



Putting Arab women in the picture

Three Emirati marketing graduates recognised from their vast network of contacts that many women faced the same challenge: they were “time poor but mind active”, and searching for ways to contribute to the region’s social and their own personal and professional, growth.

The pressures placed on Middle Eastern women, juggling their expanding role in the region’s economic development while maintaining the traditional position as home-maker, meant many had no way to attend or participate in conferences and seminars, stifling their potential.

The gap presented a unique business opportunity, to build a virtual bridge between these forums and a woman’s home, giving women the opportunity of not just viewing but actively participating in events. And creating a site where networking could take place in tweets and chat rooms rather than over the conventional coffee break.

Active participation

“The world is so dynamic now, women have work and family commitments and they don’t always get the time to go out and physically attend events. We wanted woman to get more involved in the public part of society,” says Meerah Ketait who with her fellow graduates Sarah Al Qassimi and Azza Al Nuaimi, linked up with German finance and business advisor, Dr Christiane Schloderer and Indian IT expert, Sateesh Kumar at an entrepreneurial seminar, Startup Weekend Dubai, to create MindTalk, an online company enabling women to link in and actively participate in regional

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conferences and events.

The group, which has adapted technology, used by businesses in the West to minimise the cost and difficulties of video conferencing, is initially targeting the U.A.E. but hopes to spread to other countries across the Gulf region where it could open the doors for women reluctant or forbidden to leave the home.

Giving women the option

“We’re giving women the option, whether they are comfortable or not of moving into society, of actively participating,” Ketait says. “Women in each society can mould or use MindTalk to meet their own needs.”

To be clear she says, MindTalk is not about breaking cultural barriers or discouraging women from physically attending events. “I don’t want to see MindTalk used as a way of separating women from men, or isolating them in a shell. It’s about liberating women, enabling them to keep socially active while meeting their commitments.”

Advancing development

Emirati women, are leading the way in the Arab

world when it comes to active participation in society. They are employed in professions as varied as medicine, IT, media, property development and aerospace and, according to Sabeeka Al Shamlan a senior analyst at the U.A.E. government's development company Mubadala, are continually looking to advance their personal and professional development. "Even women not allowed out of the homes, keep their minds very open and active," she adds.

But balancing the roles is becoming more and more difficult. "My mother worked but she always made sure she was home with lunch on the table when my brothers and sister and I got in from school. Today working hours are much longer, it's not that easy."

She says the technology would also help women like herself, who work in male-dominated areas and may be reluctant to attend events as the only woman. "I've had meetings with HQ where the room is full of men who will look at you and acknowledge your existence but you don't get to participate. Three years ago, when I started, I had the feeling, 'Why am I here? I'm a woman, they're not going to listen to me'. But I persevered and began slowly participating. Now I get very high ranking officers approach me and ask my opinion."

While attending in person is always preferable, having virtual access to a meeting is better than not going at all, she says.

Valuable tool

MindTalk is partnering with non-profit events while it fine-tunes the technology, but Schloderer, insists the business potential for the idea is enormous. "The need in the region is quite obvious - - when you go into a conference, you see a room full of men and there's very little women participating," she says, noting that when MindTalk went into the market and asked women if they would like to attend conferences and whether they would be interested in an on-line tool enabling this, the response was staggering. "We had women telling us it's really valuable, it's really needed here," Schloderer says.

The initial research gave MindTalk a large database of mostly Emirati women, a target group which is difficult to access, says Schloderer, and could in itself be very valuable. Using the three Emirati founders' marketing skills and network connections, MindTalk is looking to strengthen this database, and have enough experience working with non-profit organisations, to move into the business market and start making a profit, by 2013.

"We're looking at a mix of target areas," says Schloderer. "We want to cover a broad area of topics for events and target a number of different

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women's groups, including business women, housewives, and students for our database." Geographically the business is far-sighted and Ketait believes the technology could eventually be used to link women from all over the world to what is happening in the U.A.E. "It's a concept that will promote the broad scope of thinking and exchange of ideas which is happening here in the Emirates."

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