

Joe Rabah on Digital Signage Growth and Opportunities in the Middle East



The Middle East offers large growth potential for the digital signage industry. We spoke to Joe Rabah, Managing Director of EMEA, at RMG Networks, who capture over 50% of the market share in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), about opportunities in the region, new technologies, and how end users can measure return on investment (ROI).

What is your view on how the digital signage industry is evolving in the Middle East?

There is a very heavy focus on retail and the usage of digital signage to engage customers.

Smart cities are also being used to attract people. This is because of an initiative by His Highness in the UAE, specifically in Dubai, which is seeing the city become a hub of smart networks and smart government.

Are there any particular types of technology that you are seeing in the Middle East that are not yet mature in the UK or the US?

The Middle East is becoming a very mature digital network. The market is so mature in Dubai that I was surprised to visit the UK and find that most of the technology in the Middle East has not made its way there.

We're starting to see digital initiatives from the Middle East be exported to Europe and the US, which is a shift that we haven't seen before. Most new content, designs and smart initiatives are coming through that region, not the other way around.

In the Middle East, we are seeing lots of augmented reality, virtual reality, mixed reality and artificial intelligence (AI). AI is the biggest technological development right now and we are now seeing this being used to improve customer service standards in digital signage.

Can you give some examples of the innovative digital signage you are seeing?

In hospitality, we're working on an artificial intelligence kiosk that's represented by an avatar. The avatar welcomes you, scans your documents, carries out the background checks, obtains security clearance, gets your room ready and even dispenses the key to you. This is a completely automated system.

The virtual concierge is also able to interact with passersby and can solve problems. For example, if a guest loses their key, it can use facial recognition to securely give a replacement. It can also target guests with relevant adverts based on the timings they enter or exit the hotel.

If someone was checking out after a three-night stay and occupancy levels had dropped, the guest would be offered a promotion to extend their stay. All of the data collected results in intelligent business decisions and this is visualized through digital networks consisting of digital signage screens, kiosks, and tablets.



Another example is the work we have done with the government entity in Dubai. They use [AI video walls in their customer service center](#). This allows people to speak to an artificial avatar in either Arabic or English. The more questions that are asked, the more intelligent the device becomes.

The project has evolved from queries about technical services to information about nearby restaurants and flights. With AI interacting with digital screens, these devices could become smarter than we ever thought they could be.

How do you see the Middle East developing smart cities further?

There are a couple of new smart cities being proposed and some smaller cities that are already live but still expanding.

Masdar is an intelligent, solar based, energy-independent city that is trialing digital interactive screens which detect details about the person viewing the signage, such as gender, and react accordingly.

The government is also tasking its smart development teams to secure a blanket digital network that covers the smart fridges or intelligent cookware within people's homes, so there is investment in the architecture.

Over the next five to ten years, the technology in these cities will become part of normal life.

Which sectors offer particularly interesting growth opportunities in the Middle Eastern market?

Hospitality and government are two of the biggest sectors for us.

Government has seen tremendous growth over the past three years in comparison to any other vertical. This is because the government is trying to reduce its dependence on the oil industry, so they are working on different opportunities to attract people. The government is putting more investment towards smart cities, smartphones and smart devices.

Hospitality is especially big in the UAE where there is a lot of traction from visitors from overseas. Tourists are attracted to devices that are the world's largest or tallest.

Retail is also a big growth sector, and we have also carried out work in the education and healthcare industries.

Is there a big difference between the sectors you see opportunities in, in the Middle East and the rest of the world?

There is only one difference and that is scale.

The largest retailers and distributors in the US and the Gulf Cooperation Council probably have less than 1,000 locations and probably even less than 100 in Dubai that are a connected network.

Whereas, in the UK, there are stores like Sainsbury's and Argos which are in the tens of thousands in some cases.

When we consider scale, the cost being distributed over a large number of stores and retail shops can improve return on investment.

However in the UAE, we don't have the size that allows you to take advantage of multi-unit savings and increase return on your investment, but if you have money, there is no need to worry about cost.

How are you seeing brands measure return on investment (ROI) on digital signage?

The short answer is they don't. Brands are not measuring ROI. They are looking at uptakes of sales, but at the moment, ROI is usually speculation. You can calculate ROI, but you need the right metrics.

Customer engagement is a critical part of ROI. This is currently often measured through social media, but it can be more accurately recorded thanks to technology that detects how many people have looked at a screen. This can calculate the viewer's concentration and demographic details, such as their estimated age, gender, and style of clothes worn, as well as shopping habits (i.e. whether they enter the shop on the right or on the left).

Combining the measurements of customer engagement alongside the uptake in sales is the most effective measure for ROI today.

Now that we can measure attention share, how is digital signage evolving to help brands capitalize on this?

I've been in the digital signage industry for 21 years and every year I see more involvement in this area. Recent improvements include accessories that allow you to install a camera in an active screen that recognizes gestures, touch or motion to drive your customer experience. There's no need to install an external panel to connect to a screen anymore.

We're moving away from using screens that just show a video or an image, and more towards experiential use. So now, screens change based on who is standing in front of it. The content can be tweaked and tailored to the customer viewing this by interacting with their mobile phone and other smart technologies.

RFIDs, artificial intelligence, mixed reality and augmented reality are part of everyday life now, and now part of digital signage too. It's a good time to be in digital signage.

Can you explain the services that RMG Networks offer?

We specialize in delivering unique customer experiences through the use of digital technology. We provide the software, hardware, the services as a turnkey solution, and we interact with your mobile device and allow you to get a full gamut of digital content through all of these facilities under one platform. We don't think of ourselves as a content management system - we think of ourselves as a platform that allows you to deliver unique experiences to all of these areas.

If you look at our logo today, it says, "Beyond the Screen." We rise above the status quo to think, create and deliver beyond the screen. I live by those terms because when I arrived in Dubai in 2009, the mission was to power visual signage for call centers, retail, and hospitality. However, I quickly discovered that people were more interested in something beyond that.

When we opened our Middle East office in 2009, we had less than 1% market share in digital signage technologies but we now enjoy over 50% market share in the UAE alone. Our screens are everywhere from hotels to museums, to exhibition halls to shopping malls. From the airport to your hotel room, our content is seen throughout the Middle East.

Finally, what are your favorite events to keep up with the industry?

In the UAE, we have one of the largest events, which is GITEX.

When I come to Europe, I also visit IAC and RDFC for retail. I also go to CES in the US.

To find out more about RMG Networks, [follow their LinkedIn](#) or [visit their website](#).

For more information about AI's use in Dubai, [read our summary of London Digital Week](#).
