

Selling the product



ROCK STARS, GOLF PROS, MOVIE STARS, AND YES, THE JUST PLAIN RICH, all have one thing in common — they want to fly privately. Corporate titans, at least those that are brave enough to do so, also fly privately unless the hypocritical eyes of some governmental authority are on them. What these people have in common is that they all realise that flying privately is fun of course, and it's always nice to avoid the crowds, the lines and the bad food in airports, but it's also good business. The sector however, still suffers from the lack of a strong enough voice in Asia to help it sell that notion, although that's changing.

The Asian Business Aviation Association (AsBAA) is mounting a fairly strong behind the scenes effort to make the sector's collective voice heard among the various stakeholders in the region. At the ABACE show in Shanghai this year, AsBAA officials said they would work with entities like Changi Airport Group to ensure the city-state's Seletar Aerospace Park is uppermost in any development plans. The group said it was also working with a recently established pilot chapter in Singapore to take their views into account. The association also announced it had signed an agreement with Subic Bay International Airport to help develop business aviation infrastructure in the Philippines.

Working in conjunction with AsBAA is Hong Kong-based Asian Sky Group (ASG), which through its various reports has become an important voice for the industry. The group recently released its annual report on the Asian business jet fleet which, ASG said, showed that "old days of austerity and worrying about public perception are gone". ASG officials said at ABACE that buyers today were more worried about financing options, registration questions and where to base their aircraft.

The ASG reports show what most business aviation players already know — the region is sorely lacking in infrastructure, lacking in FBOs, flight service centres and the myriad other things that make for a successful and profitable industry. China is a bright spot actually, at least according to ASG, with the country currently building 500 general aviation airports.

Other areas are growing too with Australia being one of the top performing countries in business and general aviation, but Southeast

Asia is lagging, according to ASG's most recent report. China had 27 aircraft deliveries while Hong Kong had 10, but everywhere else in Southeast Asia saw negative growth. Singapore's fleet fell to 48 aircraft from 60 due to the bankruptcy of Zetta Jet and Indonesia lost eight aircraft.

Another problem facing the industry, albeit one that could change at any moment given the ability of the current US administration to change its mind on an hourly basis, is the potential for a trade war between the US and China. China announced that it may impose a 25 percent tariff on US aircraft with an empty weight of between 15,000 kilograms and 45,000 kilograms, which creates a threat to business aircraft from companies like Boeing and Gulfstream among others.

Given all this, it is key for AsBAA and other industry voices to speak loudly about how general and business aviation helps the economies of the countries in which it operates. The sector provides jobs, not just for pilots and other crew members, but also for thousands of MRO workers, FBO staff, sales people and the managers that help keep things in order.

And business aviation is not just rock stars or the aforesaid corporate titans flying on Gulfstream G650s or a Dassault 8X. It's also hundreds of business people flying on King Airs or Beechcraft Bonanzas in places like Indonesia

and Australia who need to check out three or four mining sites in a day and make it back to headquarters in time for dinner.

I think what entities like AsBAA and other sector players could do to help improve the image of the industry is not just reach out to governments, but also to the editors and journalists at mainstream press outlets that are the first to slam corporations for maintaining business jets. Show them the numbers, show them the savings to the company in terms of time (which is money after all) and show them how business jets are not just playthings for the rich and famous, but time (and money) saving tools that benefit the wider economies of the countries in which they operate. Just a thought.

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