn't mean a thing. I know of some creative directors in the Middle East - of big multi-national agencies - who haven't even heard of John Caples, Claude Hopkins or David Ogilvy - let alone read anything from any of them.

If it wasn't so serious, it would be funny...

7. Do certain industries (e.g shopping malls, clothing and apparel) do better with certain direct marketing mediums (e.g email, inserts, and flyers)? Are there any interesting patterns that you have seen in the industry? Do they make any sense?

Retail was slow to catch to the DM revolution. But when it did, it found out that the medium delivered a better return on marketing investment than any other route. I have a number of retail clients here in the UK and a few in the Middle East, including one big shopping mall in Dubai.

They are all doing fantastic business using direct marketing. In fact, we won an award in Dubai recently with Lamcy Plaza.

But good direct marketing, created by people who know what they are doing will work in any sector.

8. In one of your articles, you state that "ads created in the Middle East, seem, for some reason, to be amongst the worst anywhere in the world." Can you elaborate on what makes our region the world's armpit when it comes to advertising? Is that the reason why you keep coming to the region?

Simply this. Agencies in the region think that advertising is about entertainment.

It's not. It's about SELLING! There isn't a client alive today that gives his valuable marketing budget to an agency, with the brief "Go and entertain my customers"

Listen to what the legend David Ogilvy said on this very subject:

"I keep on beating the drum for advertising that sells...and flogging those who think that advertising is entertainment. I will go to my grave believing that advertisers want results and that the advertising business may go to its grave believing otherwise..."

Yet in the Middle East, agencies continue to waste client's money. Emirates inflight magazine is a laugh a minute for me.

Every couple of pages you'll find an ad that is so bad, it defies logic. The reason, as I have said earlier in this interview, is, no one studies the art of communication in the Middle East. They still think pretty pictures sell.

They don't by the way...it's words that do the selling...

There will be much more on this in the Masterclass...

9. Would you classify marketing as a science or an art? And why would you classify it as such? Do people get it wrong because of lack of talent, or lack of studying?

I wouldn't class it as either. Marketing is a skill. Some have it, some don't - it's the same as anything else.

The best marketers normally are those that think and breathe customers. Because that's what it's all about now. The customer is in control.

Not the brand. Not the agency. And certainly not the mission statement.

Meaningful marketing means giving your customers access and listening to and acting on, what they tell you. Anything else, is a waste of time, because, if you don't provide the service they want, they'll go elsewhere.

10. According to your writings, direct marketing is suffering - mainly as a result of SPAM and Junk mail. You identify inexperienced professionals and dull creative and copy as the main reasons behind this. At this point, what can be done to salvage the industry?

How long have you got?

We have to get more professional. We have to study and learn a lot more. We have to immerse ourselves in our profession. We have to test, test and test again. We have to rid this business of charlatans. We have to learn how to communicate to smart, savvy audiences. We have to learn how to write. We have to learn how creative works. And this is just Chapter One...

Bonus Question: Hillary Clinton's chief strategist, Mark Penn, advocates a strategy of catering to large numbers of niche groups. Yet that strategy has failed versus Barack Obama's mass targeting. What are your thoughts on that? Doesn't that prove that the mass market still exists?

I assume that this is a joke question to end off with. You are being mischevious asking me for an opinion about Hillary's marketing tactics and linking in the side issue of a niche versus mass approach.

We all know, that even the best marketing campaign will struggle to sell a flawed product.