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Soldier-cum-entrepreneur has seen it all now November 15, 2000 12:00 AM

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When Brigadier General Tannous Mouawad decided to move to the private sector, he had spent 30 years in the service of his country, much of that time gathering and analyzing intelligence.

His new passion was information on and for consumers.

"I'd like to create cooperation in my sector by bringing new technology to Lebanon in a number of areas including research, e-commerce, and the internet," Mouawad said.

In the last two years, his market research firm, Middle East Studies, has found its niche in providing polling with technology. Mouawad also initiated an information-oriented dot-com, Lebanonwire, and a consumer-protection organization.

This is not to say that the entrepreneur saw his early hopes fulfilled from the beginning.

International partners whom he approached for investing in market research here were reluctant to enter the risky Lebanese business arena.

E-commerce was also not quite what he expected, as advertisers in the region showed little or no inclination to buy online banners.

"I suffered in the beginning internally and externally internally with the people I worked with, and externally with clients," Mouawad said. He faced a lack of discipline, lies, inaccuracies, and unkept promises.

The bad economy polluted the business climate, kept people from fulfilling their contracts and obligations, and reduced business prospects in all sectors.

Despite all the barriers, Mouawad found his new career in market research and information technology rewarding.

"It's more enjoyable. I feel free. Freedom is very important. It's the oxygen of life."

In one way, the recession should be good for his business.

"In a bad economic situation, you need research, more than you will in a growth economy," Mouawad said, because proper research could help investors to minimize losses and divest themselves from those sectors overcrowded with competition. But this understanding still needs to be instilled in the Lebanese business class, he said. "Most of the Lebanese businessmen and women think research is a loss. We should convince them that they need market research and opinion research, that this isn't money thrown away."

With a young team of employees, MES designs and executes research projects involving questionnaire-building, data collection, data entry and analysis, and producing a final report.

The firm conducts quantitative and qualitative market research, as well as focus-group studies, although the latter are rare. Research is done on either a national basis with a balanced sample of 1,544 people, or regional or city level studies with a sample of 410 people.

A full national-level research survey requires two weeks of groundwork by 25 interviewers.

"We measure the opinion on the will of the consumer about everything," Mouawad said.

"It's a very honest job, and requires precision," he explained. "If you make a mistake in even one of the five stages, the results will be worth nothing."

He discovered his interest in market research while serving as military attache to the Lebanese Embassy in Washington, DC, from 1989 to 1993. Mouawad, who "felt that I was followed by market research people 24 hours a day," realized that US society is based on the results of polls on politics, the economy, the environment, advertising, and virtually all other matters of concern.

"In Europe and the US, the consumer is king. As a decision-maker, I follow you as a consumer to see what you like and what you dislike. I focus my ads depending on you," he said.

Lebanese media markets, which Mouawad said shrank far below \$100 million this year but still count among the country's best growth prospects, are ruled by decision-makers "who don't care about research and don't follow the consumers."

The narrow horizon of decision-makers extends to their lacking awareness of the importance of online advertising, Mouawad said, as he found executives in Egypt, Lebanon, and in the Gulf "not ready to allocate 1 percent of their ad money to a web budget."

His online venture, Lebanonwire.com, is a news website that he hopes to develop into a provider of instant news with hourly updates on Lebanese, Arab and world events.

Consumer protection, which is so strong in the United States, was another aspect that struck Mouawad as deficient in Lebanon's socio-economic life.

"I realized that from the time of our independence, we never had any consumer defense," Mouawad said, "and 90 percent of consumers are unaware of their rights."

Together with a group of friends, he therefore initiated a project to create an NGO for consumer protection in Lebanon; the group is planning to publish a magazine and has made contacts with international organizations to gain their assistance. His business ventures and consumer protection activities are developing, but Mouawad was emphatic that one obstacle was looming larger than all others against the growth of his and all other Lebanese businesses.

"The factor of Syrian influence in all daily affairs of Lebanese society in all ways and means makes economic progress impossible," Moukawad argued. "To that I sign my name."