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Mobile mogul

Alan Gow has helped turn Virgin Mobile into one of the world's most recognised and respected brands – now he's setting his sights on the Middle East and Africa.

WORDS **HOLLY JOHNSON** • IMAGES **VIRGIN MOBILE MEA**

Having co-founded the original Virgin Mobile alongside Sir Richard Branson in the UK, Alan Gow is more than familiar with the mobile telecommunications landscape. With more than 20 years of experience as a senior leader within the industry, he helped design Virgin's economic model as a mobile virtual network operator (MVNO) in 1999. "Our business model has been copied in every country around the globe, with approximately 200 million MVNO customers worldwide," says Alan. "We created an industry and helped it evolve, while remaining in the number one position."

In just four years, Alan helped turn the start-up into a US\$1 billion company before assisting in the creation of the UK-based Virgin Media Group, a world leader in integrated communication technologies. "Our expertise stretches across 14 countries, making us agile and able to respond to changes in the market. The Virgin brand opens doors in countries that are often difficult to penetrate. We go to places other telcos can't."

Embarking on his next journey with the brand, Alan was appointed CEO of Virgin Mobile Middle East and Africa (VMMEA) in early 2017. Based at the regional headquarters in Dubai, VMMEA was formed in 2006 and is the only mobile provider in the region, with five live operations and millions of active customers. "The business is already successful, but it's what we do next that really matters," says Alan. Having advised on Virgin's Latin American rollout and its expansion in Central and Eastern Europe, Alan is more than qualified to lead the VMMEA team. "We saw an opportunity in the Middle East and Africa to take the business to the next level – possibly an IPO – in the near future. I advised on the IPO in the UK and US, and I believe we can achieve that here." »



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While Virgin’s FRiENDi mobile brand targets the large and successful expat migrant worker segment, Virgin Mobile focuses on wealthy expats and the indigenous population. “Most of our customers here are with FRiENDi, as we’ve only just begun to push the Virgin Mobile brand. Having been with the company since its founding, I’m seen as someone who can drive change,” says Alan. “It’s always an adventure to come to a new region and roll out the Virgin brand. As the rest of the world is retracting – notwithstanding oil price impacts – people in MEA are trying to move forward, and we want to be part of that.”

Virgin Mobile aims to launch into 10 new markets over the next five years. “There is massive growth potential in our existing businesses, as well as new opportunities for expanding throughout MEA. We currently have successful operations in Oman, with a 10 per cent market share – possibly the highest of an MVNO anywhere in the world. We built our Saudi Arabia customer base from zero to 2.7 million customers in just a few years, and this is likely the fastest growth anyone has seen in an MVNO for a long time. We have developed promising plans for South Africa, an older Virgin Mobile business, which has huge untapped potential,” says Alan. “We are in discussion with Egypt and the untapped countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council – Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar – to expand our operations.

“Our most important partnership is with our host operator, and it’s only entered into if there is mutual benefit for both parties. Our success is due in large part to the strong

relationships we build with our wholesale suppliers, and nowhere is that more evident than with our partnership with STC in Saudi Arabia.” Alan also stresses the importance of technological partners in innovation and delivering customer service. “We work exclusively with Simsoft in our intelligent network and customer billing platform,” he says. “If these partner services fail, our customers can’t make calls or manage their data, so it’s essential to maintain these strong bonds.”

Alan says that digitisation is the flavour of the decade. “In terms of expanding our product offering, we are moving towards a digitised hybrid product – neither pre-pay nor post-pay – and away from our traditional MVNO style. The pay-as-you-go hybrid offers the economics and simplicity of pre-pay, but will attract post-pay customers as well,” Alan explains.

“We have also recently launched a start-to-finish digital sales and distribution process in the UAE. The customer can discover us online, download the app, have the SIM delivered directly to them, and that’s it – they’re live. They can choose their own number, manage their plan, and select their payment process. We give customers the power, while still backing this up with a human interface. Our investments in data analytics help us to understand user behaviour, expectations and requirements, so we can deliver an unbeatable customer experience.” ■

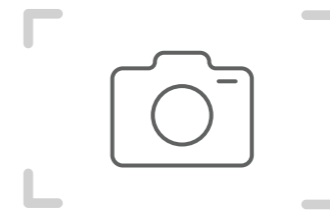
“What makes Virgin Mobile special is its genuine passion about member experiences; taking risks, surprising crowds and going the extra mile in outstanding digital engagement. That makes it a unique partner for us, one that goes beyond excellence and breaks all conventional boundaries.”
– Mohamad Khawaja, CEO, Startappz

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