

MEADFA's advocacy continues in uncertain times

Travel in 2020 drew to a standstill, with recovery coming slowly and unsteadily since then. This has put the travel retail industry's associations in a difficult position, as they must continue with their advocacy work while members are struggling, with no certainties on which to base decisions or actions.

While for some associations this has made it difficult to keep up memberships, this has not been the case for MEADFA. "During 2020 many members have joined MEADFA despite the difficult situation, which shows the dedication and striving that industry colleagues have towards improving and further expand the travel retail industry in the region," says MEADFA President Haitham Al Majali.

The MEADFA event

Last year was the first for the cancellation of many travel retail conferences and trade shows, and MEADFA was no exception. Its annual event, which had been set to take place in Dubai on November 23-24 2020, was cancelled. The association instead launched a series of interactive online forums. The webinars presented the viewpoint of the three key industry stakeholders in turn — retailers, brands and landlords. MEADFA also maintained its training event program with a new e-learning format.

For this year's event, Al Majali says the situation is still unclear. Regardless, "We are looking forward to plan for the MEADFA conference," he says. "We are looking at many available options and will definitely announce the outcome in due time." He confirms that the conference may see changes, saying: "Everything is possible, we have to adapt to the changes we are all facing."

Hope for recovery

With seemingly endless bad news in 2020, we are beginning to see some light on the horizon for 2021. "Fortunately, the worst is behind us now (as we hope); a vaccine is out and people around the globe are being vaccinated, which gives us hope that travel in the MEA region and the entire world will gradually go back to normal," says Al Majali.

Recent research by Airports Council International (ACI) suggests the Middle East region will have the second strongest recovery in the world after Asia, with a growth rate approaching 5%. This improvement will not be steady and sure, however, and passenger numbers in this region are not expected to reach 2019 levels until 2024.

Currently, travel in the MEA region remains weak. "The curve of passengers and customers at duty free stores is fluctuating up and down," says Al Majali. "It is still premature to expect anything due to the uncertainty factor we are witnessing, but as mentioned before, we hope that the difficult part has passed us, and we look forward to a state of improvement in the horizon. Amid all of that, we will continue to provide support to our colleagues, partners and operators when and if needed."

Advocacy continues

In this time of little air traffic and uncertainty surrounding the entire industry and timelines, basic needs remain, and that is where the association is focusing its energy. Al Majali says: "For the moment we are looking at developing our advocacy activities. As you are aware, we formed the

MEADFA Advocacy working group in 2019. We provided support to MEADFA members in terms of messaging, engagement strategy and follow-up support. MEADFA succeeded to mobilize good lobbying capacities and we want to continue building on this achievement.”