



Interview with GM of Joseph Group: “We want to expand in Africa and Europe”

We speak to G. Mathews, General Manager of Joseph Advertisers, the biggest signage company in the Middle East, to discuss company’s growth, the development of the signage sector at gas stations, and how to improve project management.

Mathews has been working with Dubai-based Joseph Group for 20 years. He is currently the General Manager, Joseph Advertisers, and has led a number of signage projects in the Middle East and around the world.

With how many fuel retailers do you regularly work with?

Joseph Group has been in the signage and branding industry for 42 years. During this time, we have had the opportunity to work with major fuel retailers across Middle East, Africa and India. Our clients include Afroil, InterPetrol and OLA Energy in Africa; Bharat Petroleum, Essar, Mahangar Gas and Reliance in India; Al Maha, Hormuz and Tammuz in Oman; SASCO and Start in Saudi Arabia; and ADNOC, Castrol (BP), Emarat, ENOC and EPPCO in UAE.

Joseph Group is a Dubai-based signage company operating in various industries. When did you start working with petrol stations? What separates the fuel retail sector from other industry you work with?

Our business runs across 12 different industry sectors. The first roll-out we carried out in the petroleum industry was for EPPCO in 1996. Since then, it has become one of the most important sectors, contributing to roughly 60% of our signage business.

The aspect that separates the fuel retail sector aside from the rest is the sheer magnitude of the roll-outs. The variation in the products and services that we can showcase are abundant. Our capabilities scale all the way from structural steel canopies to retail visual identity elements. We have 2 factories exclusively dedicated for the manufacturing of fuel station signages. To facilitate and manage large scale export projects, such as the ongoing OLA Energy re-branding of 1000+ stations across 17 countries in Africa, we have also developed a web-based project management application to carry out roll-outs efficiently.

How has COVID-19 affected your business?

The pandemic has had minimal effect on our operations. We haven't shut down for a single day. Our risk management and mitigation plan really benefited us, enabling us to implement the necessary safety and health precautions, without completely halting our production facilities.

During the first wave, we still had large roll-outs that were ongoing, and deadlines that we had to maintain with clients such as ENOC, Emarat, OLA Energy, Dubai Airports and Dubai Metro. Intensively planned and restricted work shifts were implemented to reduce the active manpower in our facilities, minimizing the risk of infection and still facilitating effective production in short time periods.

Understanding the vast differences in the Middle East region, how do you expect the industry to bounce back from the pandemic across the region?

COVID19 saw different levels of regulations and restrictions being implemented in countries globally, let alone in the Middle East. The manufacturing sector across the region saw varied reactions. For organizations such as Joseph Group, with its 850,000 sq. ft. production facility and 6000+ clients, the capacity to bounce back faster prevailed. What was also important is that our clients were also running operations, even if remotely, giving us the ability to execute our projects.

What changes and trends do you see in the petrol station market in the Middle East right now?

There have been big changes in the sector when it comes to retailing and signage. Manufacturers used to use fluorescent tubes for illumination of signs, now we use LEDs - a more cost effective, durable and safe solution. A lot of acrylic and plastic usage has also been reduced as people now opt for aluminium composite panels for the sign faces of canopies.

Fuel retailers are also keen to be more engaging and interactive with their customers. Dynamic platforms are now considered trendy and attractive. We have been offering our clients numerous digital signage solutions, through our division Joseph Digital Solutions. These solutions can be customized to the brand image and requirements, and provide them with the engagement they are looking for.

In Dubai, digital signages are getting very popular. For clients like ENOC and Emarat, we now supply and install custom LED screens as digital signage elements for their petrol stations and convenience stores. We install these either in the forecourt, on the columns of the canopy, or outside and inside the stores. This solution is an added revenue stream for fuel stations, as they can either use the digital screens to advertise their own promotions or rent out the space to other brands for marketing.

Another new concept is "themed stations", similar to those developed by ADNOC in UAE. Having a different image to the regular corporate look, these stations are located on the highways near the border connecting various Emirates, and are customized to create an engaging atmosphere for visitors.

Does working with these innovative players in the UAE give you an advantage when

looking at doing business in other areas of the world?

Working with brands like ADNOC, ENOC and Emarat in U.A.E. certainly helps us to expand our clientele. We partner with them for their signage and branding requirements on a regular basis, and our workmanship and the quality of our finishes are highlighted in the roll-outs we execute. These roll-outs truly help showcase our capabilities to new potential clients.

Digital signage as a concept is also relatively new to the petroleum retail industry. The extent of marketing techniques possible with using digital signage solutions are somewhat ahead in the UAE, when compared to what you see in Africa and Europe.

More specifically, what products and services are customers currently demanding more?

Attractive LED illuminated 3D signs and innovative digital signs are the products that clients are presently more inclined towards. In reference to services, clients are interested in more custom solutions and material specifications.

Our strength lies in providing clients with a variety of material options and finishes, as we have an in-house powder coating and painting plant. We also have our own division, Proto 21, which provides the 3D printing & prototyping of mock-ups of signs and various profiles. These 3D printed mock-ups make it easier for our clients to understand the functionality of their signage requirements, prior to mass production.

In general, clients expect highly visible, appealing, unique, and quality signage solutions in short turnaround periods with dedicated service.

As the largest signage manufacturer in the Middle East, what do you identify as the most promising markets?

As signage manufacturers and suppliers, we have covered majority of MENA, and have recently entered into more markets across Africa through our contracts with OLA Energy, Afroil and InterPetro. While we view Africa as the most promising market and the one showing rapid growth, we have also taken steps towards entering the European market, as we believe that it too has great potential.

We are approved and certified signage vendors for Groups such as MOL, BP and Shell, and are currently in talks with Total and others to partner with them and participate in signage tenders for the African and European region. To support our operation in Europe, we have also tied up with local installation partners across UK, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and East European regions across Serbia, Bosnia, Romania and Bulgaria.

The rebranding of Oilibya to OLA Energy is one of your biggest operations. It includes 1,100 stations across 17 countries in Africa. Can you talk us through the challenges of such a large operation?

We have a global contract with Oilibya for the rebranding of their stations from their current Oilibya

branding to OLA Energy. We've completed just over 640 stations. To rebrand 1,100 sites, you need a very strong projects and production management team. We take great pride in the fact that for our on-going OLA Energy roll-out, we fabricate and ship out all signage elements required for 50 entire stations in just one month. We are committed to finishing the project ahead of schedule.

To manage the project across 17 countries, we have developed our own web-based project management application - PSGAR (Production Sizes, Graphics, and Artwork Request). For example, if you are based in Kenya, you will be able to track every aspect of the roll-out, be it site measurements, artworks, invoices, shipment, and even installation. The app has an interactive online platform where one can choose the elements needed for a station such as canopies, pylons, spreaders, entry & exit signs, facilities & utility signs, c-store signs, etc., and customize them to the required measurements and shapes. Once your selection is made online, the artworks are created and submitted to the affiliates for approvals, upon receipt of which, the production is carried out and the estimated time of completion is advised. Dates of shipments are also advised to the respective affiliates. Every single part of the operations is registered, and at any given point you will have real-time access to the required data, including being able to trace the history of the roll-out.