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Ask Ali about social media success

Emirati writer and digital pioneer believes content is key and can make money

By Deena Kamel Yousef, Staff Reporter

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Emirati writer Ali Al Saloom during a discuss on the explosion of digital journalism and the ever-changing media landscape.

Image Credit: Francois Nel/Gulf News

Dubai: Ali Al Saloom, an Emirati writer, answers a lot of quirky questions everyday, such as: "Why do Emirati women have to wear black abayas?" and, "A Filipino wants to marry a Pakistani woman in the UAE, where can we do it?"

But the one question that everyone is asking is how digital media, and newspapers migrating to the web, can create a profitable business model online.

Well, ask Ali. The website, ask-ali.com, came about from his experiences studying in the US and Canada, where anyone in his classes with questions about the Middle East was told to "ask Ali".

That is the inter-cultural awareness brand that Al Saloom has created across multiple platforms, including the Ask Ali online portal in 2007, a magazine column, a guidebook, and his own TV show on OneTVO, the UAE's first online television platform, which he co-founded in 2007.

Starting the Ask Ali brand online required modest set-up costs, but quickly became profitable as its credibility started to grow, he said. After developing the website, uploading his own content, and reporting about places in the UAE, Al Saloom was eventually paid to become a cultural consultant and motivational speaker.

Free content

The online content answers to cultural questions is provided for free. But profits lie in selling the products associated with Ask Ali.

"Content is the asset that I built. It's difficult to put a value on this, but the people in the industry know its worth because this content never existed," said Al Saloom, who has answered more than 6,000 questions so far. "I am confident that I can go to a publishing company and sell my books and articles."

With a degree in hospitality and an MBA from the US and Canada, Al Saloom consolidated his academic background and cultural interests by setting up his own enterprise, Embrace Arabia. The firm provides cultural training courses, assists newcomers in setting up their business in the UAE, and promotes understanding of the country and its people.

With charismatic presentation, a winning smile, and a sense of humour, Al Saloom believes that the honesty of his message and the character behind the content are key to the success of his brand. Believing that anyone can work in the media industry as long as they don't think of it as just a job, success will follow if they have an inimitable style. "How many Steve Irwins are there, the Crocodile Hunter?" he asked, citing the famous TV presenter as an example.

Model

Al Saloom began his venture into online television with Reg Athwal, TV presenter, to launch OneTVO live in November 2008.

Pooling start-up costs of about \$250,000 (Dh918,055) from their own pockets and a loan from the Khalifa Fund, the pair provide local community-based and videotorial TV content. They produced it offline in the traditional media method and uploaded online for free viewership.

The videotutorials show-case businesses but do not blatantly market them, said Athwal.

They provide information and news about the business and how it was built but indirectly the company gets exposure, he said. Informational videos also appear on services, products, and business insight interviews with company CEOs.

Community news

Besides the corporate communication platform for businesses, OneTVO provides viewers with community news videos from the emirates.

Given the novelty of this digital medium in the country, Al Saloom and Reg researched other companies' business models for something that already works.

They settled on four main ways of developing and monetising the site:

1. Clients provided the informational videos, which were uploaded to the site after meeting criteria for quality and censorship, and the clients got a 30-day trial.
2. In the subscription model, clients paid OneTVO to provide, host, and stream videos with the company's logo and ten search keywords, so the company could use the web link for its marketing.
3. Paying more money would buy the client access to a search engine that was optimised for video. They also get updates on key content in their videos such as promotions related to their products or services.
4. OneTVO also creates its own TV shows sponsored by companies or paid for by product placements. In some cases OneTVO co-created branded TV channels with the companies and sometimes co-own them. They also provide a "white-labelling" service so that companies can put their logos on existing content or can digitise taped content online.

The videos that they put online shows up on 70 other websites that rank high with Google, spread on social network sites, and pop up with keyword searches, said Athwal.

"We are pro-active in co-producing videos with clients, we are a solution provide for online videos."

So far, while they have monetised their services, OneTVO had not break-even or create net profit.

"Our strategy is not to put money in our pockets," said Athwal, explaining that the cash flow they generate is re-invested into the business with the aim of making it grow and showing investors that the company is a safe bet.

Monetisation

Athwal is confident that their strategy to monetise the platform is heading in the right direction for digital media to make profits online.

They are currently creating a branded TV channel for a management company with 14 episodes on interviews with experts coming to the UAE, which viewers can access and download. They can go to a website to access the research from these experts, valued at \$10,000, after signing up. That list becomes an asset, said Athwal, so that they build loyal viewership and deliver targeted groups to online advertisers.

One problem with the novelty of the medium is that users in the Middle East are slow to adopt the technology because the decision makers are in their mid-40s and 50s — not a group that uses social media frequently, according to Athwal.

Tweet that

Digital media by numbers

1. Advertising revenue reached \$6 billion (Dh22 billion) in first quarter 2010 in the US, with newspapers clamouring for a slice of the advertising share.
2. 26 per cent of all Americans get their news by mobile phones, 43 per cent of them are under 50.
3. 72 per cent of mobile news users look for weather. 58 per cent look for current events.
4. 80 per cent of mobile news users get their news from e-mail links.
5. Less than 1 per cent of time spent online is at newspaper sites, but people access online news often.
6. Search engines drive 35-40 per cent of traffic to major US news sites. But online ad revenue is only 5 per cent of the total.
7. Five pioneering websites that could change the news (according to New York Daily News and Mashable): Wikileaks, Chicagonow, Everyblock, Fwix, and Spot Us.
8. There are more Facebook users in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) than there are copies of newspapers circulated in the region. Facebook has over 15 million users in MENA while the total regional Arabic, English and French newspaper circulation stands at just under 14 million copies.
9. New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg is hiring a "Chief Digital Officer" for the city. The job description, in part, says the CDO has to "develop forward thinking policies on social media, digital communications, web 2.0 initiatives and other tools to better serve the public".
10. In March in the US there were 117 million Facebook unique visitors, 42 million on MySpace, 20 million on Twitter, and 14 million on LinkedIn.

Sources:

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Time Magazine, May 2010

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