

Communicate

The marketing and advertising resource • October 2008 • Issue N° 46 • www.communicate.ae



Special report: The biggest marketing stories from the Olympic Games Page 44



Home on the range: Aya's IFA campaign stresses choice over hype Page 76



Jordan. Appealing? How outdoor regulations have altered Amman Page 32

ADVERTISING

Ramadan research

Communicate sits down with young GCC nationals – from the Oobers network – to discuss the meaning of Ramadan and the ads that surround it. The message for marketers? Be selfless. (Page 22)

MARKETING

Militant meals

Lebanon's fast-moving, fickle restaurant business demands innovations from owners. A Facebook-themed pub might have proved to be a smart move, but terrorism is the theme that's grabbed the headlines. (Page 38)

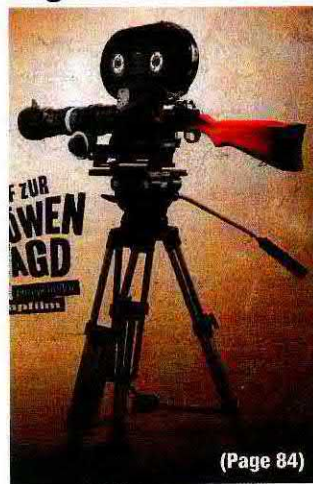
MARKETING

Pick a Pres

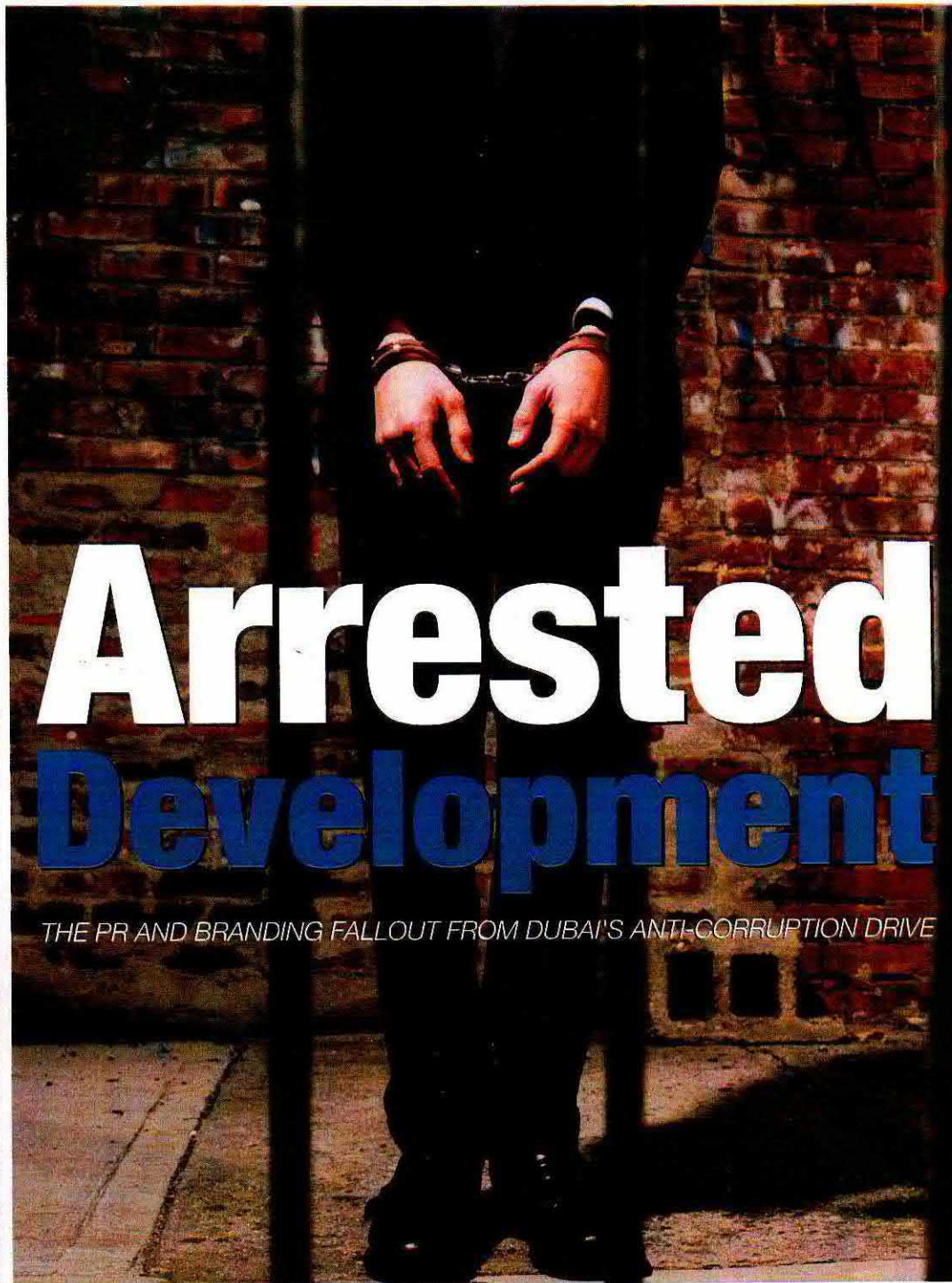
The branding of the Democratic and Republican candidates in the US election. Obama looked to have the "marketing savvy" title sewn up, until McCain picked the multi-faceted Sarah Palin as his running mate. (Page 58)

CAMPAIGN

Big shot



(Page 84)



Arrested Development

THE PR AND BRANDING FALLOUT FROM DUBAI'S ANTI-CORRUPTION DRIVE

Cover image: Getty, Gallo Images

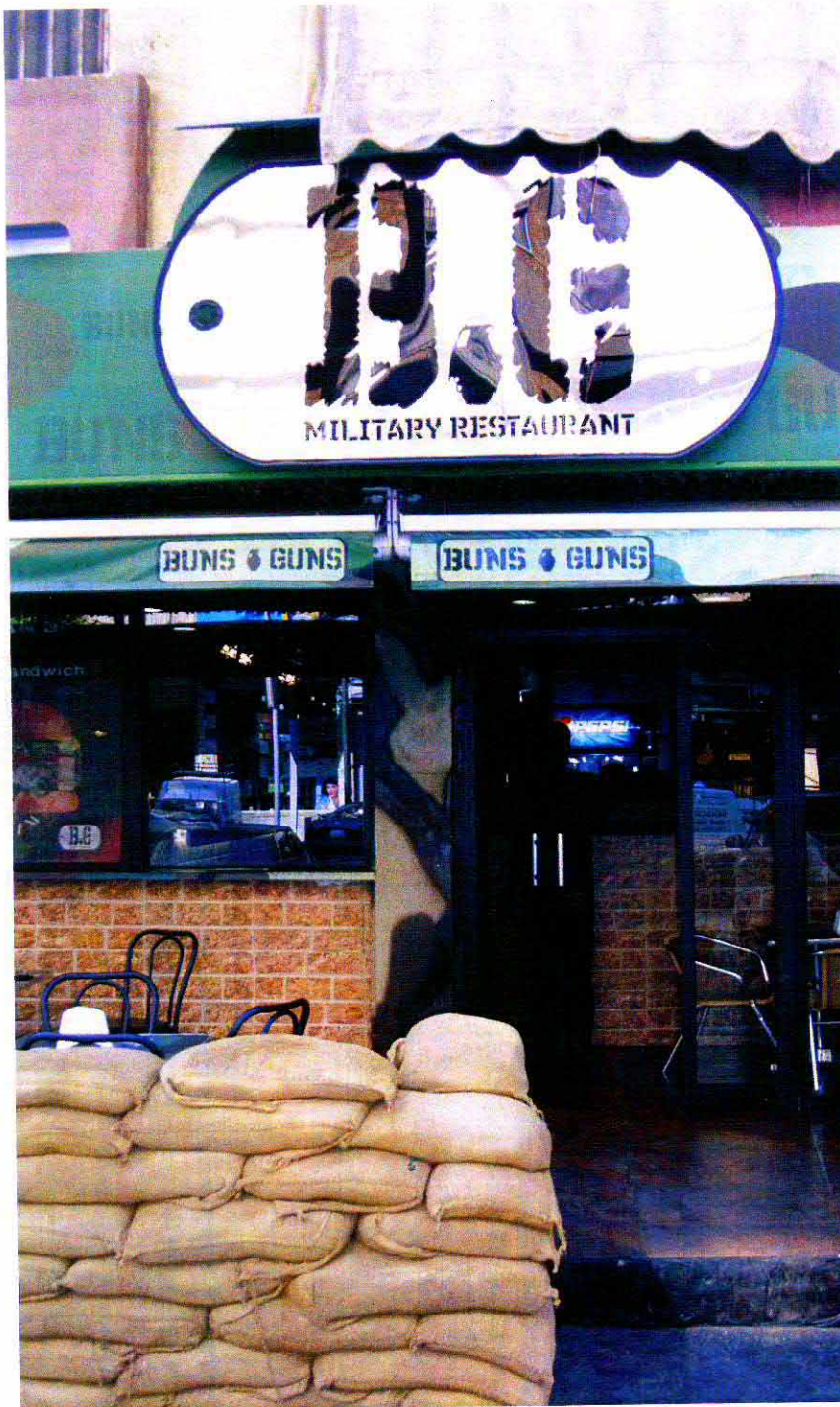
A MediaquestCorp publication

Egypt..... E£ 10	Lebanon..... L£ 5 000	Qatar..... QR 15	Syria..... S£ 100
Jordan..... JD 4	Morocco..... DH 22	Saudi Arabia..... SR 15	Tunisia..... TD 2.5
Kuwait..... KD 1.2	Oman..... OR 1.5	Switzerland..... SFR 8	U.A.E..... DH 15



A matter of taste

In Lebanon's competitive restaurant industry, it helps to have a theme to attract punters. But where do you draw the line? by Nathalie Bontems



What do a terrorist-themed restaurant named Buns and Guns, where customers can eat a “Kalashnikov” (a burger) with “Grenades” (fries) while listening to gunfire and explosions, and the world’s first Facebook-themed pub, where patrons can drink a Poke (a shot) and leave written messages on the Wall (erm, a wall) while viewing their pictures on LCD screens, have in common?

Well, they both happen to be in Beirut. And both demonstrate the famed creativity of the Lebanese.

JUST DO IT. Lebanon is a land of contrasts where the worst thrives alongside the best. Eateries are no exception. As Joumana Damouss-Salame, manager of Hospitality Services, the organizers of Horeca, one of the region’s largest hospitality-themed exhibitions, puts it, “The Lebanese absolutely love to work in the restaurant industry. A bunch of friends will just get together and decide: ‘Let’s open a pub.’”

Launching restaurants, pubs, fast-food outlets or cafés gives investors a good opportunity to make money while developing a flourishing social network and/or expressing their creativity. The food is often the last thing on their minds.

“There’s nothing rational about this,” says Damouss-Salame. “In the last year, around 100 restaurants have shut down [in Beirut] and about as many have opened. That situation has been accentuated by the economic and security crises of course, but it doesn’t matter to those investors. They made it for a bit and they’re happy with it even if, sometimes, huge amounts of money were wasted.”

In such a rapidly changing market, then, it’s vital to differentiate yourself. Even if you end up crossing the line of what is generally perceived as good taste in order to find the right gimmick and the concept that will make your place more memorable than someone else’s.

“The food and beverage industry is very dynamic in Lebanon, and the range of offers is increasing,” says Karim El Asmar, co-founder of Hodema, a consulting agency specializing in hospitality. “Meanwhile, customers are getting more sophisticated. They want more than chairs and food; they require an entertainment experience, which explains the rise of many new concepts.”

For example, by surfing the current infatuation with online social network Facebook, which has nine million (and climbing) members worldwide, 25-year-old Charbel Mouannes, founder of the Facebook Pub, certainly captured a niche.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID HURY



PHOTOGRAPH BY DAVID HORY

"Lebanese people always like to have something new, and the Lebanese use Facebook every day," Mouannes says, explaining how the network is not only the theme of the establishment, but also an efficient – and free – marketing tool. "People can apply online for membership and we already have a group of 4,000 members, with a total of 10,000 applications in just six months. We keep messaging them, posting pictures of them at the pub on Facebook, and informing them of the many events that we organize, such as speed dating and theme nights."

In fact, the Facebook Pub is so popular that Mouannes is already thinking about opening another, bigger place, and even starting a franchise. "Even if – or when – Facebook eventually goes out of fashion or shuts down, we've developed a concept that can stand on its own," he says.

DIE-NING ROOMS. Other developers have chosen to attach their properties to more serious – and potentially divisive – issues, such as death and war. The famous – and exclusive – nightclub BO18, located underground in an area remembered for the massacres that happened there during the civil war, seats customers on coffins, and its décor consists of blood-red curtains and pictures of people who died during the hostilities. The successful – but now closed – 1975 pub (alluding to the year when the civil war started) had its façade piled with sand bags, and its windows covered with old press cuttings.



SHOOTING RANGE:
The Buns and Guns menu

And if you think those food joints seem tasteless in a country that has experienced so much violence – both historically and recently – then new venture Buns and Guns (B&G to regulars) probably isn't the place for you. Its owners took the war theme and ran with it. And ran. And kept on running, until they reached the "terrorism" marker.

The small fast-food restaurant is located in a Hezbollah-dominated suburb of south Beirut and proudly proclaims its terrorist theme. A sandbags-and-guns décor greets customers who may be tempted by a "Terrorist Meal" deal. Its slogan? "A sandwich can kill you." A disarmingly honest motto for a burger vendor.

The restaurant has attracted a lot of attention in the Western press, mostly expressing shock at the idea and calling on its owners to explain themselves. Apart from a group of regular customers – mainly teens from the neighborhood – though, B&G remains relatively unknown in Beirut. Perhaps because the "outrageous" theme is rather more mundane for those who've lived through real conflict.

"War has been part of our lives. Every human being reacts to what he's been through, so this is probably a way to exorcize the past," says Dammous-Salame. Not that she approves of those who play on the country's violent history for commercial gain, dismissing it as a cheap shortcut to attention rather than a genuine expression of creativity. "It's a pity that it would overshadow the rest of what's happening on the Lebanese scene," she says.

Hodema's El Asmar agrees, although he's not as disapproving as Dammous-Salame. "The point is to get the customer's attention, to get the 'wow effect,' whether by shocking him or amusing him," he says. "As long as the most difficult part is achieved – getting the customer inside the restaurant – then you're halfway to success. The rest depends on the food and service quality."

While a concept such as B&G's is risky – some will see it as a political statement and react accordingly, depending on their background and opinions – once the idea behind it has been explained, it is generally perceived as smart – or at least funny and daring – by most Lebanese observers.

El Asmar says it was quite predictable that foreigners would not understand the concept behind the chefs' military fatigues and the arms-obsessed setting. "One shouldn't judge solely on appearances," he says. "In Paris, there's this restaurant where they always insult the customers. That was risky too, but it worked."

"The public, at least in Lebanon, usually enjoys an acute sense of irony," he continues. "As far as I'm concerned, I see Buns and Guns as a Lebanese private joke."

The art of attracting attention in Lebanon, he suggests, is dependent on what French intellectual Jean Cocteau called "knowing how far to go too far." Buns and Guns, it seems, has judged it pretty well. ■