



# Insight & Strategy: BMW iJACK /

## BMW

How a car brand hijacked charging station search results on Google Maps to raise awareness of its electric offering in the UAE

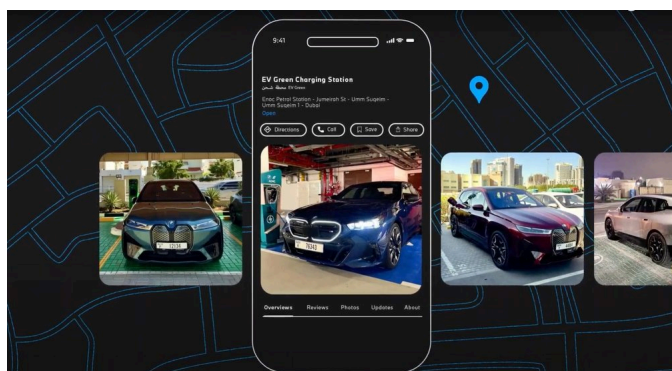
22 MAY 2024

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDhpKlwyt1c>

In March 2024, Contagious covered a campaign from **BMW** in the UAE, which saw the car manufacturer turn generic charging station locations on Google Maps into branded interaction points in the consumer purchase journey for EVs.

Created by agency **Service Plan Middle East**, UAE, the campaign centred around the behavioural insight that the first point in every purchase journey for a potential EV customer in the UAE is to look up their nearest charging stations. By bombarding each location on Google Maps with images of its BMW electric cars being charged up, the brand was able to hijack a consistent point in every new purchaser's journey and maximise exposure.

BMW photographed its EVs at over 300 charging stations across the UAE and uploaded images to the Google reviews for each charging point's location on Google Maps. While most of the images looked as though anyone could have photographed them, at some locations the brand's involvement was more obvious as images featured QR codes and links which directed people to the BMW website to request a test drive. At some locations the brand also uploaded 360-degree views of the cars' interiors.



**Results /** The images received **2 million** organic views on Google Maps, leading to a **400%** increase in test drives, where **two out of five** new bookings could be traced back to Google Maps. The campaign achieved **\$2.2m** in earned media, including coverage from the region's largest motoring channel, Arab GT, which has 3.7 million social media followers.

At Dubai Lynx 2024, iJack was awarded Gold in three categories: Media, Creative Strategy and Digital. It also received Bronze for Direct, Creative Commerce and Brand Experience and Activation.

To find out more about the strategy behind the campaign, Contagious spoke to **Ali Kheralla**, regional head of marketing and brand at BMW Group Middle East, and **Karim Mroueh**, head of digital and innovation at Serviceplan Middle East. They told us that:

- Awareness of EVs and the trigger for purchase is varied across the Middle East. In the UAE many people may be surprised to hear that BMW offers electric cars
- Because BMW has a power of choice strategy, it offers electric models for all of its cars. It means at a glance people may not immediately notice which of its cars are electric
- The brand needed to grow the association between BMW and electric cars and it saw hijacking charging station locations on Google Maps as the perfect way to achieve hyper-targeted impressions
- Because images were taken using smartphones and employees' cars the simplicity of the stunt made it authentic and ensured all media was earned from a \$0 budget

## We offer electric cars in all our 12 markets. We actually have eight models. A lot of people don't know that and we offer all of them in the region

Ali Kheralla, BMW Group, Middle East

### Give us an overview of BMW's presence in the UAE and the Middle East.

**Ali Kheralla:** We've been present in the region [for] over 30 years. We just celebrated 30 years in the Middle East as BMW Group last year. We take care of GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council], Levant and Pakistan. The Middle East is considered an extremely important market for the group globally because we've been growing almost constantly for 30 years, which is usually unheard of. Here we don't sell a lot of small cars like the 1 series, 2 series or 3 series, we are more the luxury class car segments. So very healthy contribution margins. We are represented in the region, not only as BMW, it's BMW Mini and Rolls Royce, the group owns all these three brands and [motorcycle brand] BMW Motorrad as well in the region.

### How different is BMW's reputation in the region for its EVs compared to its traditional petrol/diesel powered cars?

**Kheralla:** The presence of BMW electric vehicles differs from market to market. For instance we are very strong in Jordan and Pakistan where there's a lot of regulatory support from the government for electric cars. You don't pay taxes, don't pay customs. So the majority of our sales there are already electric. When it comes to GCC, where petrol is quite affordable, there's not really any incentive to buy electric cars. It's a bit more challenging. Dubai, for instance, is a very healthy market for us. But for the rest of the GCC we're not there yet. We're having very strong growth for electric cars in the GCC, we are working quite closely with the government here to work on incentives, and work on infrastructure. It's very important.

Electric cars are important, but we still have this approach of the power of choice. We still offer focus on BEV [battery electric vehicle] plus PHEV [plug-in hybrid electric vehicle] and ICE [internal combustion engine]. We're not saying, out of the blue, we're going to stop developing any other sort of engine technology, including hydrogen, we just concluded a big hydrogen roadshow here in the region. But we offer electric cars in all our 12 markets. We actually have eight models. A lot of people don't know that and we offer all of them in the region. Whatever you desire. We offer it in electric because we have the power of choice strategy.

### Who is the brand's target audience in the region? What is the current appetite for EVs in the UAE and the Middle East?

**Kheralla:** As BMW group we target quite a wide range of customers. We have a lot of offerings. But, we do tend to focus on the luxury segment because that's where the majority of our sales come from. High net worth individuals, influential people like royalty, government officials, because they have a spillover effect on our premium customers.

For electric, specifically, to take Dubai as an example, usually we find that electric cars are not the first car in the household. [They are] car number two or three or four. In some cases, we have car number 14 in the region. It's customers who, the majority of the time, are already our customers but they are fascinated or attracted by the concept of newness. Something different. I wouldn't say particularly it's related to sustainability, just simply [that] it's the newest gadget on the block and they want to give it a try.

### Does that mean that sustainability is less of a focus for BMW EV campaigns in the Middle East?

**Kheralla:** It doesn't mean that they don't care about sustainability, but I don't think this is the trigger to purchase. If we do a survey today and we ask everybody 'why did you buy an electric car?' I guarantee the number one reason will be sustainability. But I think there's a huge difference in what people say and how they act when it comes to purchasing something.

In Jordan, and Pakistan, yes, it plays a role. Petrol is very expensive, so there's economic savings and then there's sustainability and the whole 'feel good about myself for driving an electric car'. When it comes to GCC. I think the market cares. Governments here are putting in huge efforts and [developing] mega projects related to sustainability. For instance, the BMW aluminium is sourced from here, because it's one of the most sustainable aluminium in the world. It's completely produced by solar power. People have [sustainability] in the back of their mind but it still hasn't bubbled up to reason number one.

► <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WkCzGvDLHck>

## The first question [customers] ask us is always 'Where can I charge this car?', 'How often?' 'For how long?' So this was the biggest detractor for electric car sales

## Who are the brand's key competitors in the Middle East?

**Kheralla:** Since we have started the launch of our electric car campaign, including iJACK, we have had triple digit growth. In comparison to the competitors, unfortunately, I cannot tell you. There's zero transparency in the Middle East on car sales. So we don't know. There's no regulator or an organisation that announces the number of cars sold. Usually we do it through research through the agency or look at the cars in the street and decide what's happening. But, from our internal numbers, things are going extremely well.

## What are BMW's key business challenges in relation to EV sales in the region?

**Kheralla:** There's an external challenge and an internal one. The number one internal challenge would be awareness of our electric cars. I think if you ask an average person in all of our markets, except Jordan and Pakistan, they would not even recognise that we have an electric car. Our electric vehicle sales are very small in comparison to the rest, which usually means you have a lower budget allocated to the topic because it's input-output. The second, this is external, is charging infrastructure. The first question [customers] ask us is always 'Where can I charge this car?', 'How often?' 'For how long?' So this was the biggest detractor for electric car sales.

## How rare is it for people to have charging stations at their homes in the UAE. How much did that motivate this campaign?

**Kheralla:** In the GCC, if you buy an electric car from us, and you have a villa, we offer the wall charging box for free with the car. But the problem is, obviously, if you live in a building, it's quite challenging because you can't just have a slot where you can install a charging wall box. In the UAE, we're working with the Ministry of Energy to install charging stations in collaboration with them.

We have two strategies here. It's destination chargers, which is typical BMW wall box with 11 kilowatt AC charger, but we're also working with them in installing BMW branded DC chargers for federal roads, malls, so we're trying to mitigate the whole charging topic to the customers as fast as we can. But, one brand cannot take that full responsibility and we need to work very closely with the government.



## Was there a brief for this campaign?

**Karim Mroueh:** It was just a discussion. We had a couple of discussions, a couple of checkpoints [around] creating that big buzz about BMW's EV offering and BMWi as a brand. That set an objective for all of us to make BMWi the focus of the agency whenever we're thinking about ideas that are out of the box. But, to answer your point, was there a specific brief? No.

**Kheralla:** We don't see Serviceplan like a creative agency for us. It's more of an extension to the team. We discuss all our pain points, challenges openly with the management team and the leadership there so they know our business inside out. Sometimes it's day to day, business as usual, and sometimes we need to be a bit more creative in how to answer some of those challenges, where we always provide them with the freedom to do so.

## What was the core insight behind iJack? How did you land on the strategy for this campaign?

**Mroueh:** It was more of a behavioural insight. So back in 2021 When we first explored BMWi we conducted a couple of behavioural insights, in depth, research about EV adoption and how people actually moved from internal combustion engines all the way to fully electric cars. We saw that the main concerns were the charging infrastructure, range anxiety and awareness was one of the issues.

Part of the behaviour of people who move to electric was first to go and check if there are actually enough charging stations around them. The first thing that they do is Google. How Google answers back is first with locations, then with articles and blogs. So when we first checked EV charging next to us we saw that there were a lot of charging stations around us that are unbranded, with no pictures. That sparked an opportunity for us to go and test that out.

First we tested it out with the car of the MD of BMW. We took the car to a nearby charging station. It's still the picture that got us the most views and that was the test of the exercise. We created a simple deck of two or three slides and we jumped on a call with the team. It's all about the freedom and the flexibility that the brand gives the agency to explore that.

### **To what extent was this about creating exaggerated social proof around the popularity of the BMWi brand?**

**Kheralla:** I don't think it was about popularity. What caught my attention when the team presented the idea was 'this is perfect, because everybody knows BMW, but nobody's connecting BMW to electric cars.' If you see a BMW at an electric charging station, the first thing you think is 'ah, I didn't even know that they have an electric car'. And this was just what I hoped the outcome would be out of this. Because of our power of choice strategy, our five series ICE looks exactly the same as an i5 electric. This is another challenge we had. We needed to put it in an environment that [shows] it's clearly an electric car, although it looks like the ICE car.

I never even thought about [social proof]. This is a nice domino effect. I never even thought about it that when people go to a gas station they see a lot of BMWi drivers. The most important objective for me was 'ah BMW has electric cars' to start with and then we can go into the popularity part.

## **The beauty of this was the simplicity of it. It was very spontaneous**

Karim Mroueh, Serviceplan Middle East

### **Consumer purchase journeys are widely considered not to be linear, how difficult is it to find consistent moments where you can guarantee brand exposure?**

**Mroueh:** It was challenging. On the journey, we as Serviceplan and BMW agreed a couple of years back that it was never linear. It was linear in the first days of the internet, because it was the only source of purchase but now with a lot of variables and factors that are influencing a purchase decision, like our colleagues at Google likes to say, it's a messy middle where you go into hundreds of loops to go back to make a purchase.

The first thing when we presented this was to hijack or to place the car at all the locations. There was nothing about primary locations or secondary locations. It was a full takeover. We even considered going beyond the market that we are in now. That is something that we will be potentially exploring as well.

**Kheralla:** It's not like we have thousands of [stations] here, the market is still not there. Another very important point here is that unlike mature markets like Europe, US, China, where there's a lot of suppliers where all the cars themselves can tell you where the charging stations are, unfortunately, this is not available here because there's not one regulatory arm that regulates charging stations.

The only way to find a charging station is to go to Google Maps. There was no other choice. Tesla for instance, will only tell you where the Tesla chargers are, but not the rest. We thought Google was a pivotal opportunity for us to hijack.

### **It was reported that all of the pictures were taken with just three cars and a smartphone. Why did you take this approach?**

**Kheralla:** It was the challenge that we had no electric cars [to use]. We were using employees' cars. I still remember the biggest challenge Karim had. He was calling me [saying], 'Okay, we've used the MD's car for 20, 30, 40 stations'. We have eight cars and we need to show the variety. The problem was we didn't have them.

We had logistics issues around the cars coming, with litigation, regulatory issues, so it was quite a turmoil time for BEV for us. So whatever we had to hand, a press car, media car, the MD's car, the MD's wife's car, whatever we had, we just took them. The cars we got were not the most beautiful model, or the most beautiful car, we just got whatever we had. There was zero budget to use a professional camera or anything like that. It was Karim's team doing it themselves. They were like our social media team, just taking the car and with whatever phone they were using, just snapping a picture.

**Mroueh:** The beauty of this was the simplicity of it. It was very spontaneous. Some of the issues were things that even if you wanted to sit down and dissect this brief and try to put down all the scenarios you wouldn't even think of. For example, the driver that was just driving to the charging stations had to wait for another car to finish in busy areas and busy parking spots. You have to wait, and then you have to finish all these in a period of time. That's why it took us enough time to go and cover all the locations.

From logistic efforts, it took us some quite stressful moments that we had to navigate through to actually finish this. But I think the simplicity of it was the most rewarding aspect. When we created the case, the simplicity of the case wasn't forced. It wasn't exaggerated. It was very streamlined in terms of an idea to execution. But in between, there were a lot of logistical issues that we had to navigate through.

**Kheralla:** I hate ideas for the sake of ideas, just to submit to win awards. But this is one of those ideas that actually had an impact on our business and it worked. Having the awards was a beautiful cherry on the top. But this was never the objective. We didn't even think about that. And the team knows this very well. As BMW the group, it's not an objective for us. But when the idea was presented we had a challenge, it was answered quickly, in a very cost efficient way and this is why we went for it.



**Mroueh:** A lot of people were doubting that we were able to do it. If you go to all the pictures now on Google Maps, they're all uploaded under my name, so that's also another thing about the simplicity and authenticity. We didn't over stretch this campaign. It was just a couple of people working in synergy with each other, helping each other to actually find solutions and then that's how we ended up doing it.



**The nice fact was seeing Google Maps as part of the attribution to traffic. That's something that was a first for the dealer, to see Google Maps contributing to website traffic**

Karim Mroueh, Serviceplan Middle East

**Could you tell us about the idea behind the QR codes? Was this again about disrupting the purchase journey and finding ways to direct people into further exploring BMW as an option?**

**Mroueh:** When we first launched this, we didn't actually get the results right after. After some time the images got 100,000 views, 200,000, 300,000, 400,000, 500,000. Then we went and talked with BMW. We thought of an angle to try to push conversion. It wasn't only the QR codes. The QR codes were actually something that were placed in a couple of locations as a follow up to the campaign. But there were also descriptions and links under the images. We tried as much as we could to cover the lower funnel of the campaign, and that was just a normal reaction to how much awareness was playing in our favour. We thought of playing around the same aspect of hijacking Google Maps by placing pictures with direct links to test drives and also description and links to test drives under the images as well.

**Kheralla:** The beauty of this was not only the hijack of Google Maps. If there was a customer with a Porsche, a Tesla or whatever electric car they were charging, the car was next to them. They saw there was a BMW there and there was a QR code. With BEV customers, they're usually more curious and they're more passionate about the whole EV world. So, when they see something they're more intrigued. This also worked in our favour right there and then. Even the team was telling me sometimes that when they were shooting people were asking 'oh, what is this?' 'I didn't know BMW had this!' Charging stations aren't empty. There's always somebody charging. Those are directly our target audience to convert or at least make them consider us or know that we have an offering for them.

**Were the additions of QR codes and links something that drove much traffic to BMW?**

**Kheralla:** This was never the main objective. The main objective was visibility and the idea that we have electric cars. But since we saw that there was a momentum [we thought] maybe we should add something to try to convert. But, it was never a KPI or a target to see how many cars we sold from this. Our hope was that eventually this will happen and this will have a spillover effect. But priority number one was brand awareness for electric, and then anything that comes after it was a nice add-on.

**Mroueh:** The nice fact was seeing Google Maps as part of the attribution to traffic. That's something that was a first for the dealer, to see Google Maps contributing to website traffic. It was something interesting to look at because obviously, while it was never there, we wouldn't see Google Maps as a source of traffic. So when this happened, I think that was the most rewarding bit, for the QR codes, and also for the links that were embedded there.

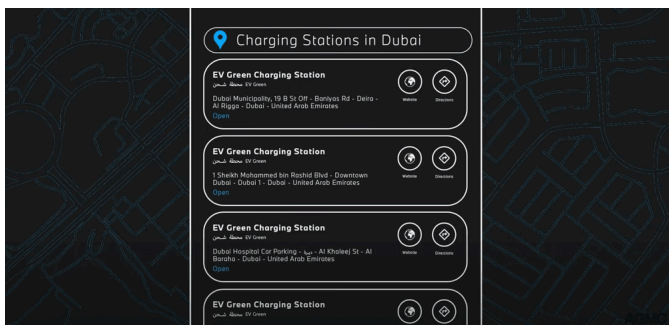
**Tell us about the media plan in place and the earned media iJACK gained. Was earned media a big target for this campaign?**

**Kheralla:** I remember I had a discussion with Karim about this. I still remember I was in my car going home from the office, and we're discussing [that] everybody's seen it, but now we need a bit of a movement and we need somebody to pick it up and push this beyond the ecosystem of Google Maps and who's using it. I would say this was a target, maybe we didn't know how we would achieve it, there was no clear route, but it was something we wanted to do. The biggest thing was obviously Arab GT, which I think is the biggest Arabic speaking automotive content on the planet. It's a huge channel.

**Mroueh:** The beauty of the PR spill out of this was that even people not from the region [picked it up]. The pinnacle was Arab GT that gave us a lot of PR and a lot of talkability. But when we measure the effect of this we're talking about \$0 media spend, and we get, from Google Maps itself, as we speak now, it's 1,308,000 [views]. 1,308,000 targeted towards people who are interested in charging stations.

With Arab GT being the biggest player in the region in terms of automotive blogging, and also the other international bloggers that picked up on this, we can say that we easily reached more than 2 to 3 million impressions in terms of earned media, without actually spending \$1. If you want to compare this and convert it, it's actually a laser targeted impression, a quality impression for someone who's actually interested in EVs, which is the main challenge for any media agency.

We're still gathering a lot of results from an impressions standpoint. The beauty of this is it's like wine. It actually increases in impressions the more you keep going and the more you store it. And that's the beauty of it. The more [time] the pictures are there, the more we're receiving notifications about an increase in impressions, unlike a typical campaign that you do that goes in the drawer after one month or two months. We finished six or seven months ago and still we're getting an increase in impressions, an increase in views and viewability which also is dialling back positively on the BMW business for awareness. It's all linked together. So obviously it also affects conversion and consideration.



**What has been your greatest learning from this campaign?**

**Kheralla:** I think most of the time, less is more. The simpler you go the better for authenticity. A very important topic for this specific activation was timing. Because this was also chosen from BMW Group internally as a best practice globally with two markets to do it. One in Asia and one in Europe. The one in Europe was not as effective because Google Maps for charging stations was already quite developed and advanced and matured. They couldn't get the photos to appear. So I think we were lucky when the agency found out about this opportunity on Google Maps and we jumped on it immediately. I can see now other brands are already trying to do that, even here. I'm not going to name them but they're trying to put images as well. But I think timing was the essence for us. So this is the biggest learning, to jump on it immediately when we saw this opportunity. We didn't overthink it.

**Mroueh:** I think simplicity and authenticity. There is something that I'm a strong believer in which is the art of unlocking the not so obvious. That's what we've been following, or I personally have been following with a couple of the leadership at Serviceplan, in terms of out of the box ideas. In a way, to reduce focus on big budget ideas and to focus more on how we can actually use platforms and media channels in a not so obvious way which will create that ripple effect that we saw. Because it was not so obvious, but when we actually did it, it was so obvious which created that effect.

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