

# Post in the Lebanon



In a region that has steadily been gathering economic steam since 1998, and where the film-making business – in particular advertising – follows suit, a high-end post house is filling a gap that has surprisingly remained void thus far. VTR Beirut is a joint venture between an established London facility and a leading Lebanese film-maker. Lynn Sauma sets the scene

**F**ilm-makers from around the Middle East no longer have to take their post production work to Europe. They are now able to do it all from Beirut – and at significantly lower cost. This means that not only will they be gaining considerable time but more important they will be saving a good chunk of their film's budget, and possibly even shifting these savings into added quality in the films themselves. As such, even though its role comes at the end of a typical filmic process, VTR Beirut could very well instigate a change in the very conception of films produced in the region.

If anyone is all too familiar with the setbacks of not having a post production facility in the region, it is Youssef Ayoub, the man behind this eight million dollar project. For the past 10 years or so, Mr. Ayoub has acted as the founder and general manager of one of Beirut's leading production companies, Intaj, which mainly produces commercials. Throughout this period he was forced to invest considerable amounts of money, as well time out of the office, to do the telecine and post work in Europe for all the commercials shot on film and produced by his company.

"Today, for a \$100k commercial, you would be paying an average of 30% of the budget on post production, and if you consider that the producer from the production company,

the director of photography, the director and a creative from the advertising agency all travel to Europe for the work, which is generally the case, you get a minimum of \$8000 to \$12,000 of travel and accommodation expenses," he explained. "So, by coming to VTR, you would have your budget cut by 8% to 12% for travel expenses alone.

"What's more, our fees are 40% to 50% lower than in a European post facility, all the while providing our clients with same equipment as in any European high-end post facility," he continued. The lower prices are possible mainly thanks to the lower costs of real estate and manpower, compared to the equivalent costs in Europe. "In other words, a commercial costing \$100,000 with the post done in Europe could have its budget drop to as low as \$75,000 simply by posting it in Beirut."

While this is undeniably a win-win situation for regional clients, VTR Beirut is also stepping in at the right time and the right place. Over the past few years, most local advertising agencies have teamed up with major international agencies, a trend that has served to create a dynamic momentum in the regional advertisement production business. Even though the regional political context marked by the war in Iraq somewhat slowed down the market last year, it has picked up

since and is increasingly gaining ground.

Moreover, the region has also seen a significant upsurge in the production of music videos, and today, more than one television channel exclusively airs pop videos. As for other film formats – documentaries, short films and features – they are becoming increasingly visible on the international film scene: just this August, the London National Film Theatre dedicated an entire month to the best Arab films of the last decade, and every year sees at least one film from the Middle East winning an award at one of the major international festivals.

In parallel, Beirut as the primary choice of location seems fitting. One could initially argue that Lebanon does not offer its investors financial incentives comparable to those of Dubai's Media City. However, on second thought, it seems that VTR Beirut couldn't have opted for anywhere else. Indeed, while advertising agencies are located both in the Gulf and in Lebanon, and the important accounts are mainly in the hands of Gulf-based agencies, Beirut continues to attract the core of the production process. With its variety of locations and its manpower's decades-long experience – unique to the region – production companies most often turn to Lebanon for their shooting.

As the first facility of its kind in the Middle

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## PLANNING THE NEWS

The Newsroom System tender process kicked off in late 2003. ITV oversaw the very comprehensive procurement process (involving 10 potential suppliers). The final decision to purchase Avid as ITV's preferred solution was announced at IBC 2004.

Avid partnered with Telestream, whose MapOne and Flip Factory products provide a solution for the low bit rate bureaux contribution requirement. Avid supplied NewsCutter XP for our desktop editing with NewsCutter Adrenaline for the craft suites, all accessing Unity shared storage at the main site. ControlAir serves as the studio automation, translating iNews running orders into AirSpeed (video playout server) and graphics play lists. In our major bureaux, they supplied LANShares with local shared-access editing and workgroup-to-workgroup file transfer capability. Avid's existing toolset delivers the media management and file transfer functions.

Early in 2004, we selected our new main premises at Whiteley, some 10 miles from the old Meridian site. We made the decision to use conventional office space on a business park — and within one floor of 18,000sqft we have comfortably accommodated three news studios, five edit suites, graphics, library and a large three-service newsroom. Contrast that with the seven acres of the old site. Using regular office space does present some problems, such as accommodating the studio air conditioning and, critically, height for lighting. We chose cold lighting to contain the heat and electrical load, and installed a fixed scaffold rig to give maximum height for the lights.

We found 3,500sqft of suitable space for the new Maidstone operation — letting space for 'The Maidstone Studios' in Kent, and proceeded to fit that out. In there we fitted six desktop NewsCutter and two Adrenaline-powered suites on a LANShare and built a newsroom with the usual amenities. This facility was up and running in October.

We set our timetable — finish construction and technical fit out and commissioning of Whiteley by the beginning of November 2004 for an on-air date of 4 December. November was to serve as our dry-run period, where production staff could turn a project into a working TV station, learn to use the studios and Avid system, and iron out all the bugs.

## SYSTEMS CHOICE

Another tender process kicked off in early 2004 to choose our systems integrator to do the technical fit out. This was tightly contested, and TSL was successful. The timetable was tight for all our suppliers, and the ability to deliver in that timeframe was a key consideration.

We decided to use Multi protocol Label Switching (MPLS) technology for our high bit rate data circuit connectivity from our major bureaux. This technology, supplied by BT, will ultimately serve ITV as a whole, but we brought forward its rollout for delivery at Meridian. This technology provides approximately 45Mb bi-directional IP connectivity to our major bureaux, of which some 20Mb remains for DV25 file transfer. The rest is taken up with normal IP traffic and an MPEG-driven vision circuit (consuming some 8Mb) which we use for live camera feeds.

This was pretty pioneering stuff, as this combination of MPLS and Avid workgroup to workgroup transfer was previously untested. BT and Avid ran laboratory-based tests in Summer 2004 ahead of rollout to confirm its viability.

I directed a small local team to oversee the project rollout. Critical to its success was its composition: as well as technical staff working closely with the technical suppliers, there were senior editorial production staff, who were responsible for managing their teams at the current and future operation. A key part of our planning and preparation was fixing the training schedule and producing the workflow specification.

Defining a new workflow in general terms is a very different matter from specifying the detail users need to be able to edit, handle and transfer material, and operate regimes that work across iNews and the Avid production system. A lot of work and planning went into this, with the editorial team working closely with Avid to produce a 'users handbook' detailing the practices and conventions for all users of the system. This workflow document is now being adopted across our other operations.

The editing training programme started mid-Summer, with a dedicated training set-up established at Meridian comprising a LAN share with 12 attached desktop NewsCutter, replicating the newsroom editing experience at Whiteley. All desktop editing users received a week's formal training on this system. This



Newsroom system, running iNews scripting and NewsCutter XP for journalist desktop editing

was critical to our success — quickly confidence in the system was established and a momentum gathered behind.

TSL and Avid started the pre-build in April, and the builders started their work in May. The technical fit-out on site started in August. By November it was largely job done.

The planning for November was also a logistical challenge — keeping the old operation running whilst cycling all staff through the new studios to establish operational practices and train them to use the new systems. We knew this would be a tough month, and it was, but the planning for it allowed us to make maximum use of the opportunity, and this paid off. This was also a month of furious bug-fixing, but we expected that.

The timetable worked, as Meridian transferred its operation to Whiteley on 4 December. That day was a Saturday, so we could 'soft launch' with short bulletins. The champagne came out for our 18:00 flagship shows two days later; three programmes being transmitted simultaneously from three identical adjacent studios generated some atmosphere!

The Meridian project has represented not just a huge change for Meridian and its staff, but for ITV as a whole. Having successfully established the new Meridian operation on-air, the model is being rolled out rapidly across ITV. We are carrying forward a common design, practices and key supplier choice for all our regional operations.



News studio: "Using regular office space does present problems, including studio air conditioning and height for lighting"

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