

Key to Driving an SME Forward in Middle East:

Countries across the Middle East are suffering due to subdued crude oil prices and cuts to outputs resulting from the OPEC deal. This coupled with geo-political tensions amongst neighbours in the region has put pressure on many businesses competing in the region. This situation is the new “normal”, it’s the environment that we are all operating in for the near future. In the face of this, SMEs in the region need to operate smart and efficiently to grow their brands and look to the future. Here are some key factors that can contribute to future successes:

1. Mission

Have a clear mission, something that holds up, and both in the prosperous times as well as in challenging times. A single-minded purpose that every single employee can live and breathe. A mission that translates to customer/consumer relevancy and drives top line sales and a healthy bottom line. This is critical for an SME at any stage, especially if the market is tough. Success comes from a brand’s commitment to helping people to celebrate their lives through the love of your brand. Creating and sharing this love should be at the centre of everything you do. Creating a simple mission statement helps to guide the business through tough economic times. It makes sure that every activity (especially marketing) is aimed to make your users fall in love with the brand.

2. Information

Collect as much information as you can on your user. It is a crowded and competitive market, how well do you know your end users? Better than your competitor? How well do you know that competitor? It doesn’t need to be big data, expensive CRM systems, or large sums spent on research or buying user information. Just take every opportunity to get to know your consumers, your customers and your competition as best you can. This kind of information can drive you above your competitors. Collect information from every source. Do whatever you need to so your users can physically engage with your brand and your products. When they are in touch then incentivise them to tell you who they are. Reward them for sharing the information. Then communicate to them regularly via electronic direct marketing. For those who can’t physically come to you; they may be spread across the world; build an online or digital brand platform. Somewhere they could shop, see new products, meet your team, understand your passion for the brand, learn about your history, and everything else that they want to do. Again collect their information. Then build a database of names. Finally, that could be turned into a loyalty club, or a repository for future data mining. Even when the retailers struggle in tough times, it should be your goal to own a list of direct customers, those who you can sell directly to.

3. Innovation & New Product Development

Users are spoilt for choice. Not just locally but globally, with products and services available to order from any country. Millions of brands. All the user wants is to be surprised and delighted by a brand. Giving them new products is the easiest way to delight them, to make them loyal to your brand over others. It can be “new to world” products, something no one has ever thought of, or it could just be a twist on the familiar. Think of Pepsi with a twist of Lime. Not new, but your favourite soda offering a little change. Pepsi with Lime is long gone, but how did it reward and delight loyal Pepsi drinkers, how did it grab Coke drinkers and entice them across? As an SME it doesn’t have to be on such a grand scale. But every single brand needs to innovate. It needs to give consumers a reason to be loyal. At times all brands can be constrained in terms of innovation. Many industries are heavily burdened with traditions and with legislation that guards against open competition and innovation. However there is always a way to innovate. Work closely with the government to develop new products or technology. Work with packaging suppliers to think of new ways to deliver your products to users. How do we get out of the format, into something more contemporary? Have your manufacturing team challenge themselves to go back to basics. Redesign your offer from the ground up. Improve it. Change it. Evolve it. Then think of new ways to communicate to your consumers and to you customers. Through digital marketing you can easily develop new ways to build your brand. So working in traditional industries in the world doesn’t need to hold you back, it didn’t stop you innovating, you just need to shift the focus, to thinking **conversely**, in order to see challenges as opportunities.

4. Communications

Every single brand in the world needs to have dialogue with their end users. Whether public or private entities, large scale global operations or a single person working out of their garage. If you have someone consuming your output, you need to **converse** with them. It is communications and marketing in its most elementary form. We in CGC, have worked for the biggest brands in the world, as well as some of the smallest, and everything in between. Every single brand has a marketing communication need. The most exciting development in marketing communications in the last 100 years is digital marketing. It has evened out the playing field. So much so that any brand can compete. The global power brand investing \$100mill USD per year on branding communications has just as many challenges as a small or medium brand investing only \$50k USD per year. The challenges may vary in size or complexity but they still exist for both. But the move to omni-marketing where communications exist across multiple platforms, means that we can all pick and choose the integrated communication plan that suits our budget and our particular challenge. You just need to make your money work smarter and harder. Spend it in the right places. You build your business on the back of amazing product, but you now build your brand via digital conversations, one to one with your end users.

5. Route to Market

Every brand needs to continually expand or refine their customer and distributor base. How do we get an ideal mix of my sales from retailers as well as one’s own direct distribution? You don’t want to get all your sales directly, as it limits your full growth potential, but equally you can’t have all your sales coming from retail customers; that affords them way too much power over your own business. So balance is needed. What is the perfect formula for your brands and your business? It’s a similar question for online vs bricks and mortar sales. What is the ideal balance? This equation changes depending on your market,

the economy, the global commodity prices, even the local political environment. There are always tough decisions to make, but how do you take one step backwards to make available the next two steps forward?

These are just a few of the levers at our disposal as business and marketing leaders. The same skills we learn at large globally successful businesses are hugely valuable when used in the SME environment. During tough market conditions, or in heavily competitive market situations, these skills make the real difference between success and failure. In today's market, the only difference between an SME and a global business is the scale, not the level of commitment to succeed. It is an "even playing field", as long as you have the right skills and experience to plan for success.

The CGC team brings you expertise across a wide range of businesses, geographies – rich experience that can be leveraged to add tremendous value to SMEs in the Middle East, and help them to not just succeed, but thrive.