

# CREATIVE ARABIC COPYWRITING



> BY: GEORGE ELASSADIS  
BIOGRAPHER

In an Ad agency, a role and function of extreme importance is that of the Creative Arabic Copywriter.

There was a time when our MENA Ad industry was laden with foreign Creative Directors or Copywriters who invariably came out with concepts in English and, understandably, in how they would have conceived them, and perhaps even for, their home markets. And I remember how we, as management, used to struggle to transpose those headlines, sub-headlines, body copy, voice-over copy, strap lines and slogans into Arabic meaningful enough for our clients' Arab target audiences so that they could identify with and relate to.

In that maelstrom, a "rare bird" that would have made life easier for us truly eluded us: the Creative Arabic Copywriter-- to think up concepts in Arabic and in Arab-culture relevance to begin with. S/he was nowhere to

be found if ever, and once an agency invested time, development and money in one, and S/he started to gain fame, other agencies were out to poach them through "offers they couldn't refuse". This put us as management in the awkward position of "doubling the offer", so-to-speak, and consequently scurrying to re-adjust the salary scales at our agency. More staff cost, that is, and extra strain on business development in order to make the target figures.

In time, more of those rare birds started hatching and entering our industry. But to this day, the problem hasn't gone because: a) demand still exceeds supply; b) some agencies do not put in place a succession plan, so they get caught up by surprise when that long-tested, senior experienced talent leaves; c) a good number of the "refills", albeit Arab, tend to rather think in English or French, depending on the educational system which produced them; and d) a good number of communication material (TV commercials and related) for multinational brands still come to our region from overseas to be suitably "glocalised" along the same concept and look-and-feel.

To illustrate what a professional Creative Arabic Copywriter really does in developing Arabic copy that is culturally relevant to an Arab audience, I'll borrow from the thought process with which a seasoned writer, Mr. **Marwan Najjar**, brought the Arabic title of the book "Play It Again" into being.

For intros: besides an illustrious career in writing for TV and the Print media, and in teaching the craft at prominent universities in Lebanon, **Marwan Najjar** did Copywriting in MENA for such multinational companies as Procter & Gamble/P&G (multi-brands), Pepsico, Philip Morris, Kraft, General Motors, and Kellogg's among other, through leading agencies such as Intermarkets and Leo Burnett between 1980 and 1997.

When **Mustapha Assad** (Assaad; As'ad) selected Marwan Najjar to transfer the book "Play It Again" into an Arabic version, Marwan did a superb job by effectively copy-writing its content, not merely translating it. But it's how Marwan "minted" the Arabic title, which

further attested to his master craftsmanship. Arabic literates would know that it could have been literally put as "il'abha thaniyatan". Instead, Marwan set about dissecting how the original English title came out to be.

First, Marwan asked himself: Is it an idiom, a Call for Action, a message? Does it conjure a sense of purpose, or a motivating big idea? Second, he analysed the book's Foreword for its underlying messages. Third, he researched the roots of "Play It Again" as an expression, and he found that "Play it" had "a musical connotation, a musical history... a musical function" from its association with the song "As Time Goes By" from the classic movie "Casablanca", which was replicated by Woody Allen in "Play It Again Sam". So in his wisdom, he decided that the Arabic should have a parallel relevance to Arab music, which he found in the repertoire of the great singer-composer **Mohammad Abdul-Wahab** and the legendary diva **Oum-Koulthoum**. And since his multi-dimensional culture pointed him to the musical structure of *Play It Again* being made up of two weak syllables surrounded by two strong syllables, he further decided on the Arabic to have just that as well. Accordingly, he set to himself a brief that he formulated as follows:

- "We need to develop a title in Arabic that will raise the interest of readers, mainly young ones, to share a success story as lived by- and retold about- a distinctive achiever in the field of communication, inciting them to accomplish even more in their career.
- The tone should be likable, with an artistic twist or source preferably authentic, yet appealing to newer generations, stated in the least number of words and with a pleasant pace supposedly symmetrical and therefore memorable."

So by drawing on the Arabic term "Hat" as "One of the most polite words for asking or commanding" and how it featured in the musical art of **Abdul Wahab** and **Oum-Koulthoum**, Marwan arrived to "Hatiha Ba'd". In the final analysis, "the objectives were not only met and the connotations implied, but even the crisp, musical, symmetrical and swaying aspect of the memorable wording was equaled in Arabic".

This goes a long way to demonstrate that Creative Arabic Copywriting is an art, even imbued with scientific methods, and those who master it can make a difference and make a name for themselves, or like Marwan, uphold the name they have already made. ■



**CREATIVE ARABIC COPYWRITING IS AN ART, EVEN IMBUED WITH SCIENTIFIC METHODS, AND THOSE WHO MASTER IT CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE...**



# WHEN ASSAD PLAYS IT AGAIN



**Mustapha Asaad**

The region's communication industry was built on the sweat and tears of a few individuals who were armed with nothing more than the clothes on their backs and an indefatigable desire to better themselves. In so doing, they created and grew a business that is second to none, which today caters to more than 350 million Arabs.

Chief among these future architects was **Mustapha Asaad**, who bought and expanded local agency Publi-Graphics from a team of 12 to 370 operating in 13 cities spread throughout 11 countries with total billings of \$1.2 billion.

He entered the business in the sixties and chose to leave it four decades later having achieved more than even he could have imagined possible. To commemorate the trials and tribulations witnessed, he elected to compile these achievements in a book that literally speaks volumes.

The rich visuals beautifully depicted coupled with his story written by **George**

**Ellassadis** with commentary as well as recollections by those individuals closest to him at the time comprise the work in its entirety. The book reads more like a riveting tale of creative ingenuity and could also be used as a brilliant reference of case studies that baffle the imagination.

The official launch of the book titled "Play It Again" by Dar An-Nahar publishing house took place at Ecole Supérieure des Affaires de Beyrouth (ESA). The event saw three communication personalities addressing, to a full-house auditorium, various aspects of the work starting with **Jacques Séguéla**, vice president of Havas Group who also wrote the book's forward, followed by **Walid Azzi**, founder and editor-in-chief of *ArabAd* magazine and concluded with **Ramsay Najjar**, founder of Strategic Communication Consultancy. ◀



**Jacques Séguéla**



**Walid Azzi**



**Ramsay Najjar**