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PRESIDENT OF MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL SAYS HOSPITALITY IS ON THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

President Stephanie Linnartz, Top Ranking Female Executive in the Hospitality Sector, Discusses “The Future of Hospitality”

Latest NUSACC “Thought Leaders” Event Attracts About 700 Stakeholders Representing 60 Different Countries

The National U.S. – Arab Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC) continued its golden anniversary year with a Thought Leader Series webinar featuring Stephanie Linnartz, President of Marriott International. Linnartz, widely regarded as the highest ranking female executive in the hospitality sector, provided remarks on “The Future of Hospitality.” (Her bio may be found [here](#).)

Upwards of 700 stakeholders registered for the event, representing more than 60 countries around the world. Participants included five Arab ambassadors, representing Iraq, Jordan, Mauritania, Oman, and Tunisia.



Stephanie Linnartz, President of Marriott International.

The webinar’s Lead Sponsor was the [U.S. Travel Association](#), the nation’s top advocacy group in the travel sector, serving 1,100 member organizations. Supporting Sponsors included the [Kuwait Hotel Owners Association](#), [Mandala Research LLC](#), and [Metis LLC](#).

Partners for the webinar included (in alphabetical order): [American Society of Travel Advisors \(ASTA\)](#), [Cruise Lines International Association \(CLIA\)](#), [Global Business Travel Association \(GBTA\)](#), [Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International \(HSMIAI\)](#), [The International Inbound Travel Association \(IITA\)](#), [National Association of Black Hotel Owners, Operators & Developers \(NABHOOD\)](#), [National Tour Association \(NTA\)](#), [Skål International](#), [Sustainable Travel International \(STI\)](#), and [Women in Travel & Tourism, International \(WITTI\)](#).



David Hamod, NUSACC's President & CEO.

The Marriott portfolio today includes nearly 8,000 hotels, consisting of 30 different brands, in almost 140 different countries. “NUSACC and its partners were deeply honored to host Stephanie Linnartz, who brought a wealth of experience and a unique perspective to our event,” noted David Hamod, NUSACC’s President & CEO. “She touched on opportunities in the Arab world, of course, but her message was truly universal, one that applies to people all over the globe.”

Arab World Hospitality

Roger Dow, President & CEO of the U.S. Travel Association, introduced Linnartz. As part of his warm welcome, Dow highlighted the value of Arab world tourism. “The turnout for today’s webinar obviously speaks to the importance of the Arab market for the United States and around the world. In 2019, pre-pandemic, we had over 1.2 million visitors from the Arab world to the United States.”

To put this in perspective, Dow said, one needs to look at purchasing power. Visitors from Arab countries “spend well over \$3,000 per person,” he noted, “compared to under \$2,000 per person coming from other international visitors. These are extremely important visitors for the United States.”



Roger Dow, President & CEO of the U.S. Travel Association.

Linnartz agreed, “I want to give special thanks to our guests from around the world, as Roger did, and particularly our friends from the Arab world, which is an important market for Marriott International and our industry overall.”



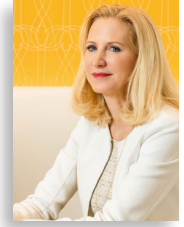
In her remarks, Linnartz covered five main topics: Recovering from the pandemic; enhancing the customer experience (including new offerings from Marriott Bonvoy); building partnerships & opening borders; corporate citizenship; and careers in hospitality. Each of these is addressed below.

Recovering from the Pandemic

The worldwide pandemic has been challenging for everyone in the business community, but especially so for the hospitality sector. Linnartz quoted John Willard “Bill” Marriott Jr., the company’s 89-year-old Executive Chairman, talking about the challenges of the pandemic: “This isn’t my first rodeo,” he said, “but it sure is my worst.”

Stephanie Linnartz

“Thank you, David. Congratulations on 50 years of service and thank you for all the work the National U.S. - Arab Chamber of Commerce is doing. It’s terrific, and it was really an honor to be with such an incredible group today.”



During the depths of the pandemic, Linnartz noted, Marriott and other hospitality companies faced extraordinarily strong headwinds. “Our business was down 90 percent, we were at single digit occupancies, at least 25 percent of our hotels were completely closed or shuttered, and at least 80 percent of the associates at our hotels and our corporate headquarters and regional offices were either laid off, furloughed, or on significantly reduced work weeks.”

Today, she said, the situation is significantly better: Leisure travel is surging, surpassing 2019 (pre- pandemic) levels in some markets. “I think people want experiences more than they want physical things,” Linnartz noted. “They can’t wait to see their family members. They can’t wait to see the world. They can’t wait to see business partners. So, I am very, very bullish that travel will come back.”



Sheraton Hotel in Kuwait.

Photo: marriott.com

She continued, “While business, group and meetings travel is coming back slower, the pandemic has spawned ‘Bleisure’ travel, a combination of business and leisure.” At a time when people can work from anywhere, Linnartz suggested, Bleisure travel provides greater flexibility and options for consumers.



Mohamed Najia, Secretary General of the Kuwait Hotel Owners Association.

Mohamed Najia, Secretary General of the Kuwait Hotel Owners Association, asked when hospitality demand is likely to return. Linnartz replied, “Marriott is a big global company, so we’re a good benchmark. Right now, we’re down compared to 2019 levels but we are seeing improvements week after week. As we look at 2022 and beyond, we are cautiously optimistic that demand will continue to return as COVID cases decline globally, travel bans are lifted, and restrictions eased.”

Linnartz concluded: “The headline is, we’re not out of the woods yet as a company, and we’re certainly not out of the woods yet as an industry, but things are getting better every day.”



Laura Mandala, Managing Director of Mandala Research

“Stephanie, I know you realize the enormous role that you play as an inspiration to so many women in the industry and to the young women and girls who are trying to determine their paths in the world. We’ll all be following you, and cheering for you, and waiting for the next big thing to come from the Marriott organization.”

Enhancing the Customer Experience: New Offerings from Bonvoy

Marriott today is the largest hotel brand in the world, and Marriott Bonvoy is the world’s largest loyalty program, with over 157 million members.

“Marriott Bonvoy pulls together our 30 brands and allows our members to engage with us throughout their travel journey and beyond,” Linnartz stated. “The program has always been the cornerstone of our relationship with our customers, but it’s even more foundational and important as we see travel return at scale post-pandemic.”

In response to changing demand in the hospitality industry, Marriott launched “Homes & Villas” by Marriott International in 2019. These are highly curated properties with very strict standards, Linnartz noted, and over 40 percent of these properties are in markets where Marriott does not have hotels.

“When we were talking to our customers, even pre-COVID, they were renting homes,” she said. “If they’re going to be doing that, let’s keep them in our ecosystem and in our Marriott family. So, in our case, over 90 percent of the people who rent homes on our Homes & Villas platform are Marriott Bonvoy members.”



Marriott’s global headquarters in downtown Bethesda, Maryland.

Photo: mhqbethesda.com

Going forward, she noted, Marriott plans to provide more offerings in the company’s travel ecosystem where Marriott Bonvoy members can “earn and burn” points. Very soon, for example, Marriott will be launching its Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection, which “offers an unprecedented opportunity to be untethered,” a very appealing message in these days of the pandemic.

Building Partnerships, Opening Borders

Bill Rheume, President of Skål International, asked Linnartz how Marriott might support travel between countries and provide consistency in travelers’ ability to enter and leave various nations.



Bill Rheaume,
President Skål International.

Linnartz acknowledged that part of the reason why consumers may not be willing to take an international trip is that they are confused: “What do I need to do to go into this country? What happens if I get COVID when I’m there? Am I going to be quarantined for four weeks?” Consumer confusion does not instill confidence to get out there and start traveling, she suggested.

There is no simple answer for how to get international travel jump-started again, she noted: “I don’t think any company can do it alone. And I don’t think any government can do it alone. I believe the key is a public private partnership to get international travel going again.”

Charles Sylvia, Vice President at Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA), pointed out that in a typical year, approximately 30 million people cruise. Many of these cruisers fly to the port of embarkation prior to the cruise and/or stay on after the cruise. He asked, “Does Marriott have a dedicated vertical for working with the cruise lines to help promote pre- and post-cruise stays?”



Charles Sylvia, Vice President
at Cruise Lines International
Association (CLIA).

Linnartz replied, “I love to see the cruise business coming back. We’re a family in travel, right? Whether it’s air, cruise, or hotels, we’re all in this together.” She concluded, “It’s a 1 + 1 = 3 situation if we can figure out a better partnership between hotels and cruise lines.”



Lisa Simon, Executive Director
of the International Inbound
Travel Association (IITA).

Lisa Simon, Executive Director of the International Inbound Travel Association (IITA), noted, “Marriott has long been a model for how effective partnerships between hotels and inbound tour operators can lead to volume business, particularly in off-peak times, to help hotels drive occupancy. So, what do you see for the future of B2B travel distribution, particularly to the USA, and the role of inbound tour operators?”

Linnartz replied, “There are all sorts of partnerships in the travel space, whether it’s different verticals -- like cruise ships and airlines and hotels working together -- or with distribution partners, tour operators, online travel agencies (OTAs), and group intermediaries. I think we need to just deepen the relationships and get more creative together, get more flexible together.”

She went on to say, “To me, so much of this is about consumer education and confidence. People want to feel safe and secure. So, through partnerships between my company and your organization, as an example, we can get creative to help build that confidence, to spread awareness, and to educate.”

Tunisia’s Ambassador to the United States, Her Excellency Hanene Tajouri Bessassi, urged Marriott to create partnership agreements to promote capacity-building through training and internships.

Linnartz replied, “Marriott wants to find ways to get people, especially young people, attracted to our industry and experiencing what a career can be like in hospitality. Part of getting people interested in the industry is exposing them to it, including partnerships like the one you just outlined, promoting internships.”



Tunisia’s Ambassador to the United States, Her Excellency Hanene Tajouri Bessassi.

Corporate Citizenship

Marriott International has a reputation as a leader in ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) with *Serve360*, fostering a commitment to create a positive and sustainable impact wherever they do business. For years, the company has ranked among the World’s Most Admired Companies, as compiled by *Fortune* magazine. Marriott traditionally takes the top spot in the hospitality category.

Linnartz shared guidance from Bill Marriott, the company’s Executive Chairman, who says, “How we do business is just as important as the business we do.” In other words, corporate citizenship is key.

Linnartz noted, “To me, it all comes down to what we do in the local community, and this is where our hotels bring ESG to life. I speak a lot about the things we do at corporate, but what is equally important, if not more important, is the work that our hotels do in their local communities.”



Catherine Prather, President of the National Tour Association.

Catherine Prather, President of the National Tour Association, asked, “How is Marriott approaching initiatives on DEI – diversity, equity, and inclusion – as well as holistic sustainability incentives through the power of Marriott’s brand presence? And how could Marriott influence their customers, travelers, tour operators, and advisors in these areas?”

Linnartz replied, “Let me start with DEI. This is something that Marriott is laser-focused on, making sure that we have an inclusive and diverse workforce, and that we are incredibly open in terms of how we welcome people into our hotels. All are welcome, and this is at the heart of hospitality.”



Internally, she said, Marriott is working to achieve gender representation parity for global company leadership by 2023. “I think setting goals is important,” she said. “I’m a big believer that what gets measured, gets done.” She went on to note that Marriott’s Board of Directors has a committee that is focused on diversity and inclusion.

The President of Marriott described a recent DEI initiative at Howard University, a historically Black university (HBCU) in Washington DC. The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation, together with Howard University, established the Marriott-Sorenson Center for Hospitality Leadership in February in honor of Marriott International’s beloved former President and CEO, Arne Sorenson, who tragically passed away from pancreatic cancer. The J. Willard and Alice S. Marriott Foundation provided a \$20 million endowment to launch the Center at Howard University, one of the nation’s leading historically Black colleges and universities. In addition, Marriott International created the Arne M. Sorenson Hospitality Fund to support the critical programmatic and career development elements of the Center.

Linnartz characterized the initiative this way: “How can we create programming, internships, and a whole program around hospitality for the students at Howard University to serve the goal of getting a more diverse group of associates, both in our hotels and at our corporate headquarters?”

Sustainable Travel International, a partner organization in the webinar, inquired about Marriott’s commitment to sustainability.

In late September 2021, Linnartz pointed out, Marriott announced that it is setting a long-term, science-based target to reach net-zero value chain greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by no later than 2050. In support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this announcement aligns with the company’s sustainability and social impact platform, *Serve 360: Doing Good in Every Direction*. This platform guides Marriott’s commitment to help take on the world’s most pressing social, environmental, and economic issues.

Linnartz highlighted some of the steps that Marriott has begun to take as part of this new initiative:

- ☞ Reducing single-use plastics. This includes replacing single-use toiletry bottles of shampoo, conditioner, and bath gel with larger, refillable pump-topped bottles. For Marriott alone, this will prevent about 500 million tiny bottles annually from going to landfills.
- ☞ Rolling out an internal food waste prevention and reduction campaign, designed to reduce food waste by 50 percent.
- ☞ Launching a responsible sourcing guide to help Marriott’s suppliers to responsibly source 95 percent of the company’s top ten priority categories.

- ☞ Planting more than 415,000 trees, thereby promoting trees and forests as natural solutions for corporate sustainability and citizenship goals.

Careers in Hospitality

“At Marriott International,” Linnartz noted, “we always say, coming to work for our company is not a job, it’s a career.” A majority of Marriott’s General Managers, she said, started out as hourly workers in Marriott hotels.



Bob Gilbert, President & CEO of the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International.

Bob Gilbert, President & CEO of the Hospitality Sales and Marketing Association International (HSMAI), asked, “What are some of the critical skills you think are going to be necessary for those commercial executives in the future, when it comes to capturing and optimizing revenue for their hotels?”

Linnartz replied, “It will start with some of the same good old-fashioned skills that have been important all along – like creativity and resiliency – but maybe we dial them up.” These executives have “added some new tools to their tool kits. I think we’re going to have to be extra nimble, flexible, and creative in terms of getting the revenue in the door. We’ve had to make sure that our revenue management tools are adjusted, if you will, for extraordinary demand or lack thereof.”

“I love technology,” she suggested, “but I don’t think technology will ever replace the human touch. I believe in high-tech *and* high touch. So, when I think about the future, I think we’ll see more technology adoption in hotels. But we will also continue to see this industry as a great place for people to work and build careers and have meaningful lives for themselves and their families. So, that’s the outlook I see for my company and, even more broadly, and equally importantly, for the entire industry and sector.”

Laura Mandala, Managing Director of Mandala Research

“I want to thank NUSACC for making this opportunity available for all of us today to showcase Stephanie and her new role as Marriott’s President. The Chamber’s 50 years of bringing the United States and the Arab world together through NUSACC, David, has really been so important . . . for economic development, but also for cultural understanding and diplomatic relations. That is particularly critical in our world now.”



For five decades, the National U.S. - Arab Chamber of Commerce (NUSACC) has served as a commercial bridge between the United States and the Arab world. Widely regarded as the voice of American business in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the Chamber serves over 50,000 members and stakeholders in the USA and across the Arab world. Awarded the E-Award for export excellence by the President of the United States, NUSACC is the only business entity in the USA that is recognized by the League of Arab States and the Union of Arab Chambers.

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