MAN OF THE YEAR

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FARID CHEHAB

YES, HE DID IT

All of us at *ArabAd* are gratified to have selected Leo Burnett CEEMEA's Chairman and Chief Creative Officer, Farid Chehab, as our Man of the Year, and for more than one reason. First, we agree with the opinion expressed by Publicis Groupe Chairman and CEO Maurice Levy, namely that the designation is long overdue. Second, we take considerable satisfaction in celebrating the success of a genuine professional who has more than earned his spurs. Most importantly, given both the current state of the regional advertising and communications industry and the primary causes thereof, Farid Chehab's singular devotion to creativity qualifies him to be more than just our Man of the Year: it also makes him the man of the hour.

Why? Because Chehab continues to personify the core reason for our industry at a time when many of his peers seem to have forgotten all about it. As this magazine regularly affirms, far too many advertising agencies and other media entities have fallen into the dangerous habit of assuming that our business is like any other, that our goals can be set and our performance evaluated exclusively by accountants and other finance specialists. This is not just to devalue our contributions as an accelerator of economic growth and therefore as a partner to all manner of socio-political development. It is also to endanger the very capabilities that allow us to keep playing such a crucial role.

Advertising and other communications disciplines involve far too many intangibles to be managed solely on the basis of what the bean-counters have to say. In order to properly serve the interests of our clients, our modus operandi has to be designed around an unshakable commitment to developing and maintaining the creative talent required to keep the wheels of commerce turning. Our clients rely on us to build and guard their brands, to help them recognise and seize opportunities in the marketplace, and at all times to capture the imaginations of their own customers. Fulfilling this mission has always depended on creatives, individuals who may never look at the bottom line of a spreadsheet but whose work ultimately determines what ends up there.

Almost singlehandedly, Farid Chehab has transformed Leo Burnett CEEMEA from a relatively minor player focused on Lebanon into a force to be reckoned with across the Middle East. In this instance, it is to his credit that he has not done it alone, for his most telling achievement is to have understood the need for a team of talented creatives in order to maximise value for the client. Rather than having adopted the (these days depressingly common) viewpoint that creativity is just another cost to be absorbed and therefore one to be reduced, Chehab has rightly identified it as his agency's primary product, a key differentiator in the face of competition, and therefore a worthy recipient for the investment of time, money and energy.

The result is that where others have neglected to nurture and reward the talents who drive our business and accordingly struggled to retain the best among them, Leo Burnett CEEMEA has emerged as a standard by which other agencies are measured. It has served as an incubator for budding creatives, providing many of the region's high-flyers with the education and experience needed to parlay their innate ability into the next level of success. For all of this and more, Chehab merits not just our applause, but also our gratitude for having put into practice what the great poet Robert Frost once explained so succinctly. When two roads diverged in our shared wood – when others were hobbling themselves, their clients and our industry by failing to place sufficient value in creative excellence – he took the one less travelled by, and that has made all the difference.

Walid Azzi