

## Robin Padgett's two hats



Robin Padgett, the new Chairman of the Airline Catering Association

Over the past few weeks, Robin Padgett has been venturing out from his home in Dubai to parts of the world that are probably not practicing the thorough vaccination regime and public health initiatives that have made the UAE one of the world's success stories.

But as the northern hemisphere ventured into summer, [dnata's](#) Divisional Senior Vice President for Catering and Retail says he is encountering customers and fellow travelers in a different frame of mind than they were one short (or long, depending on your point of view) year ago.

"There's a punchy enthusiasm to get back and get flying again," he tells *PAX International*.

Whether it is the northeastern United States, or Central Asia where he has touched down recently, conversations with travelers and customers reveal that although confidence in air travel has grown close to pre-pandemic levels, uncertainty has remained. Government restrictions have the potential to change quickly and affect passenger movement in unexpected ways.

Back at home, dnata is an organization that has changed somewhat in structure under the direction of Executive Vice President Steve Allen who took over the top spot at the company in April. Padgett's division, which handles the airline catering and retail part of dnata's operation, will be stressing the company's retail sales capabilities. Rather than a "seismic shift" in emphasis, Padgett calls it more of a recognition of the current landscape of airline food service that has been going on for years.

"We want to highlight our expertise and also recognize that (retail) is a large part of our portfolio and is becoming part of on-board service business that airlines can no longer ignore," he says.



dnata began a meal delivery service at Schiphol Airport with the help of iFLEAT, Dutch company [Thisbezorgd.nl](https://www.thisbezorgd.nl)

In October of last year, dnata trialed a partnership with a leading food delivery company at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam, supplying meals to passengers on [Transavia](https://www.transavia.com). Customers can choose from a range of fresh salads, poke bowls, sushi platters and hot meals and have their order delivered to the aircraft just hours before departure.

Though seen as a well-known and vital part of airline cabin service, Padgett says buy-on-board food service is still shaping a solid, positive identity. As airlines invest seriously in the quality of their retail offer and experience, passengers are seeing retail as the immense value-add it is – not simply a method for airlines to generate revenue.

“Choice and innovation has benefitted greatly from the move to retail. COVID-19 will only drive the growth of retail further and the investment in doing it right,” Padgett adds.

Earlier this year, Padgett took the role of Chairman of the [Airline Catering Association’s](https://www.airlinecateringassociation.com) Strategic Committee, succeeding LSG Group’s Erdmann Rauer. Much of the difficult task of navigating through a year of pandemic may be in the wake, now, but Padgett says that telling the story of airline food service — its safety and standards — and the role it plays will be a major part of the task ahead.

Padgett adds that the ACA will be pushing governments around the world for what assistance they can give to help train and position employees as they return to work. Also, looming in the future will be additional environmental regulations. Those too will require an effort by the ACA to tell the world about initiatives already underway. Airlines, caterers and suppliers have already done much to develop products and services that are sustainable, he says from new lightweight materials to environmentally friendly packaging.

“We will also need to explain ourselves and explain what that means for the consumer and, more importantly, what that means for the environment,” he says.

All this activity will occur as air travel opens up and forecasters look to the out years. Padgett was enthusiastic to see the industry gather in a limited way for the recent Arabian Travel Market in May and looks forward to a 2022 when more events take place, to confidently engage with customers

face-to-face.