

Abu Dhabi Week sits down with Twofour Arabia's general manager and executive producer Jonney Steven to find out more about the company's first television project and its plans for expansion in the UAE



Can you tell us a little bit about what Twofour do?

Twofour Arabia is a part of the British media group Twofour. We work with brands, government and corporate clients to help them tell their story in an interesting, innovative, engaging way and we produce television programmes for many broadcasters – the BBC, Channel 4, Sky and ITV to name a few. Here in the UAE, we are bringing in the best international experts in our field to work alongside budding local talent, working towards the 2030 vision which sees an expanded media sector as a key contributor to Abu Dhabi's success.

You were a key member of the team that started Twofour Arabia. Why did the company decide to expand to Abu Dhabi?

Seeing great potential in the MENA region and wanting to bring Twofour's award-winning services to the Middle East, Twofour's Global CEO Charles Wace chose Abu Dhabi as an ideal regional hub. When we started exploring Abu Dhabi, we came across the coincidentally named Twofour54, the government entity that is charged with developing the media sector in the Emirate and thought that it would be the perfect home for our new subsidiary. We opened as a

freezone company within their Khalifa Park campus in 2010, where we can take advantage of their state-of-the-art media facilities.

You aired your first show *In the Footsteps of Thesiger* on 1st April. Why did you choose this for Twofour Arabia's maiden television project?

We chose *In The Footsteps of Thesiger* as our first broadcast project because we felt that it held enormous significance for Abu Dhabi. Wilfred Thesiger, or Mubarak Bin London as he was affectionately known locally, is famous for his books and photography that pre-date the founding of the UAE. We thought that in the 40th anniversary year of this great union, it was the perfect time to recreate Thesiger's most famous expedition and a great tool to take a look at just how much the UAE has changed over the past 40 years. With Thesiger being British, but working closely with Emiratis to achieve his goals, we also thought it resonated with our own ambitions for Twofour Arabia.



As executive producer on the show, what were your responsibilities?

I was involved in the whole process, from the initial seed of an idea, right through to broadcast. I worked with our development creatives to get the format into shape and the programme commissioned in the first place.

I was then involved in choosing the team who would be on the ground filming it (we were very lucky to secure Alexis Girardet, the award winning expedition and adventure director who had just finished our BBC series [Prince] Harry's Arctic Heroes), I helped recce the route, which was good fun and I was then responsible for liaising with the channel when it came to post production and approval.

What was it like working with the international explorer Adrian Hayes?

Adrian is so full of energy that at times it's hard to keep up with him! Seriously though, it was his drive, passion and enthusiasm for this project that made it happen - through tricky negotiations getting permissions, to capturing to his great character on camera. We're working with him on some new ideas too, so watch this space!

What's next for Twofour Arabia - do you have anything in development?

In terms of broadcast TV, we have lots in development at the moment, but I can't give too much detail at this stage. After such a great reaction to Footsteps of Thesiger, we're in talks with Abu Dhabi Media about further series, both original formats and Arabised versions of some of our proven award-winning formats from the UK.

In the non-broadcast side of our work, we have a major UAE government project that we're hoping will launch soon, which will help to get across to the public the valuable work that is being done every day for the benefit of the whole country. We've also just started our internship scheme, where we've taken on UAE Nationals to work with our experienced development team in creating lots of new ideas and formats for regional television.

If you had free reign to produce any documentary for Twofour Arabia what would it be?

I think there are so many exciting stories to be told in the UAE that it would be too difficult to pick just one. I think that a truly aspirational series about the great career paths for Emirati's could showcase the amazing journey that young people here can embark on could be very interesting, but there are also countless stories waiting to be told looking backwards, at how the UAE has evolved at an incredible pace.

What's the most satisfying thing about your job?

It's got to be telling stories in an engaging and exciting way, whether that's telling the fascinating story of Wilfred Thesiger to a TV audience, or telling the incredible story of what some of Abu Dhabi's top brands and corporations have achieved in a relatively short time frame to their stakeholders.

What's the ultimate goal for Twofour Arabia?

We would like to grow our Abu Dhabi based business to a similar size as our London business, where we have over 20 brand new television series in production and a large team producing multiplatform content. We see the Emiratisation of our business here as crucial too, so we would hope that our mix of international experts and budding young local talent can continue, with our young Emirati team members rising to senior positions.

Jon Muller