

SHOPPING FOR

■ Stage set for the longest retail promotion yet ■ DSFO to revitalise existing brands and announce new events, says CEO

By **Keith J Fernandez**

It's fitting that the head of the Middle East's biggest shopping festival is a shopaholic. "I use it as therapy," Laila Suhail admits guiltily.

"Women love to shop," she jokes. "Only, we usually regret it afterwards."

One thing the 35-year-old CEO of Dubai Shopping Festival Office is shopping for now – between organising the 12th Dubai Summer Surprises, which began yesterday – is a new strategic plan for the brands she handles: DSS, Dubai Shopping Festival (DSF) and Eid in Dubai.

"We're going back into the DNA of each brand," she tells *Emirates Business* at her Creek Road office. This means rejigging current strategy to emphasise existing products as well as creating new retail activities. As an agency of Dubai Economic Department, DSFO is tasked with creating opportunities for the tourism and retail sectors, she says. "The focus now is on bringing more shopping tourism to Dubai."

One way of doing that will be with a new festive retail promotion during the month of Ramadan, the observance of which has significant consequences for business. Suhail's team is also taking a fresh look at DSF, which runs 25 next year, as well as at DSS. "Both are very strong brands, but over the years different components of

these brands have been promoted for one reason or another. So we want to bring back their original charm – we need to ensure we retain our leadership position," she says, alluding to the various other shopping tourism events in the region. "We're talking of a total restructuring when it comes to promotional and activities, as well as our relationship with the retail sector."

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Business relationships crop up frequently in our conversation, and Suhail appears to have used the downturn as an opportunity to strengthen ties with her sponsors and partners.

The DSS, for the first time that she can remember – and she has been at DSFO for 15 years, rising through the ranks from sponsorship co-ordinator to become CEO last January – everyone in-



NEW STRATEGIES



Changes were changing that all to focus on sponsors, says Laila Sami.

... would a truly working together for the benefit of all. —The crisis means we've had our fair share of bad situations, but one good thing that's happened is everyone — hotels, airlines, retailers — has come together to offer great value deals for the consumer. We attract more than two million visitors to DSS every year by offering these unparalleled promotions and sales, and the re-

sults benefit by enhanced sales revenues. It's a win-win situation. — That season Emirates airline is flying children into Dubai for free, while yesterday's launch day activities at Mall of the Emirates saw 25 top retailers offer discounts of up to 90 per cent. — And when there's an chance of winning an opportunity to witness plane take-off, Dubai Shopping Mall

... going to give away gifts of DSS milk to over the nine weeks of the season. — But don't let the current economic climate mean this year's DSS has less sponsors joining its DSS On Mall than before — it's as compared to last year's lot. "Getting sponsors has been challenging," Laila admits, "because most companies have slashed their marketing budgets — which is what we aim for."

The value for money approach has worked here too. "Instead of just offering huge branding on various marketing collateral, we're working closely with our sponsors to fulfil their requirements. Now more than ever, we look at everything from our partners' point of view. With The Dubai Mall, that means wearing a Dubai Mall T-shirt with Juhaybi, I need to think of what's good for both."

So Emirates airline has DSS offered welcome packs for children, for example. Coca-Cola gives additional logistic support, while several of this year's top cartoon shows are being held at sponsor malls. And, she says, this also benefits the consumer, who doesn't have to pay specific entrance fees for these shows. Many of these lessons were learned at this year's DSS, particularly during the financial crisis. Successfully organising the event at six DSS events were successful shows, she says, strengthened the Dubai brand considerably — while limiting the impact of the crisis on the emirate's GDP. "Retailers came back to us and said the DSS helped them to maintain their revenues — and they're looking to DSS to do the same," she says. Some 2.1 million visitors attended last year's DSS, spending a total of Dhs 35

LIFESTYLE CV

CAR "Nissan Maxima. I have to say I'm not a very good driver. Every morning my garage runs into me. But I hope to improve enough to buy a new car at the end of this year."

MUSIC "I don't really listen to a lot of music. I don't really

like a lot of the popular Arabic music, but I know Nancy Ajram because of the brands she endorses."

HOLIDAY SPOT "Anywhere. As long as it's on a plane going somewhere. One place I really want to go to, though, is the Maldives. The water is a big attraction."

BOOKS "A lot of management books. I must admit, I recently got around to Seth Godin's Purple Cow, which talks a lot about creative thinking."

UNWIND "Spa treatments. And shopping."

... began life as a 2,700 sq m indoor playground has been re-branded Modious World, as well as 37,000 sq m area, while ticket prices have been reduced to Dhs10 for adults and Dhs5 for children.

That's something Suhail takes particular pride in. Modious is a character she dressed up — and by October, she says, her office will be ready to announce new development for this symbol of Dubai. This far, media reports have speculated on a new set of friends for the pilot's grandma, more networking opportunities and an external office property.

One and a half years in the driving seat, what has the job taught her? "I have to say it has given me a really different perspective on this region. I've spent as long as I can," she says. "I've learned just how high the expectations are — and managing those has been one of the most exciting challenges."

And the retailing having to deal with the challenges of these bleak recessionary times, she says: "We've only got stronger."

What's up for her next? What does this committed career woman want to do next? Where do you go next you've made CEO? "If I ever decide to quit," she confesses softly, "I'll probably look at working with the retail sector. After having worked for the government for so long, it'll be a challenge to see things from the other side."

