

## CLOSE-UP 2

## 'The industry has lost one of its true icons'

Following the death of Antoine Choueiri, adland's elder statesmen talk about the man and his legacy

## A LIFE IN FOCUS

**O**n 11 March, almost to a man the region's media and advertising leaders descended on Lebanon for the funeral of Antoine Choueiri, who died in Beirut at the age of 70 on 9 March.

Regarded as one of the founding fathers of the region's media industry, Choueiri was chairman of the Choueiri Group, the Middle East's largest media sales house, and his passing has had a deep effect on many who had worked alongside him for up to 40 years. He was buried in his hometown of Bcharre following a memorial and mass service at St George Maronite Cathedral in Beirut.

Joseph Ghossoub, chairman and CEO of the Menacom Group, was among the mourners who paid their respects to a man who, throughout his career, had been responsible for managing the ad sales for some of the largest media owners in the region, including daily newspaper *An-Nahar*, pan-Arab broadcaster MBC, LBC and Dubai Media Inc.

"Antoine Choueiri cannot be remembered in a few words and when the history of advertising and media will be written in the Arab world it will describe Antoine as the architect of this business for the last 40 years," said Ghossoub. "Antoine was a phenomena of a man who worked relentlessly until the last day and refused to admit sickness and weakness. [He was] a fighter and, by all means, a fierce negotiator with the extraordinary ability to win and also give his opponent a win, as strange as this may sound. All those who worked with Antoine knew that his word was the signed contract and his handshake was enough to seal the biggest of deals. In fact, everyone who dealt with Antoine learned something from him and carries with him a memory of a charitable person who knew how to take but also how to give to charities, NGOs and those in need generously



*Choueiri... a powerful man with huge influence, but respected and trusted by those who worked with him*

## Antoine Choueiri

Choueiri was born in 1939 in the Cedars region of Lebanon to a railway mechanic father and a housewife mother. He left school at 15 and did not go to university. Instead, he went to night school and learnt how to be an accountant.

His first job was with a luxury goods distributor, which also owned two magazines. After a spell as GM of the group's media division, he left in 1971 to form his own media representation company from scratch.

The outbreak of the civil war saw Choueiri move to Paris, where he remained for a decade. He launched Video Force in Saudi Arabia, selling advertising space on rented videos and was an early pioneer of mupis in the kingdom. By the mid-Eighties, he was eyeing up the cash-rich UAE market, initially focusing on Abu Dhabi TV. A major breakthrough for the business was the creation of LBC in 1985, followed by LBC Sat a year later, with Choueiri appointed as media representative for both.

and silently. Heavens will be happy to receive a man who lived his life fully with a strong belief in God and country."

Often referred to as the 'godfather' of the region's media industry (a nickname he refused to accept), Choueiri was one of the most powerful men in regional advertising. It was estimated that he controlled 70 per cent of annual TV spend in the GCC and Levant and had the power to direct where that spend was allocated. Such power meant he had his detractors, but in a rare interview in October 2006 he told *Campaign*: "I follow the way that I decided for myself. I never divert from what I consider being right. I have some rules and philosophy that I respect no matter. And I do believe that, in the end, the truth will prevail. I am myself. I am not low profile or high profile. I am probably the most known person in the advertising industry in the Middle East. But I don't believe in making a noise for no reason. I don't like to talk when there is nothing to be said."

Whenever Choueiri's name was mentioned in media cir-

cles, it was inevitably attached to a string of anecdotes and rumours. Yet he rarely, if ever, responded to his critics.

Alain Khouri, chairman and CEO of the Impact BBDO Group, had known him for almost 40 years. "Antoine was undoubtedly a pioneer in regional media and has had an amazing influence on our business. He played a primary role in setting the foundations of regional media and greatly contributed to the growth of the media and advertising sectors within the MENA region.

"Antoine approached his business with an amazing blend of ingenuity and drive. He loved his work but loved his people even more. And though immensely successful, he remained both humble and approachable. Many of us today are losing more than a business associate - we're mourning a friend."

Khouri's words are echoed by Akram Miknas, chairman of MCN. "On a personal level, I've known Antoine since 1972. Our businesses are co-dependent and it's sad to lose someone who has played such

an instrumental part in my life. And there was a separation between friendship and business. We are contemporaries. We started in the industry at the same time, we left Beirut at the same time, we grew professionally in parallel. This gave us a lot in common. It earned us a mutual respect, and a genuine friendship. On March 9th, the industry lost one of its icons. Antoine was a media man, but he had a tremendous appreciation for the creative product and therefore for the creative agency. He had a great deal of power and respect, but he always used it fairly. He was a self-made media authority who earned himself the right to regulate the industry. This did not come easy."

Ian Fairservice, group editor and managing partner of Motivate Publishing, said: "The publishing world owes Antoine Choueiri a huge debt. It's no exaggeration to say that the media landscape in the region would have been a very different place without him. The industry has lost a true pioneer and a great character."

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