



Sky's the limit

How **Dr. Nejb Ben-Khedher**—head of Emirates Skyward—elevates over 30 million customer experiences worldwide, propelling the global carrier to reach stratospheric new heights.

BY **AAYA HAFIDI**



VIP For All

For Dr. Nejb Ben-Khedher and team at Emirates Skyward, creating customized experiences for customers—regardless of their membership tier—is both critical and essential in order to delight the program's members worldwide.

Simply put, to grow, businesses need customers. Yet, to grow into a business with over 30 million loyal customers in every corner of the world takes something far beyond—or in this case, above—business as usual.

Enter Dr. Nejb Ben-Khedher, the transformational leader at the helm of Emirates Skywards—Emirates Airlines customer loyalty program that caters to those who fly on the airline to major destinations worldwide via Dubai or travel on its partner airlines like Qantas, Air Canada, and Japan Airlines.

The airline, established in 1985, has evolved into the world's largest international carrier, recognized for its excellence in service. Based in Dubai, Emirates is renowned for its luxurious in-flight experience and award-winning entertainment and has been named one of the top 100 most reputable global organizations.

For Dr. Ben-Khedher, spurring innovation within the Skywards program and creating enhanced, personalized travel experiences for customers of all segments is critical and essential to his executive agenda in 2024 and beyond. A 30-year airline industry veteran with a unique, diverse background, Dr. Ben-Khedher started his career with American Airlines in the areas of network planning and revenue management after earning a Ph.D. in industrial engineering from the University of Michigan.

To better understand the program's unique value proposition—for both customers and the Emirates brand—IQ recently spoke with Dr. Ben-Khedher to discuss a variety of topics, from his strategy for expanding Skywards' diverse member base to strategic collaborations with global partners, innovative technologies, and a commitment to personalization and seamless experiences define the Skywards program's trajectory.

***IQ:* Congratulations on reaching the milestone of 30 million members in the Emirates Skywards program. How has the program evolved over the years to attract and retain such a vast membership base?**

Dr. Ben-Khedher: Thank you. For perspective, Emirates took its inaugural flight in 1985—which would be the commencement of a remarkable journey that started with only two leased aircraft. Fast forward to today and Emirates has evolved into the world's largest international airline. In 2022, we earned our place among the top 100 most reputable organizations globally, a noteworthy achievement that sets it apart as the sole representative from the Middle East in the prestigious 2022 Global Rep Track 100.

We launched our frequent flyer program— Skywards—in 2000. Over the

years, the program experienced substantial growth, reaching 10 million members by 2013 and tripling in size over the last decade.

This expansion aligns with the airline's parallel growth and Dubai's increasing prominence as both a business hub and a favored destination. Notably, Dubai has clinched the top spot as the global destination in the TripAdvisor Travelers' Choice Award for two consecutive years.

In 2016, a pivotal transformation was initiated for the frequent flyer program, transitioning it into what can aptly be described as a lifestyle loyalty program. This transformation involved the creation of a vast ecosystem comprising travel and lifestyle partners. By actively engaging with a wider audience through digital channels, the program has empowered members with enhanced earning opportunities, including benefits from everyday spending. The program has also been structured to provide accessibility to rewards from the first mile earned, democratizing the experience for all participants. At the same time, premium members enjoy a heightened level of exclusivity for their loyalty.

We've been fortunate to earn industry acclaim for being a trailblazer, particularly as one of the first airline loyalty programs to introduce a subscription service.

Furthermore, strategic partnerships have been formed, including one with the renowned Dubai Mall, one of the world's largest shopping complexes. Emirates has embraced personalization by tailoring member communications and pioneering in-path offers for individuals booking flights through the Emirates' online platform. This multifaceted approach reflects Emirates' commitment to innovation, customer engagement, and delivering an unparalleled travel experience.

***IQ:* The Skywards program has a diverse member base from over 180 countries. How do you tailor the program to meet the unique needs and preferences of such a globally distributed audience?**

Dr. Ben-Khedher: You are absolutely correct that our member base spans the globe, reaching corners far and wide. It is noteworthy that a significant portion of our members, exceeding 3 million, is

concentrated in the United States and the United Kingdom. This global diversity is a testament to the wide-reaching appeal of our services. Emirates and Fly Dubai collectively cover over 200 destinations, forming an extensive airline network that enables us to connect major cities in every corner of the world.

This expansive reach positions us as a key player in global travel, resonating with a diverse array of travelers. Moreover, our strategic partnerships with other airlines, such as United and Air Canada in North America, Qantas in Australia and New Zealand, Gold in Brazil, and JA and Korean in Asia, exemplify our commitment to fostering local relevance for our members.

Beyond the realm of air travel, our collaborations extend into the broader travel category. Notably, we have forged a global strategic partnership with Marriott Bonvoy, allowing members to earn rewards on both programs. Additionally, our Skywards hotel booking platform provides members with the opportunity to redeem rewards at hotels worldwide. Further enhancing the member experience, our Skywards platform facilitates earning and redeeming with everyday partners, including financial institutions in our most strategic markets. These multifaceted partnerships reflect our dedication to offering members a comprehensive and rewarding travel experience.

***IQ:* As the head of Emirates Skywards, how do you see the loyalty program evolving in the future to continue delivering value and innovation to its members?**

Dr. Ben-Khedher: This is a great question. At the core of our strategy lies the effective utilization of data to foster meaningful engagement with our members through digital channels. This approach goes beyond mere targeted offers; it extends into the realm of personalization, allowing us to tailor benefits to the unique preferences and needs of our members. A key facet of this strategy involves unbundling benefits for premium members, providing them with greater choice and flexibility in their experiences. While our commitment to digitalization remains steadfast, we

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recognize the importance of cultivating on-the-ground and in-the-air experiences to establish a robust emotional connection with our members.

For instance, Skywards serves as a gateway to extraordinary redemption opportunities, granting members access to VIP and behind-the-scenes experiences facilitated by our extensive network of partners and sponsorship assets. Particularly prominent in the sports category, these experiences exemplify our dedication to creating moments that transcend the ordinary.

As we move forward, our focus on curating exceptional experiences remains unwavering. The intention is to offer our members not just a service but a personalized journey where every interaction resonates on a deeper, more emotional level. This fusion of digital precision and tangible, memorable encounters are emblematic of our commitment to delivering a travel experience that transcends expectations.

IQ: Speaking of technology and digitalization, how does Emirates Skywards leverage cutting-edge technologies to create seamless experiences for its members?

Dr. Ben-Khedher: The Emirates app is positioned as a reliable travel companion for our members, offering a range of features to enhance their journey. Passengers in business class can conveniently pre-order meals, and all travelers have the option to select onboard entertainment. Beyond these amenities, our award-winning in-flight entertainment system incorporates baggage tracking features designed to alleviate the anxieties of our members during their travels, further elevating their overall flying experience.

In addition to the Emirates app, we present the Skywards Everyday app—a platform strategically designed for members to seamlessly engage with lifestyle partners in Dubai. This innovative application allows users to link up to five credit or debit cards, providing a hassle-free experience. By simply swiping their cards at any of our 1000

partner outlets across the UAE, members earn miles for their expenditures. This example underscores our commitment to leveraging technology to facilitate a seamless earning experience for our members.

Furthermore, our exploration of cutting-edge technologies extends beyond the present offerings. We are actively considering the integration of blockchain technology to secure earn-burn transactions, ensuring the utmost security for our members. Additionally, artificial intelligence is being harnessed for online targeted offers, while predictive AI modeling plays a crucial role in the effective management of our membership. As we embrace these technological advancements, our goal is to continually enhance the travel experience

for our members, providing them with convenience, security, and personalized engagement throughout their journeys.

IQ: The growth and success of the Skywards platform have distinguished you as a transformational leader. From that perspective, how do you help create breakthroughs and elevate performance within the organization?

Dr. Ben-Khedher: Firstly, thank you for the compliment. The Skywards transformation marks the fourth major metamorphosis in my two-decade journey as a travel and technology executive. Throughout this time, I've identified three key elements crucial for achieving success

in transforming businesses and delivering breakthrough performance.

The first element revolves around crafting an aspirational vision that not only energizes the team but also unites it under a common purpose. The second element emphasizes effective communication, aligning both internal and external stakeholders with the envisioned goal. The third element, equally vital, centers on precise planning and execution of initiatives that support the visualization of the established vision. This involves setting, measuring, and reporting on specific key performance indicators.

These three elements form the foundation for success in a rapidly changing and complex business environment.

A 30,000 Foot View...x1000
With 30 million Skyward members to serve, Dr. Ben-Khedher says he maintains his drive by designing meaningful ways to engage with members, as well as crafting new ways of working with team members and embracing new technologies.

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The Emirates Experience

Delighting customers is not just part of the Skywards experience; it permeates every aspect of Emirates' customer-focused strategy. This includes *Chauffeur-drive*, a complimentary program that escorts first class and business class passengers within 50 miles to a participating airport.

Our world is marked by rapid change and constant evolution, and leadership must embody three essential traits to enable organizations to reach their highest potential. Leaders must adopt the mindset of apprenticeship, acknowledging that no one possesses all the knowledge. This involves a commitment to learning, unlearning, and listening with humility. Leaders must also embrace the role of facilitators (FISs), recognizing that collaboration is key. By harnessing passion, energy, and creativity within diverse cross-functional teams and fostering powerful networks, leaders pave the way for innovative solutions to emerge from the fusion of ideas.

Finally, as leaders, we must act as

amplifiers of talent, unlocking the full potential of individuals by encouraging robust exchanges of ideas, facilitating rigorous debates, and empowering and stretching their teams. In this dynamic and uncertain world, these leadership traits are essential to navigating change and achieving peak organizational performance.

IQ: As a leader, what keeps you up at night and what are some of the most difficult aspects of your role that others may not realize?

Dr. Ben-Khedher: Situated at the intersection of customer experience and commercial contribution, Skywards faces the ongoing challenge of maintaining a

delicate equilibrium between these two vital aspects. Functioning as advocates for the members we serve and the airlines we support, our role demands a nuanced approach that blends both sense and sensibility. Notably, what sets our responsibilities at Skywards apart is our reliance on various entities to deliver actual services to our members throughout their travel journey. This necessitates constant collaboration and communication with different touchpoints, from airport lounges to onboard services.

An integral aspect of our success lies in the extreme collaboration required with internal stakeholders. Raising awareness at various touchpoints involves coordination with marketing colleagues for member

communication and commercial colleagues for accessing flight rewards. While some may perceive this dependency as a challenge, I see it as a rewarding experience that fosters a collaborative spirit, making collaboration an integral part of our organizational DNA.

Contrary to expectations, Skywards, operating under the umbrella of the strong Emirates brand, continually endeavors to prove its value. Despite the excellence of the product and customer experience offered, we perceive this as an opportunity rather than a challenge. It compels us to forge lasting emotional bonds between Emirates and travelers, including those who may be infrequent. Our mission is to secure a prominent place in the hearts and minds of travelers, ensuring that Skywards remains the top-of-mind choice whenever thoughts turn to travel.

IQ: Conversely, what excites you most about the future?

Dr. Ben-Khedher: Well, a lot of things, but there is a new generation of digital natives, customers and stuff that is coming on board and new expectations are being set. So, for us, we need to design new ways to engage with our members, but also new ways of working for our staff and embrace new technologies as well.

To do so, this keeps the transformation we started in 2016 as an evergreen one. Our target for 2026 has us multiplying our key metrics by nearly five times within ten years from when we initiated the transformation.

This keeps us on our toes. Personally, I feel re-energized just by talking about it. This is the secret to eternal youth as a leader. **IQ**



BIO: Dr. Nejjib Ben Khedher
Divisional Senior Vice President,
Emirates Skywards

Dr. Nejjib Ben Khedher carries 30 years of global airline and travel experience, including leading executive positions with Travelocity in North America and Sabre Holdings globally. He is currently the divisional senior vice president, Emirates Skywards since July 2015, leading its digital transformation from an FFP to a broader lifestyle loyalty business, doubling its size and introducing a number of industry firsts.

Dr. Ben-Khedher started his career with American Airlines in the areas of network planning and revenue management, after earning a PhD in industrial engineering from the University of Michigan. He also holds an MS in Artificial Intelligence, and an MS in Air Transportation from French Engineering Schools.