

media and marketing

Advertising man to remember

The late Antoine Choueiri was a pioneer of the industry in the Middle East and remained a power who was known among his peers as well as his rivals for his fighting spirit, vision and business sense, which made him the man to see when you were in dire straits, **Keach Hagey writes**

Anyone who is anyone in advertising has a story about the first time they met Antoine Choueiri.

Ramzi Raad, an industry veteran who was recently named Advertising Person of the Year by the Dubai Lynx Awards, has one of the best.

It was the summer of 1968, in swinging pre-civil war Beirut, and Mr Raad, now the chairman and chief executive of TBWA\RAADCK, was a young advertising executive working for an agency while attending university. One afternoon, his boss sent him on an errand to the magazine where Mr Choueiri worked, called *Arab Week*, and when he reached the building he was pointed towards a large room with a big balcony.

"There was nobody behind the desk, but on the balcony there were two people sitting during office hours, playing backgammon in the noisy Lebanese way, swearing and so on," he says. "So I stand waiting for my turn to speak because I know that the game is reaching its climax. They throw the dice for the last time, and then, suddenly, Choueiri takes the backgammon board, claps it together and throws it - whoof! - off the balcony."

"The building is on a main street in Beirut. So as I watch this sight, wondering whether it's going to fall on a car or somebody's head below, he turns to me and says, 'What do you want?'"

Mr Choueiri, who died on Tuesday in Beirut at the age of 70 following a long battle with cancer, did not like losing and possessed a legendary drive that he used to build the foundation of the advertising industry in



the quotes

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company that he founded, the Choueiri Group, controlled the flow of advertising to most of the top free-to-air television stations in the region, including MBC, LBC, Al Jazeera and Dubai Media Incorporated. In recent years, after Rotana tied up with LBC and handed its ad sales over to its commercial arm, Rotana Media Services, its reach has shrunk somewhat, but it remained the dominant force in the media buying market.

The Choueiri Group was able to rise to such a position of dominance in part because it was the first to the market. Mr Choueiri left the magazine in Beirut to found the company in Paris after the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in the 1970s. It gained its Middle East foothold in Saudi Arabia and then expanded to Lebanon and the Emirates. The group operates now in 11 markets across the MENA region as well as in Europe and Japan.

During these early decades, TV in the Arab world was largely a government-run affair, but by the 1990s, when the first truly commercial satellite-TV stations, such as MBC, were emerging, Choueiri had a clear advantage.

Soon, there was an overwhelming number of channels - more than 500 at last count - far more than the number of advertisers in the region could support.

According to Eli Khoury, the chairman of Quantum Holding, the Choueiri Group provides a crucial function for the region's advertising industry by deciding

which channels have the potential to survive and channelling advertising to them.

"Antoine knows how many TV stations the market can afford," Mr Khoury said last month.

"So he knows the industry inside out. He knows how much it takes a TV station to operate and be profitable."

"However, he is faced with the situation that there are too many TV stations, so if he sees any hope in a station, he tries to keep it standing on its feet until it becomes something worthwhile."

In performing this function, the Choueiri Group acts as a kind of regulator in a pan-Arab market that lacks any other form of regulation, Mr Khoury said.

Advertising rates per capita in the Arab world are a fraction of what they are in more developed markets, in large part because there is no single, universally accepted units for audience measurement.

But critics say one man's regulator is another's monopolist.

"I don't think Antoine wants to be a monopolistic person," Mr

Khoury said. "I think it's the absence of professional competitors that makes him the monopole of the industry. And being the monopole of the industry, he's done some really great stuff for the industry. At least he regulated competitiveness, ie pricing. Otherwise, the industry would have suffered big time."

Without a powerful middle man to set prices and act as a kind of gatekeeper, Mr Khoury said, the 500 channels would have engaged in a race to the bottom on ad rates, in much the same way the internet advertising prices are pushed down because so much ad inventory is available.

Some have complained about the large commissions the company took for its trouble, which, according to Jayant Bhargava, a principal at the consultancy Booz and Company, were more than four times that of media buyers in more developed markets.

But all who met Mr Choueiri spoke in awe of his ambition, vision, business acumen and generosity.

Joseph Ghoussoub, the chairman

and chief executive of MENACOM, the parent company of regional advertising and marketing companies such as Team Young and Rubicam, first met Choueiri in the 1980s, when he was working as a rising advertising executive in Saudi Arabia, the launching ground for a generation of Lebanese media executives now running the industry in the Gulf.

"He was a real businessman, a fighter, somebody who knows what he wants and somebody who really fights to get what he wants," Mr Ghoussoub says.

"Without the fighting spirit in this business, what do you do? He was a clever person, a very intelligent person, and at the same time he had the right objective mind and charisma to be able to make it."

Mr Choueiri leaves behind his wife, Rose, and two children, Pierre and Lena. The children serve as the managing director and chief financial officer of the group, respectively.

These days there is a lot of talk about the rising power of digital media in the Middle East and the

imminent arrival of the so-called people meter boxes to measure TV viewership more accurately and efficiently, which industry leaders hope will help close the gap in ad spending per capita between the region and the rest of the world.

But for the moment, the region's media still largely lives in the world that Antoine Choueiri created, a world in which research data often matters less than personal relationships.

"I could tell you many agencies that, at their time of trouble, they go to what they call the patriarch. They go to Antoine to help them out," Mr Khoury said.

"If you are a small company and you have just lost a client and you have some bills that could send you bankrupt, it's enough to walk into his office, tilt your head and say 'I'm dead if you don't help me'. And he will tell you 'OK, forget about it'."

"He's that type of a person. When you are in trouble, you know you can count on him."

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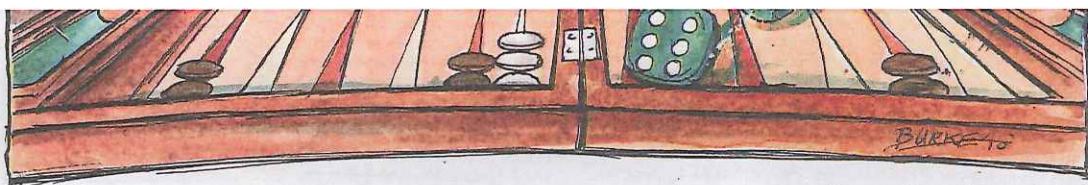


Illustration: Christopher Burke for The National

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The mogul and his investments: Antoine Choueiri, the recently deceased former chairman of the Choueiri Group, which is involved in the Al Bayan newspaper and the television station Dubai One, which features the cooking show *Hany Wafia*. Rabi Moghrabi / AFP; Courtesy: Arab Media Group; Jaime Puebla / The National



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World

Pay freeze for UK civil servants

Gordon Brown, the British prime minister, warned yesterday that the UK economic recovery is fragile after announcing a pay freeze for top civil servants to help tame a record deficit. **b8**

