

## Site exports local goods

By Thomas Schellen

The latest locally designed online shopping site, BuyLebanese.com, is as much a business as it is an attitude.

Karim Saikali, who created the site together with partner Nasri Messarra of web-development firm Kleudge, wants to improve Lebanon's image abroad and give local businesses an edge in exports.

"All my projects have the word 'Lebanon' in them," Saikali said. "My aim is to show that there is a lot of potential in this country."

BuyLebanese.com has been operational a mere week. It is far too early to talk sales figures, and perhaps turnover will never matter that much for the site's success.

"I explained to suppliers that it's a good step for them to prepare for exports and that it's not only a matter of selling," Saikali said, because they can build "brand awareness."

The entrepreneur looks to advertising as an important revenue source for BuyLebanese.com. He and his partner designed the site to have space for up to 150 banner advertisements and are considering offering advertising rates for as low as \$50 per month per banner.

The site lists 80 products, supplied mainly by six companies and displayed by BuyLebanese.com on a commission basis. It lays claim to the title of being "the world's first internet mall specializing in Middle Eastern products."

The design of BuyLebanese.com is extremely clean and browsing the list of all Lebanese, mostly food-related, products is very easy.

"My target is Arabs all over the world, and all people who know about Middle Eastern food," Saikali said, whose aims for the betterment of the Lebanese situation include "getting money coming in from outside."

Based on the BuyLebanese shopping catalog, a person could live in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan and satisfy his craving for authentic Lebanese bread with date and almond jam for about \$50 \$11.50 for jam and bread, and \$39 for shipping. A Lebanese researcher in Antarctica, if he so chose, could expect a delivery of one deluxe narghileh with a kilogram of apple-flavored tobacco to cost him around \$153 which could well be a small price to bring a flavor of home to the ice desert.

BuyLebanese.com promises delivery of its goods within two to six working days. However, while the site's pages of products and destinations lend themselves to such mind games, Saikali knows that his most realistic markets might be in Suburbia, USA. Here, he said, his \$15 per first kilo shipping rates are very competitive and his wares could meet a demand that is not satisfied by Middle Eastern foodshops found in the big cities.

The whole concept of BuyLebanese.com would sound far less viable if Saikali himself were a believer in the need for venture capital. But he and his partner "did not spend a dollar, except our time."

That, however, amounted to "six months of work, sometimes overnight," he said an estimated 1,500 man hours of labor.

This week the partners plan to send out about 200,000 e-mails to alert customers to the new site.

Apart from that, Saikali trusts in the power of word of mouth "word of mouth is unbelievable" and in media reports to get the site known.

"I never spent one dollar on advertising," said Saikali, who has already created another online business by using the same method. "I've had to overcome expenses and manage everything."

Saikali also founded [E-comlebanon.com](http://E-comlebanon.com).