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# Digital Tools of the Trade: The Social Media Fourum

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# Digital Tools of the Trade: The Social Media Fourum

## **Abstract**

As one of the world's fastest-growing regional economies, and one which is making enormous investments in its telecommunications infrastructure, the Middle East's vast potential as the next hotspot of online growth is well recognised. With marketers around the world increasingly keen to make use of social media it is perhaps surprising that the Middle East (and specifically the GCC) has yet to see some of the innovations, and there is a less active social media scene than international spectators might normally expect. The Middle East's social media ecosystem is certainly growing. To take only the social network with the most readily available data, Facebook, we see recent estimates of month-on-month growth of anything up to 48 per cent for countries in the GCC and North Africa (Inside Facebook, 2011). Whatever the real picture is behind this perceived trend, it is notable that according to some sources Qatar and the UAE now have a higher nominal Facebook penetration than countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand (www.socialbakers, 2011).

## Digital Tools of the Trade: The Social Media Forum

By Phil Ryan | Four Communications

As one of the world's fastest-growing regional economies, and one which is making enormous investments in its telecommunications infrastructure, the Middle East's vast potential as the next hotspot of online growth is well recognised. With marketers around the world increasingly keen to make use of social media it is perhaps surprising that the Middle East (and specifically the GCC) has yet to see some of the innovations, and there is a less active social media scene than international spectators might normally expect.

The Middle East's social media ecosystem is certainly growing. To take only the social network with the most readily available data, Facebook, we see recent estimates of month-on-month growth of anything up to 48 per cent for countries in the GCC and North Africa (Inside Facebook, 2011). Whatever the real picture is behind this perceived trend, it is notable that according to some sources Qatar and the UAE now have a higher nominal Facebook penetration than countries like the United Kingdom and New Zealand ([www.socialbakers.com](http://www.socialbakers.com), 2011).

Despite this, marketers in the region are, by their own admission, lagging behind other developed and emerging markets in using social media to fulfill real business objectives. In their recent analysis of this issue, Econsultancy concluded "A lack of understanding about online marketing is holding back a significant proportion of companies, as is the general shortage of case studies that are specific to the Middle East" (<http://econsultancy.com>, 2011).

A number of theories can help explain why the region has been relatively slower to react: cultural and linguistic differences amongst audiences, a lack of training and expertise, or simply a reduced need to adopt new techniques due to a less competitive marketing landscape.

Whatever the case, 2011 marks a change in the wind of social media adoption among marketers in the Middle East. The same report goes on, for example, to suggest that 58 per cent of companies are increasing their digital marketing budget in 2011. Adoption of new platforms – with 340 million smart phone users predicted in the MENA region by 2020 (Mazen Nahawi, 2011) - will no doubt drive this trend faster perhaps than many observers expect.

### Obstacles

Part of the challenge for marketers looking to play a part in this trend is identifying which of the accepted global best practices is suitable for implementation in the region. As with any new trend, a tendency to identify and replicate the success of prominent international case studies could prove too tempting a technique for the region's marketers.

But replicating successful campaigns for a different audience is at best an unreliable technique. Where cultural specificities and language barriers do not limit success, a campaign that works once on the basis of its innovation and novelty is subject to the law of diminishing returns. Instead, the most successful marketers will approach the problem by building solid foundations to overcome two specific obstacles: a lack of compelling content for immediate use and a requirement to prove success and demonstrate value to internal stakeholders.

### Case Study: The Social Media Forum

This approach is best demonstrated via a case study which shows how a mixture of traditional techniques and technological innovation can be used to provide a foundation for social media

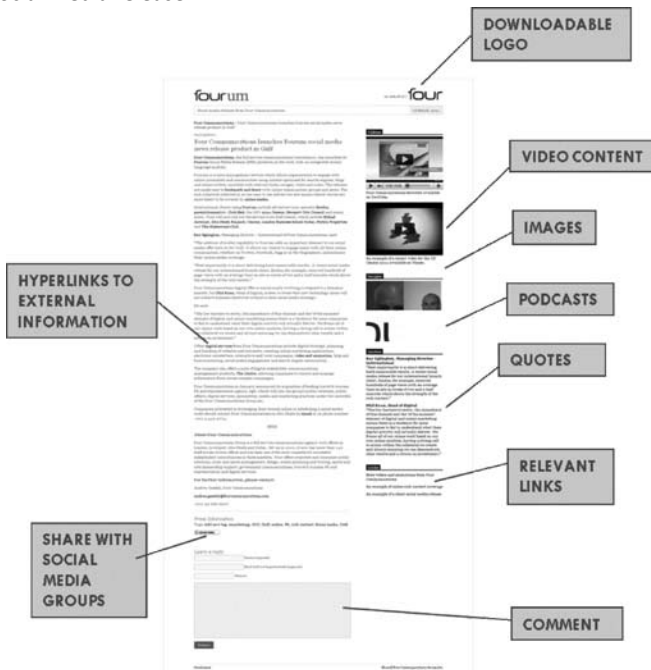
activity. Four Communications, an independent communications agency with Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Oman operations, created its Fourum, a platform for publishing and distributing social media releases, for English and Arabic audiences.

Social media releases (SMRs) are press releases that have been optimised for online distribution and sit on a statically linkable platform so they are easily accessible via direct link and search. A format broadly following the structure of a traditional press release is marked-up to include hyperlinks to external content that give the information in the release a wider context (i.e. the company website or spokesperson’s biography) and any rich content, such as video, podcasts and images, is available to view and download alongside the copy (see Figure 1).

With Four’s solution, a maximum of six images, six video clips (which are fed through via a video platform such as YouTube) and six podcasts are available, meaning that the journalists can pick and choose the elements that best support the story they want to tell. A comments box, sharing options and tagging mean that the press release is accessible outside of the typically closed-media audience and allows for two-way engagement, increasing brand amplification and interaction. Comments go through an approval process ensuring that no comments will be published without permission.

The platform’s dual-language capability makes it unusual if not unique in the region. But it is crucial in a region where native social media users increasingly post and comment in both languages. Ray Eglington, Managing Director – International comments on this trend: “successful communication is much easier when you are speaking the right language. The inclusion of an Arabic capability within Fourum means our clients are able to interact on equal terms with an audience now used to switching between English and Arabic across online communities from Twitter and Facebook to the wider world of blogs and collaborative encyclopedias.”

**Figure 1:** Social media release



Such a platform is based around the concept that giving journalists and bloggers easier, direct access to the content they want in a usable format (whether that is a technical video format or simply text in their mother tongue) thus increases the chances of engagement and media-pick up. Because it provides an easily-accessible online hub of all the collateral associated with a press release (including the release itself), this saves the lengthy back-and-forth between PRs and journalists for content and can be found and shared by people that might not be on an original distribution list, such as bloggers and influencers.

Online journalism is an immediate medium and so a product that saves time and provides all content in one link means that deadlines are not missed and coverage can be achieved, with relationships still successfully intact.

### Passenger Shipping Association

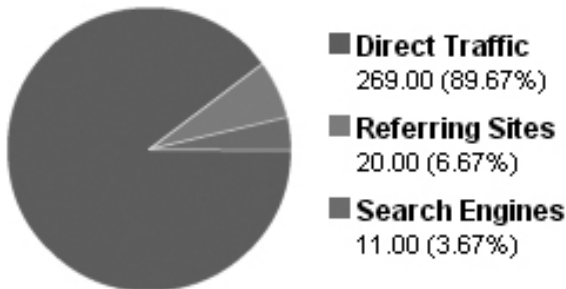
While results from Middle Eastern campaigns are not yet available as this article goes to print, the potential for the social media releases paradigm is clear. One case study in tourism - an industry favored in particular by Gulf markets – demonstrates this potential.

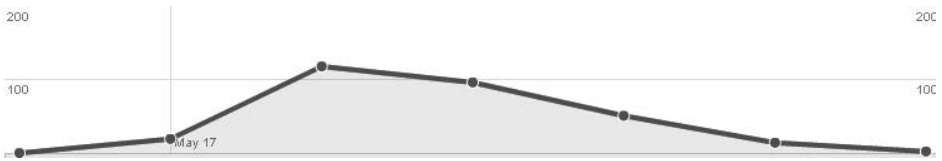
The Passenger Shipping Association (PSA) represents the cruising industry with 42 member cruise lines. In May 2010 the Passenger Shipping Association held the annual cruise review event in which they released the latest figures from the cruise industry illustrated by a video (created by Four's in-house digital team) and looked ahead to upcoming developments in the sector. To PR the event and industry insight, the PSA team at Four Communications issued a figures-based social media release to media alongside rich video and image content using Fourum.

The social media release went live and the link was issued to media on the 18th May 2010 and immediately saw a peak of 118 visits, which was followed by 96 visits on the 19th and 51 visits on the 20th (Figure 2); a total of 265 visits over three days and 243 video views.

Indeed, direct traffic from journalist click-throughs accounted for 89.67% of all visits, with a further 6.67% from referring sources and 3.68% from search engines (Figure 3), demonstrating that the social media release is an attractive package for journalists to receive and captured their interest. The average time spent viewing the release was 1.14 minutes and the bounce rate was low, at 36% meaning journalists read and absorbed content.

**Figure 2:** Traffic source May 16 – 22, 2010



**Figure 3:** Visits May 16 - 22, 2010

As Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate, Fourum has achieved results in terms of increasing the number of journalists who are accessing client stories and content, but this, of course, must translate into coverage in order for the PR sector to prove the product's value to clients.

The cruise review release achieved 13 pieces of national and regional coverage. As Eglinton states, "most importantly it is about delivering hard measurable results. A recent social media release for our international launch client, Exodus, for example, received hundreds of page views with an average time on site in excess of two and a half minutes which shows the strength of the rich content."

### The Business Context

If this case study demonstrates the potential for the development of robust social media platforms in the Middle East, it also emphasizes above all else the requirement to fulfill business and media objectives. To do this, social media releases have two additional requirements: that they fit within a wider strategy encompassing online and offline elements, and that they relate to persistent monitoring and strong ROI objectives.

### Integrated Strategy

A joined-up strategy is key. All online elements should permeate offline activity and vice versa and should integrate seamlessly as an entire campaign. For example, an offline launch event should be hyped on owned social channels beforehand with live blogging, tweeting and checking-in at the event and photos, videos and summaries posted up on social accounts afterwards, alongside coverage in offline and online media which is then shared through social media and social bookmarking.

In terms of a wider social strategy that social media releases form a part of, it is important to keep a number of elements in mind, including content, social media management and engagement, buzz monitoring, online PR and blogger relations, SEO, online marketing and online and social advertising.

Social strategy should follow a focused, tailored approach to ensure that the brand can engage with its audience in relevant places and foster a loyal community which will convert to brand-ambassadorship. The strength of social media is allowing brands two-way engagement directly with their audience, which, of course, requires procedures in place to deal with any queries or issues that arise in an effective and timely manner. Brand horror stories of miscommunication or poor management replicate themselves online and with such transparency and immediacy, it is vital that any approach is considered and backed by experienced professionals and common sense.

Management and moderation of owned communities is a time-intensive process but there are numerous paid for and free tools, such as Hootsuite and Tweetdeck, to help manage the process. Similarly, providing quality, engaging, relevant content to accompany PR opportunities and as a sticky, engaging asset on a website, microsite or application is extremely important in online strategy.

Of course, a brand might have actionable insights, a strong methodology, robust tools, a loyal, engaged community on social channels and a plethora of high-quality content alongside social media releases, but there is still an important need to match this with conversations with media, either over the phone, email or a coffee. Human relationships are integral to PR, it's just that now we have more ways to create and sustain them.

### **Reporting and ROI**

Social media activity is often an investment, but its low cost means it traditionally delivers results relatively soon after implementation. A social media campaign should enhance what a brand already has and, where possible, have a call-to-action that allows it to deliver tangible ROI. Four, for example, uses a mix of automated buzz monitoring tools and manual analysis to assess the impact of social media, largely across the twin metrics of "impact" (percentage of relevant audience directly or indirectly influenced by activity) and "engagement" (extent to which these audiences are influenced).

The automated tool analyzes online conversation for any search term (or multiple search terms) with a database going back to 2007. It is invaluable to produce buzz monitoring reports to assess the current online landscape for a client or industry ahead of campaigns, to evaluate campaigns by comparing buzz before and after activity, for competitor analysis, for ongoing reputation management and, of course, for any crisis communications.

Manual analysis then takes over to extract actionable insights: trends, areas of specific interest, keywords, search performance, platform performance, sentiment, who the key influencers are talking about a brand, with whom they share information, the spread of discussion across different online media outlets e.g. microblogs, forums, blogs, the countries and languages discussing your search term(s) and the "passion" of posts.

Low barriers to entry, the immediacy of social media and the 'of the moment' element of digital and online marketing means there is a tendency for some companies to fail to understand what their digital activity will actually deliver. By framing online work around existing analysis, a strong call to action within created collateral and a focus on demonstrating clear results and a return on investment, marketers can create a compelling internal case and a high quality strategy at the same time.

### **Where next?**

The Middle East has no lack of commentators calling for their vision of the region's future. But our analysis is that, if the region is to develop its own identity, it must have the confidence to adopt or creative native language services which fulfill a genuine business or consumer need within the region itself.

Marketers and media can help build this structure by developing services with the needs of the region in mind, and resisting the urge to assume identical patterns of use will develop here as in social media's more mature markets. Part of this is to modify or create robust tools and techniques with MENA-specific features, building on the foundations of existing global work while still remaining flexible to the demands of the region.

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