

For communication consultancies the region spanning Saudi, the Emirates, Oman and Kuwait is a market with almost limitless potential, says **Brad Staples**

## Gulf of opportunity

In the Gulf region, leaders believe that the impossible is possible with vision, perseverance and risk. Just 10 years ago, it was defined by desert sand and rich oil reserves. Today it is bidding for the 2020 Olympics, building a Louvre and a Guggenheim, and hosting Formula One. The region is home to some of the world's most beautiful architectural achievements and offers a unique lifestyle, the sampling of which is on every globetrotter's must-do list.

Over the past decade the Gulf rapidly diversified, and acquired new layers of sophistication in the process. Its leaders and corporations are among the world's most dynamic, and are eager to communicate their successes and guard their reputations. For communication consultancies, the Gulf remains a market with almost limitless potential, even if conducting public affairs in countries where freedom of expression is only an emerging concept requires a highly tactful and nuanced approach.

Geographically, the Gulf region might be said to include Iran, Iraq and Yemen, but for business purposes, a tighter definition is usually applied. Saudi Arabia has the most economic and political clout, but the Emirates – principally Dubai and Abu Dhabi alongside Qatar and Bahrain – have first-class connectivity and aspire to become global cities to rival the likes of Hong Kong and Singapore. Oman has developed a burgeoning tourism industry, while Kuwait has taken tentative steps toward accountability which are new for the region.

But in other ways it might appear that Gulf societies have ossified. The Saudis still rule in Riyadh alongside the Al Khalifahs in Bahrain, the Al-Sabahs in Kuwait, the Al Maktoums in Dubai and the Al Nayhans in Abu Dhabi. But if the states all exhibit remarkable political stability, they are not shielded from the outside world.

While benign autocracy rather than Western-style democracy is still the preferred political model, it has not prevented the emergence of lively discussions about



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social issues, increasingly facilitated by the internet. Contrary to some perceptions, consultation is a concept that resides in Gulf Arab culture, albeit within frameworks that protect the linear hierarchy of power and decision-making. Nevertheless, social media networks have been embraced wholeheartedly by the Gulf Arab public. The states' leadership has grasped the significance of grassroots engagement.

The penetration of the internet and digital media has proved a turning point for the region over the last five years. For instance, Sheikh Mohammed of Dubai recently launched his own Facebook page and recruited thousands of friends eager to engage in an increasingly open policy dialogue where few topics are off-limits. You might call this new means of communication the e-majlis: the modern form of “a place of sitting” where leaders receive, listen to

and discuss with their people their needs.

Sheikh Mohammed is a trendsetter: encouraging the concept of transparency is still a tough challenge culturally for most Arab policy and business leaders. On the media front, freedom of expression needs to be encouraged further through more appropriate regulatory frameworks. This should be accompanied by greater professional development for a media community which needs to provide adequate analysis and report the news in an appropriately rigorous way.

On the economic front, the launch of Bahrain, Dubai and Qatar as financial centres – aspiring to compete with London, New York and Frankfurt – has placed significant pressure on the ruling business and policy elites to devote effort to the creation of the fiscal, monetary and economic tools necessary for Arab multinationals to compete internationally. For instance, Hawkamah, the region's corporate governance institute, and the Mudara Institute – the regional equivalent to the Institute of Directors – are both making headway introducing best-practice codes of conduct. As the Gulf begins to emerge from recession, this drive and vision needs to deliver results if the most significant economic, social and political challenge – that of unemployed Arab youth – is to be addressed successfully in the years ahead. Education, with a focus on outward perspectives which don't forsake Arab values, is consistently a prominent policy priority in the Gulf states' job-creation strategies.

The Gulf states' leadership has modernised their region, protecting the hierarchy of power while gaining influence in our increasingly competitive and interdependent world. But for the region to progress further, they need to provide a stronger lead on issues such as corporate transparency and civic engagement. If they can rise to that challenge, it would be an admirable achievement and a model of governance to watch.

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