

THE DIGITAL ONES TO WATCH

They're powerful, they're forward thinking and, most of all, they're digital. *Gulf Business* lists 10 companies to keep a close eye on as they propel the region's online industry forward.

DUBIZZLE

Classifieds

Most people who have lived in the UAE for any amount of time are likely to have had some encounter with Dubizzle. The classifieds 'portal' was one of the earliest Dubai-centric community sites to emerge on the scene and has grown and developed with the city over five years. Today, the company has expanded its operations to Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Syria and Tunisia. Dubizzle is aiming to be the number one classifieds site in at least 80 per cent of them within three years. Now available in English, Arabic and French, it provides one of the most comprehensive, flexible and easy-to-use services of its kind, anywhere in the region. And it's expanding aggressively.

J C Butler and Sim Whatley,
founders of Dubizzle





YADIG

Reviews/social networking

Having seen the success of review sites such as TripAdvisor and Amazon, it is clear that there is latent power in public reviews. Tapping into the seam of popular opinion comes Yadig, part social network and part review website. It was established to share word-of-mouth opinion on restaurants, bars, spas, hotels and salons in the online realm. Not only is the bank of opinion easily searchable, you can also share your experiences with friends through the integrated networking tools. Users can instantly communicate a good review to their friends using the YaPP app on a mobile phone. With consumer behaviour turning increasingly to reviews pre-purchase, Yadig has significant potential to impact corporate behaviour.

WAMDA.COM

Business networking

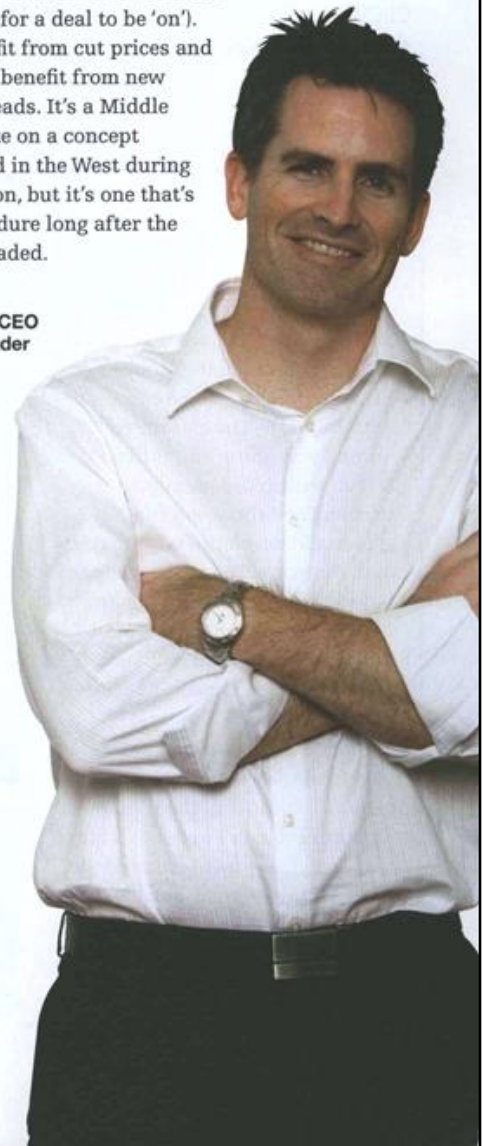
The internet and new technologies have created all sorts of new possibilities for entrepreneurs in the region. Launched on the back of the Celebration of Entrepreneurship event, Wamda.com, the region's start-up content and community hub, is driving trends for both entrepreneurialism and the web with formidable verve. This interactive resource, created by private equity firm Abraaj Capital, facilitates a space for knowledge share and connection, primarily for entrepreneurs as they start their businesses and for business leaders and mentors, whose advice can help SMEs through all the key stages of growth.

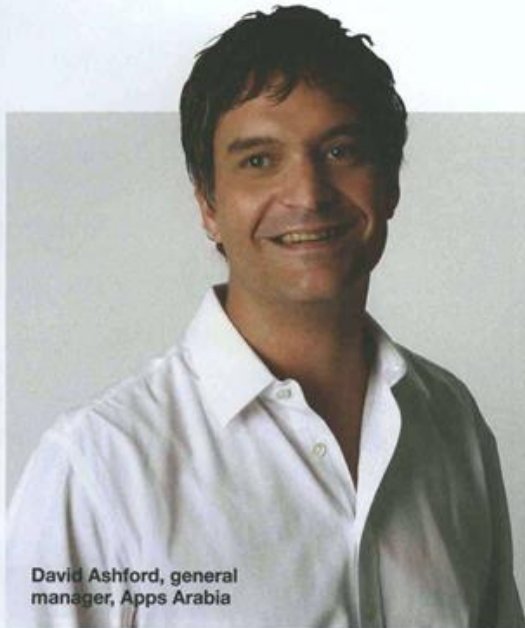
GONABIT

e-commerce

Formed only in January 2010, GoNabit is one of the newer companies in the UAE's digital domain but has gone from strength to strength. Calling itself a 'group-buying website', the company operates across the MENA region in both English and Arabic. The basic premise is to leverage the numerical power of a loyal, broad customer base to source heavily discounted products and services (although a minimum number of subscribers is required for a deal to be 'on'). Users benefit from cut prices and businesses benefit from new customer leads. It's a Middle Eastern take on a concept popularised in the West during the recession, but it's one that's likely to endure long after the crisis has faded.

Dan Stuart, CEO
and co-founder
of GoNabit





David Ashford, general manager, Apps Arabia

APPS ARABIA

Mobile apps

Founded in June 2010 and supported by Abu Dhabi's media powerhouse, twofour54, Apps Arabia invests in the best apps from the MENA region. An entrepreneur with an ingenious idea for a mobile app can approach Apps Arabia and the firm will seek and fund a developer to realise the idea and then share the profits. Crucially, Apps Arabia works on an 'Arabs for Arabs' premise, which means the company is actively incubating local talent – expat and national, as long as you reside on regional soils. General manager David Ashford says that all mobile app ideas are considered as long as they are commercially viable. Apps Arabia has already released the multiplayer word game, Kalimat, and has 10 more apps currently in production.

ALSHABAKA.ME

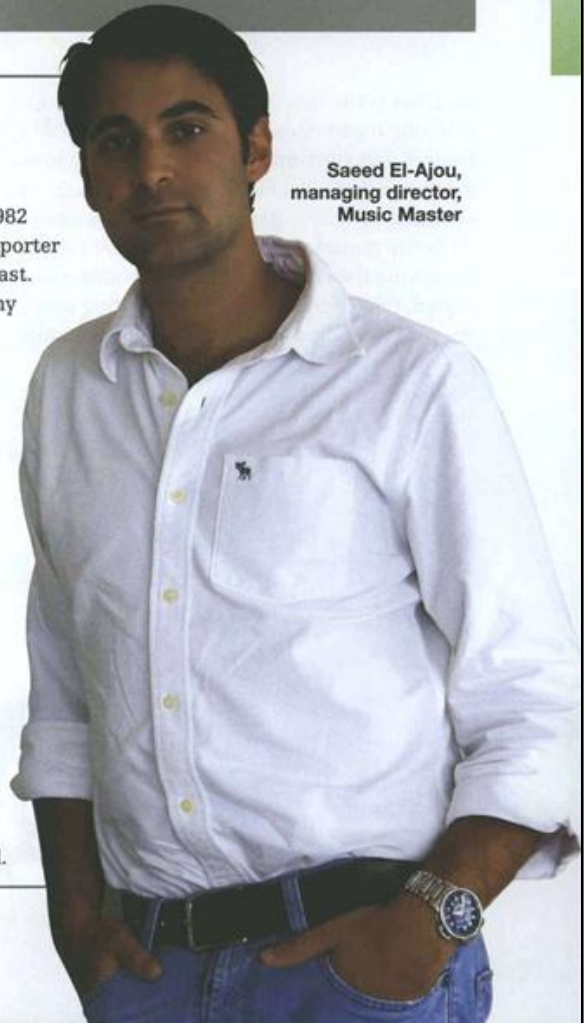
Business networking

Social networking on a corporate level is every bit as popular and useful today as leisure networking. And it's best to keep the two separate. Alshabaka is an Arabic take on the LinkedIn concept with the glaring advantage of having an Arabic (as well as English) interface. Job hunters and professionals alike are beginning to log into the region-specific site to take advantage of a site specialised in the local career environment. Expect to see it grow, especially in the regional microclimate of a youthful, mobile population seeking employment.

MUSIC MASTER

Reviews/social networking

Music Master was established in 1982 in Jeddah, KSA and was the first importer of legitimate music to the Middle East. Hooking up with Warner Music, Sony Music, EMI and Universal Music, it has long distributed the latest Western music and added to its catalogue a broad selection of Arabic music. This year, the company has also entered the digital world of distribution, acknowledging the changing consumption habits of regional customers. More than three million tracks are available without digital rights restrictions across the GCC, Lebanon and Egypt. Fully digitised, the firm was also the first to incorporate an interactive 'quick response' bar code in its adverts, allowing users to scan it with their smart phones for an opportunity to win a free download.



Saeed El-Ajou, managing director, Music Master

ISHOPAHLIC

E-commerce

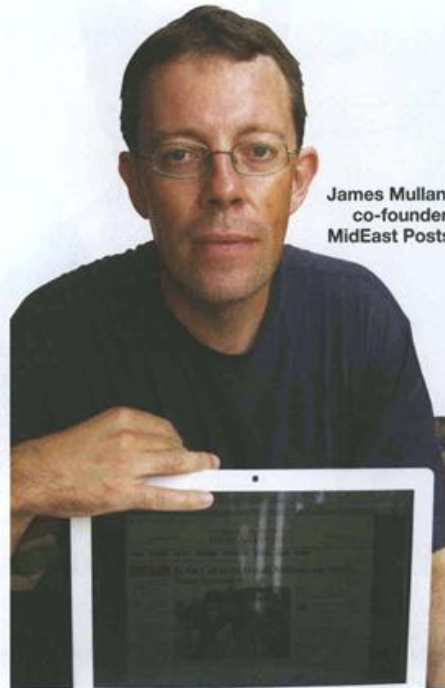
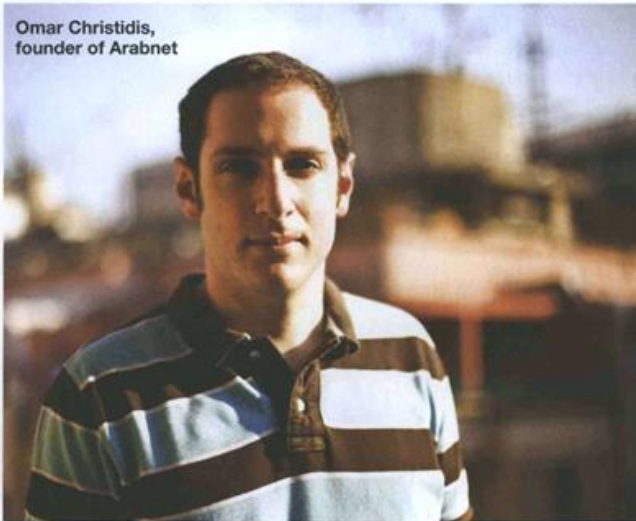
E-commerce has yet to arrive in the Middle East as it has in the West, where credit card penetration is much higher and consumers are more comfortable with the security surrounding online shopping. But that's not to say that digital and retail are divorced. Though companies continue to look for ways to drive e-commerce in the conventional sense, smartphones have enabled apps like iShopaholic to emerge. This is a shopping guide that includes mall directories complete with electronic savings vouchers based on your location (through clever use of positioning technology). In a culture so empasioned by the shopping experience, it's likely to be very popular.

ARABNET SHIFT DIGITAL SUMMIT

Events

ArabNet is the largest conference for the regional web industry, bringing together over 1,000 illustrious Arab web business leaders and start-ups, including a strong presence from regional entrepreneurs – fed by recruitment workshops held in seven countries. The four-day conference took place in Beirut in March. To locate digital talent for the ArabNet event, founder Omar Christidis took a road trip in the 'ArabNet Bus' across the region, fuelled by the mission of finding promising youth and encouraging them to launch their own businesses.

Omar Christidis,
founder of Arabnet



James Mullan,
co-founder,
MidEast Posts

MIDEAST POSTS

Content

Blogging is not a new phenomenon, and it's as big in the Middle East as it has become elsewhere in the world. 'Citizen journalists' risk information overload as everyone seeks to get their voice heard. How do you track down and absorb the information relevant to you? The answer is blog aggregators – common platforms that collect compelling copy together from the most influential content producers in a region. Modelling itself on the US's Huffington Post, MideastPosts.com hopes to provide the Middle East audience with a pertinent, local voice that sidesteps the limitations of traditional print journalism. "The copy they write is often far more insightful, honest, passionate and relevant than copy you will find in a newspaper," says the firm's co-founder, James Mullan.