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RISING STARS

HOW MAJID ENTERTAINMENT AIMS TO RAISE
THE BAR FOR CHILDREN'S TELEVISION

MOHAMAD YEHYA, MANAGING DIRECTOR, MAJID ENTERTAINMENT

SEPTEMBER 2015

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COVER STORY

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

How Majid Entertainment promises to raise the bar for children's TV, and boost local production

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SEPTEMBER 2015 / 29

The children's magazine Majid is familiar to most Arabs in the Gulf, with a 37-year history and a cast of popular characters securing it a place in the hearts and minds of those who grew up with it. And with Abu Dhabi Media having taken the decision to take Majid into the digital age with its own dedicated TV channel and web portal, the brand looks set to win over many new generations of fans.

Majid Channel, which is due to launch on September 25 as a free to air channel serving the MENA region, is the brain-child of Mohammed Ibrahim Al Mahmoud, managing director of Abu Dhabi Media, who threw his support behind the ambitious project to expand the magazine into entirely new territory.

Abu Dhabi Media created a new subsidiary, Majid Entertainment, in September of 2014 to develop and run the channel. Mohamad Yehya, who was hired as managing director of the subsidiary in November 2014, says that part of the rationale behind the venture was to create a channel featuring children's content that offers entertainment more in keeping with the local culture of the UAE and its Gulf neighbours than the type of brash and often violent animations originating from the West.

"It's an entertainment channel with a bit of twist. We are trying to avoid all types of violence and all kinds of typical aspects of Western cartoons with too much action and violence. We are trying to present something that is more entertaining, has more value but also has international standards," Yehya says.

"The channel is also an adaptation of the magazine, which has a long history, almost 37 years, and there is a big need also in the market for an Arabic channel that will reflect the value and traditions of the Gulf area."

"We are trying to reflect the real values of the country, how they want the kids to think, but in an entertaining way. It is not just an educational channel, we have really nice, entertaining shows," he adds.

▼ Majid Entertainment aims to encourage children to interact and become interested in hobbies including art and craft.

2011



▲ Developing talent.



▲ Children can be entertained and learn new skills at the same time.

"THE CHANNEL IS ALSO AN ADAPTATION OF THE MAGAZINE, WHICH HAS A LONG HISTORY, ALMOST 37 YEARS, AND THERE IS A BIG NEED ALSO IN THE MARKET FOR AN ARABIC CHANNEL THAT WILL REFLECT THE VALUE AND TRADITIONS OF THE GULF AREA." Yehya

By leveraging the Majid brand, the new channel will also be able to gain far greater traction and will also have an established base of fans in the form of the many generations who have grown up with the magazine.

"We have generations who have grown up with Majid magazine and they would love to see their kids join Majid, but now it is the digital age and TV age. This is where we come in. We're developing a channel that will reflect 37 years of history and traditions. Parents are very familiar with



Majid Entertainment has been promoting its brand at exhibitions.



▲ Art will feature prominently on Majid Channel.

the characters and our intellectual property. That's part of the reason we're taking this step and adapting the magazine into a free channel and an online platform," he says.

Indeed, Yehya adds that Majid Entertainment consists of three divisions: a media division that includes the TV station, the magazine and the online platform; an e-learning division that is dedicated to e-learning apps and software; and commercial facilities, which is focused on investing in the brand and licencing and

"SOME OF OUR PARTNERS THINK WHAT WE'RE TRYING TO DO – TO LAUNCH A CHANNEL IN SIX MONTHS FROM SCRATCH – IS IMPOSSIBLE. BUT WE ARE ALMOST THERE, EVERYTHING IS RUNNING AS PER THE SCHEDULE." Yehya

creating commercial facilities for kids' entertainment.

Majid Entertainment's offices are separate from Abu Dhabi Media although it has a dedicated studio located in its parent company's premises.

Certainly most of Majid Entertainment's 23 staff members have been kept busy working on the core offering of content for the TV channel, which will feature locally produced content along with some carefully selected international content tailored for the region and dubbed in Arabic.

The content being produced locally consists of animations and live action programmes focusing on positive themes and subjects such as sports, arts, science and heritage. Majid Entertainment is working with about 25 production houses, many of which are based in the UAE, for its original content.

Furthermore, members of its own team are working closely with these production companies to ensure that everything is on spec. Yehya puts the scale of the undertaking in perspective. "We are producing more than 150 hours of content in less than six months including almost 70 hours of animation. This has never been done before, not in the region or anywhere around the world. Most of the live action shows that are being produced in the region and being filmed in studios in Abu Dhabi and Dubai."

Yehya admits that the company's ambitions have raised eyebrows. "Some of our partners think what we're trying to do – to launch a channel in six months from scratch – is impossible. But we are almost there, everything is running as per the schedule," he says. "We are working in a very effective and efficient way in order to reach the deadline and to present something good for our viewers."

Majid Entertainment is working with UAE-based production companies including Blackstone Studios, Crazy Piranha, iProduction Studios and international production firms including Italian company Mondo TV.

Production work has taken place at

"WE ARE PRODUCING MORE THAN 150 HOURS OF CONTENT IN LESS THAN SIX MONTHS INCLUDING ALMOST 70 HOURS OF ANIMATION. THIS HAS NEVER BEEN DONE BEFORE, NOT IN THE REGION OR ANYWHERE AROUND THE WORLD." Yehya

25
NUMBER OF
PRODUCTION
HOUSES THAT MAJID
ENTERTAINMENT IS
WORKING WITH



▲ Mohamad Yehya has been involved with broadcast and production since he was 15.



▲ Majid is a very well known character in the Gulf.



▲ Animation for many of Majid's shows is being produced in the UAE.



▲ The channel aims to connect with local culture.

sound studios and other production facilities across the UAE, and post production work is also being largely handled in the country. "It is our policy to keep as much work in the UAE as possible," Yehya says.

Intellectual property owned by Majid Entertainment accounts for about 30% of the content being produced. "We have a huge library and we own a lot of IPs," Yehya says. "Many of the IPs are more than 30 years old and are famous kids' brands, so we are developing these ideas."

On the animation side, the channel

**"OUR POLICY IS TO
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BETWEEN THE KIDS."**

Yehya

is starting with six shows from its own intellectual property including famous characters such as Majid, Amouna, Kaslan, Captain Kalfan and Caramella.

"Majid is main character and we're producing 52 episodes in which he goes on adventures, discovers new areas and travels around the world. Part of the concept is built around the idea of being friendly, being more open, safe and nice. You don't have to be just in your neighbourhood to be yourself, you can always travel, meet more people, discover different cultures



▼ Key members of the Majid team.



▲ Many of the shows are being shot in UAE-based studios.



150
HOURS OF CONTENT
THAT MAJID
ENTERTAINMENT
IS PRODUCING IN
THE RUN-UP TO ITS
LAUNCH

but still be yourself," Yehya says.

Another show, featuring the famous magazine character Fadooli, will consist of the animated character interacting with a human presenter. "Fadooli is always curious and always trying to get the answers to everything so he will challenge kids," Yehya says.

In terms of the live show formats, Majid Entertainment is focusing on activities including art and sports, but with the aim

of encouraging children to try these activities for themselves. "The live show formats will create some role models for all the kids.

We have a dedicated show focusing on sports champions from age six to 16. So we go visit the clubs for all types of activities, from football to chess and ping pong. We highlight the efforts made to train and create champions and encourage children into sport."

These shows will also provide special

MAKE IT REAL

With Majid Channel set launch later this month, the channel is already gaining significant traction on social media. The company launched its official Facebook page at Abu Dhabi Book Fair in May and garnered 300,000 followers within about six weeks. Furthermore, the channel's activities will also extend beyond digital as it seeks to encourage children to interact with real activities and leave the tablets and games consoles at home.

"Within Majid Entertainment we will have a dedicated event desk that will start introducing kids' activities, events, international plays, and local plays," Yehya says.

"We want to focus on the theatre in the UAE, there is a big gap when it comes to the children and the theatre in general. We want them to act more and be part of the big plays. One of our main targets is to encourage kids to act like kids, not just watch tablets. We want them to practice more sports, arts, do kids' activities in a proper way."

Yehya says that the company has already developed specific ways of achieving this. For example, it is creating a show called the Robotech which will focus on a robot competition in which children will build their own robots.

reportage on how children can get involved in these activities by gaining support from their families, from the government or from the clubs. "We explain more about each game. We are focusing more on extreme sport also to encourage kids to try to practice more physical sports," Yehya says. Another series, called Robotech, is dedicated to technology, robotics and digital applications.

In keeping with Majid as an animated character, another show focuses on digital art. "It is a drawing show but focusing



▲ The Majid brand will become even more widely recognised.



▲ Majid will be just one of many colourful characters to entertain children on the channel.

▼ Yehya studied at New York Film Academy.



more on the digital part of the work, creating characters, creating all types of art animation. You would be surprised to see how many talented kids and what type of creation they can do, starting from the age of seven, eight and nine. So we have diversity in our shows and this is about the live show," Yehya adds.

While the channel's main target is six to fourteen year olds, it will also have some slots for pre-school. These will be introduced from launch and Majid Entertainment will develop its pre-school offering in later seasons.

While the animated shows and live action programmes are being produced by various companies, Majid Entertainment will also have its own presenters to host the shows and entertain viewers between shows.

Majid Entertainment is keen to ensure that its presenters are from the Gulf and are able to connect with the audience. To this end, the company is actively looking for new blood to front the channel and even launched a competition in Abu Dhabi earlier in the year to discover new talent.

"MAJD IS MAIN CHARACTER AND WE'RE PRODUCING 52 EPISODES IN WHICH HE GOES ON ADVENTURES, DISCOVERS NEW AREAS AND TRAVELS AROUND THE WORLD."

"The reaction was really amazing, we have a queue of kids waiting to join the auditions. We didn't expect that two days of auditions would attract over 3,000 kids. We had some people coming from Saudi Arabia to take part in the audition with their kids.

"Our policy is to showcase new presenters, new talent. We want the channel to be real, we don't want to just have famous presenters which would create a kind of wall between the kids.

"For the live shows we're focusing on finding presenters aged between 16-18 because they have to be able to read the script and interact, but later we will be introducing different age groups within our activities," Yehya says. ○

YEHYA IN PROFILE

Yehya had no confusion about what career to pursue and has been involved in TV and broadcast since he was 15 years old. Yehya, who grew up in Lebanon in the 1980s, lived in a compound which also housed a TV and radio station. "Because of the war we didn't have the luxury of acting like normal kids and going to play football so we had to stay in the premises of the compound. At 12 I used to play in the radio and TV station and started learning after school. I saw the cameras in operation, how the editors worked on the films, and then I started working there in the summer holidays," he says.

Yehya went on to study at New York Film Academy and has worked at ADM and other broadcasters all over the Middle East before taking on his current role as managing director of Majid Entertainment and director of TV projects at ADM.