

Innovators Guiding Influences

In a bustling city of more than three million, residents and visitors in Dubai have an overwhelming number of restaurants, malls and activities to choose from. Accordingly, there are no shortage of websites and apps offering tips and reviews, from restaurant search engine Zomato to travel website TripAdvisor, among others.

A homegrown player separating itself from the pack is Insydo. Tanaz Dizadji, Siobhain Spear and Sami Eltamawy founded it in 2014 as an English-language "online city guide." It initially focused on anonymously reviewing restaurants, venues and services around Dubai, but Dizadji, who's CEO, found it difficult to monetize the business and the approach was time-consuming. She had to dispatch her small team to visit thousands of businesses to gather information about prices, dress codes and service quality.

Two years ago, Dizadji decided to change Insydo's approach from a review-based app to a media platform similar to Stepfeed or the Middle East version of BuzzFeed, a shift that widened its focus to include broader lifestyle content and news. "[It allows for] more room to play with brands and to be more unique with content," says Dizadji, a 33-year-old British-Iranian expat.

Insydo built a data analytics platform to pinpoint trends and popular businesses, which helps Spear, who's editor-in-chief, identify topics that will appeal to a millennial audience. Browse through Insydo's website and you'll find content that appeals to local residents and curated hand-picked experiences across different lifestyle verticals. They run alongside short pieces on, say, telecom company Du's new service to renew an Emirates ID and the launch of Apple's latest iPhones.

The move helped Insydo rack up 1.6 million website visits per month. Videos generate three million views per month. That's made it easier to get big advertisers on board, such as Mercedes-Benz, Jumeirah, Pepsi, Sephora, Audi and MasterCard among others.

"There's a real thirst for native [advertising] content published in the region. The quality is really low" says Dizadji. "We give them the storytelling" More than 150 clients, including Disney, Sephora, Unilever, Coca-Cola and Landmark Group have signed on as a result.

This October, Insydo will be publishing Arabic content for the first time. It's a move designed to reach an audience in Riyadh and Jeddah. Dizadji hopes it will double the company's base of 550,000 unique monthly visitors by the end of 2018. Since changing the business model, she says the startup broke even on revenues of \$1.2 million last year, up from \$204,000 in 2016.

That's quite a feat, since the downturn in advertising in Dubai has clobbered the media industry. Venture capitalists also tend to shy away from media startups. "We looked into VC funding but quickly realized that it would not be suitable given the nature of our media company" says Dizadji. Instead, she turned to angel investors who work in the media business, raising a total of \$3 million.

Dizadji was born in Tehran, but her family moved to the U.K. when she was a child. There she studied accounting and finance at the University of Warwick. After graduating in 2006, she spent three years working as an accountant with PricewaterhouseCoopers in London, before changing careers and joining a non-profit in London promoting awareness for elephant conservation. She led its arts and education efforts.

She moved to Dubai in 2010 after she was headhunted to work for a non-profit called START, which hosts workshops for children with special needs. After four years at START, Dizadji moved to a new role at Omnicom where she led the agency's corporate social responsibility for four years at Omnicom.

As she settled into life in Dubai, Dizadji found she was constantly googling tips on restaurants or hairdressers, but couldn't find a website that curated recommendations the way she liked. She gathered information she came across and made her own lists in an Excel sheet.

The experience convinced her there could be a business opportunity in creating an online guide for Dubai.

She developed what would become Insydo in September 2014. Through job postings she recruited Eltamawy, who had worked previously as a software engineer in Egypt, and Spear, a British expat who had a background in advertising. Eltamawy was drawn to the opportunity to build Insydo from the ground up and believed Dizadji was doing something unique. "There was a gap in the market for a quality digital lifestyle solution for consumers in the Middle East," says Eltamawy, who has now left his role at Insydo in 2018.

Within months of joining Dizadji elevated them to the title of co-founders. "They became critical to the success of the company," she says.

After several months spent collecting reviews and categorizing them as "The Good, The Bad and The Tips" their website went live in September 2015. Instead of approaching large brands, Insydo tried offering marketing services to smaller businesses, including sponsored content. Although SMEs didn't have big marketing budgets, Dizadji thought they offered a better opportunity to build a broader client base.

Building a following was tough, with Insydo attracting about 45,000 users per month at the beginning. It got a big boost in early 2016 from a publicity stunt, when Dizadji asked then marketing manager Steve Worobec to raise brand awareness, with the tagline "Save Steve's Job"

A play on the name of Apple's founder, Worobec plastered his face on billboards along Sheikh Zayed Road, Dubai's main artery, and made appearances around town imploring people to save his job by checking out Insydo's website. It wasn't entirely tongue-in-cheek—the company had little budget for additional marketing if the campaign failed.

She remembers people thinking she was taking a risk, but the campaign helped put Insydo on the map. Users did 250,000 searches on its website in two weeks, and it generated buzz in local media.

It became apparent though by late 2016 that focusing on anonymous reviews was too time-consuming and getting small business owners onboard was costly. It was at this time that Insydo pivoted to create a content solution for larger brands looking for native promotion.

Insydo began mining data culled from Google search, other review sites and social media, among other sources, to uncover trending topics, restaurants and products. It broadened its focus to feature coverage on everything from retail brands to new tech gadgets. Dizadji calls it their "secret weapon," as it has helped make operations far more efficient. "We realized that using data was just more powerful," she says.

Refocusing her business delayed her plans to enter new markets, such as Saudi Arabia, but it worked out for the better since it helped her avoid replicating "mistakes on a much bigger scale she says. Surprisingly, one of those included the launch of a smartphone app in 2016. The cost of acquiring and retaining users on its app was too high. "Sometimes you're actually jeopardizing your own business by having [an app];" says Dizadji. Insydo ditched the app last year and stuck to a mobile-friendly website. She admits accessing their website on mobile is not optimal user experience, but it hasn't prevented them from attracting users.

While simultaneously building Insydo's presence in the region, Dizadji, El-Tamawy and Spear launched a second start-up venture last year to fill a market. Through Insydo, it became apparent that advertisers wanted to take advantage of social media influencers with smaller followings. Unlike influencers with millions of fans, social media users with 20,000 to 30,000 followers typically don't have agents. Dizadji says those micro-influencers are generally more selective about who they work with, but they will agree to promote a product at a cheaper rate, and still reach highly-engaged audiences.

Dizadji and her Insydo co-founders developed an online marketplace that connects advertisers to micro-influencers. So far, 3,500 influencers have signed up, with a combined following of 60 million. Brand Ripplr has arranged 67 campaigns in the GCC for clients including Pepsi, Anghami and Landmark, with the startup taking a commission from advertisers. It has raised \$1 million in seed funding from two angel investors and Dubai media company OLN.

Although Insydo and Brand Ripplr are separate companies, they occupy the same office. They've also shared clients and collaborated on marketing campaigns. Dizadji admits running both companies is a challenge, but says launching Brand Ripplr was "too big of an opportunity to turn down" Now she has to balance that with running Brand Ripplr. The two startups have 12 employees each. Dizadji guides the strategic direction of Brand Ripplr while her co-founder Spear takes the content lead on Insydo. Dizadji builds partnerships and pursues clients for both. While building two digital companies is no easy feat, Dizadji is adamant that this is only the beginning - "there's a lot more to come," says the entrepreneur."

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