

MOBILE

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SINCE JOINING THE COMPANY FIVE SHORT YEARS AGO, DR SAAD AL BARRAK'S LEADERSHIP HAS BROUGHT DYNAMIC AND REFRESHINGLY GLOBAL ADVANCEMENT TO WHAT MIGHT EASILY HAVE REMAINED JUST ANOTHER MOBILE SERVICE PROVIDER. KERRY DIMMER FINDS OUT HOW THE MANAGING DIRECTOR OF THE ZAIN GROUP'S SUCCESS IS INSEPARABLE FROM THAT OF THE COMPANY HE HEADS UP





There is a definite spiritual aura to the recently revamped and rebranded Zain Group. Although the word is derived from Arabic origins – meaning beautiful, good and wonderful – there is also a deeper, more energised, universal

appeal to the name. This will become evident as the Zain Group follows through on its promise to become one of the world's leading mobile operators.

When Saad Al Barrak joined the Zain Group in 2002, his approach was to introduce a 3x3x3 strategy – regional, international and global – that would reach fruition by the end of 2011. Five years into this programme, the Zain Group is officially the leading telecommunications provider in Africa and the Middle East. It has also increased its customer base from 600,000, as a single Kuwaiti operator, to a conglomerate of 21 operations with over 36 million active customers. Under Al Barrak's leadership, it is steadily en-route to meeting its goal of being one of the top 10 global telecommunications players alongside giants like Vodafone, Orange and T-Mobile.

In Africa, Zain is probably better known as Celtel – a brand already synonymous with innovation – a reputation it acquired with the introduction of One Network. Al Barrak explains the significance of this revolutionary product: 'One Network is the world's first borderless mobile phone network spanning six African countries. It completely removes traditional roaming charges so our customers can make calls at local rates and top-up with airtime purchases from any of the countries where One Network is in operation. This product has provoked significant interest from European mobile phone market regulators who want to know how we achieved this. So far, 160 million people have benefited and we intend to expand this even further.'

It is in Africa that the Zain Group will focus its efforts on growth and meeting its target of acquiring more than 70 million global customers within 10 years. According to Al Barrak, 'Africa presents the Zain Group with many opportunities. We have already invested more than US\$10 billion in the past three years. This is one of the largest non-mining investments in Africa and has been used to acquire, expand and improve Celtel's networks. As a result, the Zain Group's customer base has increased from less than five million to more than 24 million in Africa alone.'

These figures are especially impressive as six of the countries where Zain is operational have experienced civil war, unrest or coups in the past decade. 'We are willing to take risks and challenge any situation we encounter. We have an attitude that is best described as "the greater the risk, the greater the opportunity."' says Al Barrak.

He points out that 90% of Zain's staff, including top management, are African and, as such, are intimately familiar with the unique challenges that the continent presents. 'The international business and diplomatic community recognise that there has been improved progress in the areas of governance in Africa and as a result the continent is more attractive to investors than ever. If you couple this with the high price of gold and oil on the global commodities markets, it is obvious that economic liberalisation will follow.'

Al Barrak's own governance at Zain is based on empowering the people with whom he works. 'I employ the best and thus expect the best. I am

direct, simple and blunt. I enjoy people who manage to create balance in their lives yet remain performance-driven.'

There is no room for personal milestones because, as Al Barrak explains, they reflect structure and measurement: 'Life is ultra fluid and volatile. Exceptional opportunities often arise in a split second and it is your own capacity to capitalise on that precious moment that will decide your destiny and fortune. If you stand still for too long, you will miss the chance to be catapulted to elevations you have not dreamt of.'

Al Barrak is a qualified engineer with two degrees and a Harvard alumnus. He is the recipient of the 2005 Middle East CEO of the Year award in the information and communication technology sector and has also received recognition as the E-businessman of the Year. He is highly regarded for his pioneering efforts in the Middle East's telecommunication industry.

He is a somewhat humble man who is a self-confessed humanist believing in diversity of choice and the unity of people to bring about a better society. His personal motto to 'be first, be daring and be different' has been a huge factor in his success. He spends 75% of his time in the air, travelling to and from Zain business activities with little time taken to enjoy his favourite pastime of reading history, politics and management books and poetry.

The rebranding of the Zain Group was Al Barrak's dream, or 'obsession' as he calls it. 'It was one of my main daily management priorities over the past 18 months.' It says a lot about the man that he read numerous books on rebranding in order to educate himself on the principles that needed to be applied. It appears that his personal growth is a never-ending journey that will benefit all within his influence.

With the manifestation of the new name and the creation of a new logo comes the incorporation of three new values for the Zain group – radiance, heart and belonging. Surely these values mirror Al Barrak's own essence and reflect the incredibly positive change in spirit, energy and vision that the Zain group now experiences under his exceptional leadership and visionary guidance. 90