Elias Chabtini – Founder & CEO, Medica Group, UAE



If you want to build a startup, you must have skin in the game, not only be a passive investor sitting in an office; you need to be a leader with management skills

28.02.2020

Tags: UAE, Medica Group, Medical Aesthetics, Cosmetics, Plastic Surgery, Medtech, MEA

Medica Group provides medical aesthetics, cosmetics and dermatology, and plastic surgery products and equipment across the Middle East and South East Asia. As a self-made entrepreneur, Elias Chabtini, co-founder and CEO, reflects on the humble origins of the company and its transition to becoming a key player in the region, explains the main dynamics of the market, and reveals the company's expansion strategy in Sub Saharan Africa following the recent partnership announcement with the investment group Gulf Capital.

Medica Group is currently celebrating its 20th birthday, could you explain the market opportunities you identified back in the late 1990s that inspired you to start the company?

Back in 1997, aesthetic procedures were a luxurious business with very little to offer, mainly facelifts, tummy tucks and breast augmentation. I believed that the future was going to be in non-invasive procedures, where clients could receive any needed treatment, without going under the knife. It is a belief that I had after tackling the hair removal business. The first hair removal machine I sold was for USD 250,000 back in 1998. To put it in context, if the client had invested that money in real estate, it could have multiplied hundreds of times. But, at the end of the day, the client got his money back in one year, a great return on investment.

At the time, everything was more expensive in the aesthetic business and people were willing to pay but only the rich were able to afford it. When Botulinum toxin and dermal fillers came out, it was still a taboo subject. We had to grind for seven years before things started to change in a positive direction. We opened the Singapore office in 2002 and our Asian market kicked off almost immediately because people understood the concept of non-invasive procedures in that region; they were ten years ahead of us in that regard. The challenges in the Middle East were big because doctors did not know how to inject. It took Medica a lot of efforts om one-on-one trainings and educational seminars.

Going back to the industry, it is not exclusive to a certain social class anymore and is no longer a taboo subject. Today, people can discuss breast augmentation or hair transplants over lunch or dinner, the subject is wide open. I always say that looking good is not just an option anymore, it is a way of living.

What is your business model and how does it differ from your competitors in the region?

Medica is the only company with a full-fledged 360 offering. Back in 2004, we were chosen to do a medical aesthetic center from A to Z, including management and operations, for the Royal Clinic of Saudi Arabia; we did two of them when nobody in the region knew how to structure the layout and the functionality of a clinic. The business model that we built was based consultancy first, then marketing and education. Providing state of the art technologies was a must, but not the only game-changer in our business style.

This year has marked an inflection point for Medica after the acquisition of 70 percent of the group by the regional investment firm Gulf Capital. What was the rationale behind this partnership?

I founded Medica Group with my partner Tania Akl back in 1999. Today, she chose to follow the family path and not to be tied to any business. The decision was taken to find a partner with the same vision as mine, to institutionalize the business in order to scale it up to the next level. Choosing Gulf Capital depended on two factors: ambition and solid partnership.

Being UAE-based was also important because they understand the market dynamics. We are now putting the spotlight in Asia again and I am loving the challenge. Being able to start this new

journey with experienced people is an advantage. I have made many mistakes learning curve, and today it is good to have more expertise available in the company for better decision making. One of the recent developments that will allow us to move forward in our growth is our recently launched vertical for digital dentistry.

What is Medica Group’s current geographical footprint?

Today we are covering 11 countries in the Middle East and the Gulf and we are moving to Africa soon. The Asia adventure will begin in the second quarter of next year. The company’s Asian main office will remain in Singapore and we are still evaluating all the options to make sure that the markets we choose fit our objectives and ambitions.

The company started in the UAE and Singapore because the countries are similar, they offer easy service, easy access, a safe place to live, and are technologically advanced. Today, being located in Dubai means we are in the middle of a hub that allows us to be well-connected to the region. In addition, the UAE is helping investors, and they are diversifying the economy which helps every single industry.

What makes the Medica Group the partner of choice in the region?

Medica is known to always go the extra mile. We are the only company that has a direct presence in every market we cover and education centres in every country, as well as having the latest reliable technologies. Our clients can send one purchase order to deliver products in 20 centres all over the region and they are delivered the next day, with the same price and only one invoice. Those capabilities are unmatched and are very competitive. A second uniqueness is the exchange back guarantee we offer which allows clients to return equipment if they are not satisfied, within one year, and choose other products. It is impossible for clients to lose since we always had the latest and most reliable technologies.

Looking towards the future, what can the industry expect from Medica in the next three to five years?

We are going to reshape the industry. We already believe that we are three to five years ahead of the region’s industry in terms of size, footprint and market reach. The growth of the company in

terms of revenue is not a strategy, is an achievement. We are working hard, in stages, so that by 2021 everything is in place.

As an entrepreneur, what is your definition of success and what keeps you going?

Success is not about money; it is about self-satisfaction, achievements and perseverance. I am not saying that they are not compatible, because they are, but I went through a lot in my life and consider myself very lucky. Passion and happiness are the only fuel that you need to accomplish anything you want. It is important to remember that I have had my fair share of mistakes. Lessons that have allowed me to grow and better understand myself, my business and the industry. Another crucial part is the investment I make on my own education, going to good schools like Harvard or the London Business School every year to remain updated. It is especially important in this fast-moving world with everchanging dynamics. Investing in the continuous education of the leadership team of Medica is also one of the main drivers of the company’s success.

Can you share with us some of the most important lessons that you have learned when starting a business?

The lesson I would like to share is that there is no better way to be successful in business than to start something from scratch. If you want to build a startup, you must have skin in the game, not only be a passive investor sitting in an office; you need to be a leader with management skills. In order to understand the market and the people, you have to be connected to them; that applies to almost every industry but especially in a business related to life sciences. Whether it was during my time with restaurants or the Medica Group, I was always in touch with the clients, being in the restaurant every single day and night, and the same has happened in Medica. The success comes because you are connected to people and you have boots on the ground. When I go to a client, I take care of him from A to Z and make sure to hear his or her concerns and provide whatever he requires, understanding his objective so I can lead the change with him.

The more direct the relationship, the better. It might sound obvious and simple, yet it is a fundamental aspect that many often overlook. Starting a business is an incredible feeling because you are agile, flexible, act fast and get things done; the larger you become, the more difficult it is to swivel.

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