



# Opportunity for associations in the Middle East

With a tailored approach, the conference industry is ripe for growth in the region

by Ajay Bhojwani

In today’s globalising world, a significant part of the revenue of many international and regional associations comes from their overseas membership and customer base as well as various educational activities and conferences outside of their domestic market.

Associations with global ambitions are often challenged in the way they operate when they transition into new markets. When expanding globally, every association puts their best foot forward. This often means they base their business strategy and expansion plans on growing their membership, organising conferences and events, or alternatively selling their products and education programmes. The Middle East, as a region, is no different from a lot of emerging markets around the world and has its own unique requirements and preferences when it comes to such business engagements.

A young market with a transient and moving population, especially in key countries in the Gulf, the Middle East region is where the demand for education and learning products continues to be high. Whilst the online learning environment is a big seller, the region still leans towards more face to face interactions, which also comes from a culture of building personal relationships with everyone you engage with in business. Whilst Arabic is the language of the region, most of the business is done in English, which makes it easier for associations, especially out of Europe and the US, to penetrate the region with their products, membership and other offerings. Business is still done in a very personal manner and relationships are key to success. The notion of handshake agreements, which has been a way of doing business for decades, continues today.

As the oil prices continue to be low, several nations in the region have defined a new way forward for themselves and are working towards building economies of the future that are less dependent on oil. Most countries in the region have mapped out a new forward strategy for themselves, such as Dubai’s Tourism Vision 2020, the Abu Dhabi Economic Vision 2030 and Saudi Vision 2030, while several more countries such as Oman and Jordan have also followed suit. Each strategy is aimed at developing the economy with more of a focus on the business that drives their agenda, looking at a range of industries from technology and healthcare, to education and finance.

It is of utmost importance for associations to link to these long-term visions set by the economies and work closely with the government entities as they look at widening their reach in the region. A lot of these cities today realise the importance of having international associations bring in best

practices and education to strengthen the various sectors they represent and hence have created various government policies to encourage such business engagements. One such venture is the Dubai Association Centre, launched by the government of Dubai to assist and support international and regional associations in setting up their business in the emirate, whilst catering to the entire region by running various programmes.

Another important issue for associations is making sure their offerings are customised to the region, which for the Middle East is even more critical as a lot of the economies are still in their early days of development whereas some are quite advanced. Hence, the ability to alter the offering and customise it to the country and then to each economy becomes vital.

Furthermore, as we move forward, societies will realise that meetings, conferences and events are a platform but the main driver is the community, and associations are integral in forming and bringing these communities together. As the local associations continue to get stronger in Middle East and be this driver of change, international and regional associations will need to work closely with them and in fact support them in this journey of change which will be mutually beneficial.

Countries in the region like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and many more will continue to open their doors wider for this change, while digitisation – which is an enormous driver for change – will continue to be adapted more and more into the way we do business. Associations today need to ensure this is part of their strategy when building relationships in these countries. ●

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