

Bombs, Bullets and Government Seizure

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My Turn

By Nancy Fletcher

Story tellers have power to influence and inspire (a point highlighted at our national convention in New Orleans). Today, I am honored to share the story of Antonio Vincenti, who operates an OOH media company based in Lebanon called [Pikasso](#).

Antonio is the former chairman of FEPE, the international OOH organization which convenes in Stockholm this week (OAAA Chairman Sean Reilly and I will speak there).

By sharing his story, Antonio gives us perspective. We all have problems, but Antonio has faced war and government seizure. The government bulldozed more than 3,000 of his billboards.

In a sense, we all are builders. We build sales, relationships, teams, and growth.

Antonio is a re-builder.

His story – from halfway around the world – reminds us of key fundamentals:

1. The power of persistence
2. The importance of constitutional protections in the US Bill of Rights, particularly the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech and the Fifth Amendment's safeguard of property rights

Thank you Antonio, for your gift to your colleagues in the US industry: **perspective.**

Antonio Vincenti overcame them all. His boards are up... and with a powerful message: #LifeBacktoNormal

By Antonio Vincenti

Based in Beirut, I operate in eight countries. [Click here](#) for a slideshow of my inventory (billboards, malls, and shelters).

I am not trapped in the past, but at times it is important to remember how we got here. In that spirit, I share with you three challenges I have faced, starting with government seizure.



The Challenge of Bans

In August 1995, the government of Lebanon decided to remove all billboards from the streets of the country. In just one week, our 3,300 billboards were destroyed by bulldozers (one-third of the country's total of 10,000 billboards).

On the brink of bankruptcy, we laid off 70 of our 87 employees. It took a full year of lobbying state authorities to secure a new regulation allowing us to resume our work.

This event was a defining moment in my life.

- Government seizure highlighted the importance of our reputation and commitment to community by helping citizens' groups. Our solid reputation generated sympathy and support throughout this tough period, which made many politicians uneasy. This dynamic helped pave the way to new regulations.
- I decided I could no longer be reliant on a single market and be exposed to such an extreme risk again.
- Government seizure strengthened my character. It made me determined to question administrative decisions, and to fight the unfair ones.

Those bulldozers reinforced my determination to rebuild the business – with my 17 colleagues – even stronger than it was before. We would become the leading OOH company in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, and recently expanded into West Africa.

Today, we are a team of 450 professionals in eight markets with a total of 13,000 faces and 166 digital screens.



Wall in Iraq

The Challenge of Wars

My destiny is to operate in countries affected by war, revolution, or threat of terrorism. This is the case in all eight countries where our group is present.

War creates destruction and suffering. Civil war is even worse, with chaos, betrayals, and widespread devastation.

Yet, for those who dare to work under such conditions, war also creates opportunities. Economies are volatile during times of war; with big risks come big rewards. Economic growth is at its fastest during the early stages of conflict, before a typically lengthy period of stagnation and contraction. This is followed by recovery when there is a consensus that war will soon end.

A main challenge to be overcome is in shaping a network of multifaceted teams with a shared familial, sectarian, and geographical association. The value of alignment, sense of ownership, dedication, and perseverance within a team working together in time of war is second to none. Once this is secured, the market needs to be addressed in the same way as if "life is as usual."



By that, I mean with optimism, assurance, and above all to delivering on commitments. At these times, trust is paramount.

These are the underlying reasons for creating our hashtag #LifeBackToNormal as a tribute to the suffering of Iraq's second city, Mosul, and to celebrate a return to normal life.

The Challenge of Aiming to be Part of the Best in Class

How do you build a world-class OOH company in countries where the size of advertising budgets is limited, you are governed by economic uncertainties that prevent even five-year plans, and clients expect the best service and the latest technical innovations?

There is only one answer: You must have total commitment and a long-term view.

- We offer our team a stable lifetime career.
- We abide by laws and regulations, aspiring to be a model landlord.
- We assure advertisers and media agencies that – no matter what – campaigns go out on time. For example, our LED signs have alternative power supplies.
- We continue to invest in materials from the best suppliers so we stand out from the competition and became the OOH market's point of reference.

Such a vision takes decades to implement; overcoming government seizure and war instills persistence with a long view.