

Title : The year of service – Joint President Interview

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The screenshot shows the Banker Middle East website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the logo 'BANKER MIDDLE EAST' on the left, a 'wap-banking' banner in the center, and a mouse cursor on the right. Below the navigation bar, there are links for 'home', 'news', 'features', 'research', 'departments', 'comments', and 'menu'. On the left side, there is a sidebar with buttons for 'SUBSCRIBE', 'CONTACT US', 'MEDIA PACK', and 'Join our MAILING LIST'. Below these buttons is a 'Breaking News' section with a placeholder image. The main content area features an 'Interview' section with the title 'The year of service'. The article text discusses the success of Habib Bank AG Zurich in 2000 and its focus on enhancing customer experience through WAP banking services. A photo of Reza Habib, Joint President, is included. On the right side, there is a vertical sidebar with several advertisements: 'Your Key to a smarter business Middle East', 'NAD AL SHEBA CLUB' (the only fully floodlit 18-hole golf course in Dubai), 'DINING' (with a photo of food), 'www.pipeline dubai.com', and 'Computer News middle east'.

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Interview

The year of service

Riding high on a record year, Reza Habib, Joint President of Habib Bank AG Zurich, spoke to Banker Middle East about the banks' exciting year ahead. "2001 will be the year of service for us," he enthused, adding that rather than adding to its branch network or its expanding the banks' global footprint, Habib Bank AG Zurich will be firmly concentrating on enhancing the customer experience.

This good old fashioned approach to face-to-face banking is all well and good, you might think, but isn't everyone else turning to 'faceless' banking - the telephone, the Internet, the mobile phone - in order to build better customer relationships?

Reza's answer is in firm agreement, being the man that helped drive forward a stunningly high-tech strategy based around Sun's Java programming language for the bank; and Habib Bank AG Zurich was also among the first handful of global financial institutions to launch WAP banking services for the mobile phone.

However, and perhaps despite this cutting edge technology, he is adamant that if you don't get it right at the micro level - the moment the customer walks into the bank - then all else will fail.

And he's right. Habib Bank AG Zurich's customer base has risen year on year, deposits have increased by almost 15%, and the UAE part of the organization made a very respectable Dhs58m for the year 2000.

"In Dubai, people seem to have forgotten about the most basic services. When people walk to the counter, how they are dealt with is always an impression they will carry with them. We will take the edge in dealing with people as people - getting back to good service - face to face backed by efficient use of high technology."

Noble sentiment indeed, but the Joint President does not use words lightly. The 'customer service' promise means an investment in the Group's human resources at all levels, with training across the board, at regular intervals.

Despite the relatively small number of branches globally, the bank is the only one to have a physical footprint inside the gates of the Jebel Ali Free Zone (while the competition is outside), and is expanding operations into Canada imminently.

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Private banking is handled from the banks' Zurich headquarters, but Reza sees a need for a 'small private banking initiative' in the UAE.

And the bank plans to continue to push into consumer banking - certainly in the UAE - building on the big publicity boost it gained from the introduction of WAP services last year.

The Internet is still high on the agenda, with the recent launch of a facility to create LCs on-line, saving time for corporate clients, and enabling them to get LCs processed much quicker and with more accuracy, as the bank can quickly amend any errors electronically.

Account information available via the web now spans an impressive six year history, with Reza explaining that the bank already held this data in its internal decision support systems.

Allowing secure access to it via the Web did not involve any major technology investment or upgrade - 'only in storage - but storage is cheap these days', explained the Joint President.

So, a clear cut strategy is in place for the next few years. Are there any hurdles?

The final challenge remains the communications challenge; operating in markets that have regulations. The biggest challenge will be to run one data centre globally," he said.

At the crux of the customer service strategy lies a belief that Habib Bank AG Zurich 'can deliver more quality' than its competitors.

'We are slowing down on branch opening - there's no point in trying to compete with banks that have hundreds of branches. Our strategy is technology - when you have hundreds of branches and have to adapt to new technology; you get a big shock. We have the infrastructure in place, and can afford to concentrate on service now," concluded the joint president, with clear pride in his voice.

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