

Business

Gulf Bank's 'Let's Talk Business' podcast interviews top events management firm

Podcast highlights little-known origin stories behind some of Kuwait's favorite brands

KUWAIT: Gulf Bank aired the second episode of its "Let's Talk Business" podcast with Ahmed Al-Majed, General Manager at the Suffix company for sports events management. The program, hosted by Tareq Al-Saleh, Deputy General Manager of the Economic Research Unit at Gulf Bank, presents entrepreneurial stories within a simplified economic framework, targeting budding entrepreneurs who are considering starting businesses of their own. The bank's new podcast is part of its overarching strategy of fostering economic and community sustainability in Kuwait.

Following our passions

Ahmed Al-Majed started his talk about the beginning of his work in the sports equipment sector, an industry that he loved but was not as popular in Kuwait at the time—at least, not popular enough to sustain a business. He said, "I learned then that a business should not be built on personal passion alone. You may be passionate about something, but the market may not be ready for it. That is what happened to me when I founded my first local sports products store in 2004."

Competition

When asked about competition in the sector, Al-Majed touched on his company's philosophy and their unique view of business in the sports event management sector, saying: "At Suffix, we see ourselves as being complementary to the sector. We work with all sectors in the country. We do not necessarily view ourselves as being anyone's competitors, rather we are an added support system for many people and entities. The market is very large, and our mission is much greater, which is why we are pleased with any effort that succeeds in reaching a new category of customers, and promoting a culture of sports and health."

Focusing on the customer experience

The Suffix company is responsible for organizing the annual "Gulf Bank 642 Marathon" and has been successfully putting on the event for over seven years. With the marathon reaching bigger and better heights every year, Gulf Bank recently announced the extension of their strategic partnership with Suffix for another three years. Al-Majed spoke about the most important thing that distinguishes the marathon from other events, highlighting the unique and enjoyable experience that Gulf Bank creates for all participants, saying: "The marathon is for everyone, whether you are a sports enthusiast or just participating for a



KUWAIT: Tareq Al-Saleh interviews Ahmed Al-Majed during Gulf Bank's second episode of 'Let's Talk Business' podcast.

day, so it is important for this marathon to always be more than just a race. Hence, we work to create a beautiful experience for every participant, despite its logistical difficulty. We make sure that the contestants pass through the various landmarks of Kuwait, starting with Souq Sharq, Kuwait Towers, and Souk Al-Mubarakiya, because we want to add a sense of excitement, especially for those who are not interested in, or do not like, sports. In that way, we hope to urge everyone to practice healthy habits like walking and running."

Patience paves the way to success

During the interview, Al-Majed explained the necessity of continuous work and planning, and not expecting impressive success from the first attempt. Al-Majed continued: "When we started the Gulf Bank 642 Marathon series in its first year, we had 1,400 people, but that was like getting a million participants to us, and we were very happy with that number. After only three years, the number of participants reached 10,000, which placed the 'Gulf Bank 642 Marathon' on the list of the largest marathons in the world. We have also recently been awarded a Bronze Ranking by World Athletics, an honor that we received among 128 marathons around the world."

Working during the pandemic

The lockdown and the long curfews in Kuwait were some of the big challenges that the Suffix company faced, and successfully overcame using technology. Al-Majed said: "Today, technology has become an essential element in every company, whether it is a digital company or not. The use of technology enables us to continue working and reduce costs, in addition to increasing the ability to innovate. Within a few short years, we have gradually transformed into the digital company we see today, and although our main activity is managing sports events, today technology has become the heart of our work. During the pandemic, our sector was one of the most affected. We took the opportunity to prove our ability to work and manage events digitally and remotely, launching various services within the first days of the closure and the curfew. We found that it resonated very well with the customers, whose loyalty to us significantly increased during this period."

Risk management

When asked about the financial aspect of the business, Al-Majed said that when the company was launched, the reliance was very high on the management of sports events as a source of income, while the

management of sports facilities constituted only 6 percent of the company's size. According to Al-Majed, this financial model constituted a great risk to the company's feasibility. The partners' vision was to focus on developing the sports facilities management division to constitute 60 percent of the company's size. In that way, the company could ensure the sustainability of income throughout the year, and in different seasons.

Financing

On financing, A-Majed said: "We still see Suffix as a small company, with very large potential for growth, without the need for investors to enter the business model at this time. We have many goals that we are seeking now, and we prefer to reach them without any pitfalls or pressures. Entering financial investment helps you accelerate growth but it may not help you speed up success. So, as my partner Ahmed Al Hezami always says, we choose to enjoy the journey. We may look into getting investors when we reach the goals we have set for the next five years."

"Let's Talk Business" is Gulf Bank's newest podcast, created in collaboration with Belmokhba, a local creative content creation and production house. Episodes air on Gulf Bank's digital and social media channels.

Gulf Bank's vision is to be the leading Kuwaiti Bank of the Future. The Bank is constantly engaging and empowering its employees as part of an inclusive and diversified workplace in recognition of every employee's role in delivering customer excellence and serving the community at large. With its extensive network of branches and innovative digital services, Gulf Bank is able to give its customers the choice of how and where to conduct their banking transactions, all while ensuring a simple and seamless banking experience.

Gulf Bank is committed to maintaining a robust sustainability program at the community, economic, and environmental levels through sustainability initiatives that are strategically selected to benefit both the country and the Bank. Gulf Bank supports Kuwait Vision 2035 "New Kuwait" and works with the different relevant parties to achieve it. For more information on Gulf Bank's various initiatives and activities, customers can visit one of Gulf Bank's branches or log on to Gulf Bank's Online/Mobile Banking services. Customers can also direct their queries via WhatsApp on 1805805 for round-the-clock assistance from Gulf Bank representatives, or call the Customer Contact Center on the same number.



SINGAPORE: In this photograph taken yesterday migrant workers are pictured working at a construction site in Singapore. —AFP

Singapore migrant workers suffer under COVID curbs

SINGAPORE: Bangladeshi migrant worker MD Sharif Uddin used to spend his days off with friends outside his cramped Singapore dormitory, but coronavirus curbs have for 18 months left him stuck inside during his spare time. More than 300,000 migrant workers, many of them from South Asia, live in dorms in the prosperous city-state, where they are typically packed into shared rooms and sleep on bunk beds. The vast complexes were hit by COVID-19 and locked down at the start of the pandemic, while restrictions were introduced across the whole country for a period to prevent a broader outbreak.

Curbs have been eased for most in Singapore, where—despite currently facing a renewed virus wave—vaccinated people can go out shopping and to restaurants, and borders are gradually re-opening.

But it is a different story for the low-paid migrants, who remain subject to far more onerous restrictions that mostly allow them to travel only between their work and accommodation. "It's a very painful life... like prison," said construction site worker Uddin, adding that before the pandemic he used to meet friends at the weekend to drink coffee, recite poetry and gossip.

"We're only allowed to go to work and home, back and forth, and nowhere else. It's like living under house arrest," added the 43-year-old, who has worked in Singapore for 13 years and written two books about his experiences. Beyond heading to work, the migrants are allowed occasional trips to specially-built "recreation centers" that typically comprise shops set around a square, and sports facilities.

'Economic commodity'

When the dormitories—self-contained and usually in out-of-the-way parts of Singapore—became the epicenter of the city's first COVID-19 wave last year, it sparked national soul-searching. Calls mounted to improve the livelihoods of migrants who have for decades done the back-breaking work of constructing

the financial hub's gleaming skyscrapers, cleaning housing estates and maintaining public transport.

The government pledged to take steps such as building new dormitories with more modern facilities and more space for residents. But the continued restrictions faced by the workers—who typically earn from Sg\$500 to \$1,000 (US\$370 to \$740) a month in one of the world's most expensive cities—highlight how little has changed in reality, critics say.

"Our government doesn't quite see them as fully human," Alex Au, vice-president of migrant rights group Transient Workers Count Too, said. Authorities treat the migrants like "an economic commodity", and fail to "accord them the same rights, the same freedoms that our citizens have," he said.

As criticism mounted, authorities in the city-state of 5.5 million started a scheme that allows a limited number to make organized trips to designated areas. About 700 participated in the scheme's first month in September, and it was expanded at the end of last month to allow up to 3,000 workers a week from the dorms to participate. But this still represents only a tiny proportion of the workers.

'Psychological problems'

The government maintains that continued curbs on migrants—who come from countries including Bangladesh, India and China—are necessary as there is a higher risk of virus transmission due to their living conditions. This is despite the fact 98 percent of dorm residents have been fully vaccinated, higher than the city-state's overall rate of 85 percent.

"Any easing of movement restrictions will need to be done in a careful and calibrated manner," Minister for Manpower Tan See Leng told parliament last week. He also said authorities have improved access to mental health services. But this is little comfort for dorm resident Amir from Bangladesh, who longs to have the freedom to go where he wants.

"I miss nature, open space," said the 32-year-old construction site supervisor, who spoke using a pseudonym. "We can only see our dormitory life and our construction site. We cannot travel... cannot see outside." For Uddin, change can't come soon enough for the increasingly stressed migrant workers.

"We are facing psychological problems," he said, adding their "fundamental rights as workers and human beings" had been breached. "This imprisoned lifestyle won't let a person live a healthy life." —AFP

Rosneft profit up with 'rapid growth' in energy demand

MOSCOW: Russian oil giant Rosneft on Friday reported an increase in profits in the third quarter, with its CEO predicting a "super cycle" of rising energy prices as demand picks up. The company—which is about one-fifth owned by Britain's BP—has returned to profit this year as oil prices have rebounded following a dismal 2020 for the industry and global economy due to the pandemic.

Gas prices have also surged this year as the world economy recovers from the COVID-induced crisis.

CEO Igor Sechin said in a statement that "despite the uncertainty in the global economy" there is a "rapid growth in demand for traditional energy resources". "We may witness a new super cycle on the oil and gas markets," he said.



The state-controlled company reported a net profit of 314 billion rubles (\$4.3 billion) in the third quarter after suffering losses in the previous year. Profit was up 35 percent between July and September compared to the previous quarter. Quarterly revenue rose to 2.3 trillion rubles in the third quarter, 60 percent higher than a year ago.

Sechin said the market conditions were favorable for the company to increase its "investments in new projects" among which is the Vostok Oil project in Siberia. The Rosneft results comes as talks conclude at the COP26 UN climate conference in Glasgow with calls for nations to phase out fossil fuels. —AFP



BEIJING: Workers sort packages for delivery at a JD.com distribution center on "Singles Day", also known as the Double 11, the biggest shopping day of the year, in Beijing. — AFP

Alibaba, JD enjoy record Singles Day despite tech crackdown

BEIJING: Chinese ecommerce titan Alibaba enjoyed record sales during its Singles Day shopping extravaganza, giving a much-needed boost to the firm after a torrid year in which it became the symbol of a government crackdown that hammered the country's tech sector. The firm said 540.3 billion yuan (\$84.5 billion) was spent as China's army of consumers went on a splurge, despite a much lower-key sales campaign following pressure from the government to tone down the aggressive promotions and rampant consumerism.

Combined sales with industry rival JD.com came in at 889 billion yuan (\$139.4 billion) — equivalent to the GDP of many countries—which was also a record and up about a fifth from last year. Both Alibaba and JD.com reported strong sales of items such as electric appliances, electronics, pet supplies, and cosmetics and other personal-care goods.

JD.com share rose more than four percent in Hong Kong on Friday, though Alibaba was down more than one percent. "Single's Day"—so-called for the 11.11 date—began more than a decade ago and for years was a one-day, 24-hour event on November 11.

But industry players expanded it recently into an extended promotion from November 1-11, with many retailers and platforms offering discounts and pre-sales even earlier. The shopping fest now dwarfs the US "Black Friday" spree and has become a barometer of consumer sentiment in the world's second-largest economy. Concerned that Big Tech was becoming too powerful and abusing its market dominance, the government has this year dramatically tightened regulation.

The campaign has rattled investors, slicing billions of dollars off the market capitalization of Alibaba—which has seen its share price plunge about 30 percent this year—as well as JD, Tencent and other major players. In e-commerce, the government has taken specific aim at alleged abuse of user data and monopolistic business practices by platforms, such as banning merchants from selling their products on rival sites.

But the steadily rising consumer sales are also likely to be quietly welcomed by the government, which is moving to create a more modern consumer-driven economy, lessening the traditional reliance on manufacturing, exports and government investment. —AFP