



**Guest
writer**

**BY PHANG
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THERE'S no magical spell that drives shoppers into malls. Instead, operators need to have a good understanding of what their malls offer and the type of catchment they want to attract.

And no single formula applies to all malls. Rather, the adage "different strokes for different folks" aptly describes what malls should be doing. The "magic formula" is

keeping close to who the customers are and what they want.

The competition is stiff. For a small nation, Malaysia certainly punches above its weight and is ranked as one of the world's most must-go-to destinations when it comes to shopping.

For two consecutive years, Malaysia was ranked the world's No. 4 global shopping destination after New York, London and Tokyo. In fact, three of the world's largest shopping malls are in Malaysia, namely 1 Utama Shopping Centre, Mid Valley Megamall and Sunway Pyramid Shopping Mall.

According to a study conducted by Malaysia Shopping Malls Association (PPK Malaysia), for a country with a relatively small population of 30 million, it boasts over 500 malls. And that number is expected to increase with more developers joining the bandwagon and established operators expanding their portfolio of malls.

The growth of malls signifies the change in people's lifestyles. Malls are no longer just places for shopping – they are also for leisure, entertainment and socialisation. Shopping as a popular pastime has seen an increase among locals and tourists.

Heart and soul of the community

It is estimated that one out of five Malaysians spends his leisure time at a mall on any given weekend. Hence, malls have become an extension of people's lives. In fact, they have become part of the heart and soul of the community.

The changing lifestyle and new shopping behaviour has reshaped the landscape of the shopping industry. Mall operators are being challenged to be more creative and innovative in order to compete to remain ahead and be sustainable.

In the Klang Valley, it is estimated that 66 shopping malls are located in Kuala Lumpur and another 58 in Selangor. Combined, they offer 33.7 million sq ft of retail space.

In such a competitive market, malls that are able to distinct themselves from others with unique differentiators will be able to attract the crowds. Successful malls are usually strong in their own positioning and brand identities. These include Suria KLCC, Pavilion, Sunway Pyramid, Mid Valley, One Utama, Plaza Low Yat, Berjaya Times Square, The Curve and Gateway@KLIA2.

Strong branding

Strong brand identity allows these malls to face newer competitors entering the market as well as existing competitors as they keep a stronghold in people's minds.

The identity occupies top brand recall in the minds of shoppers and that can be a very powerful connection a mall



Mid Valley Megamall, one of the nation's biggest shopping venues

Different strokes for different malls

Shopping centres are part of people's lifestyle where they converge for leisure, entertainment and socialisation



Themed and unique precincts such as Tokyo Street in Pavilion breaks away from the norm in shopping environment

has with its shoppers. Branding built extensively and consistently over time allows these malls to reap the benefits over the long run.

While a strong brand, clear unique selling points (USPs) and great brand identity help, that is only part of the story. The other part calls for creating an experience that supports the brand, positioning and USPs.

Today's malls are beyond shopping. They are lifestyle centres that create urban experiences for people to go to as part of their discovery journeys.

As such, mall environments are becoming increasingly interesting and creative. Comfortable common space and ambience, good connectivity, destination sight-lines, exciting store design and atmosphere, unique interior design and layout have all become parameters to be pushed and explored to accentuate the overall experience.

The boundaries of sight, sound, smell and touch are being constantly redefined.

For example, Starbucks is not just a social place, but also a study place too. Students enjoy having their group

study in Starbucks instead of in a library because with enabling technology, searching for information has become so easy. This disrupts the traditional way of students accessing information and the need for a physical library.

Green initiatives such as car park guiding systems with sensor lights provide convenience for shoppers when searching for parking space. For art lovers, malls have also become their destinations as art galleries open up within or artistic art pieces are displayed for public viewing.

Themed and unique precincts such as Asian Avenue in Sunway Pyramid, Tokyo Street in Pavilion and others, which break away the monotony and clinical retail environment, are some of the successful retail concept precincts that attract crowds.

Real-life stories

While people go to malls for brands and experiences, it's ultimately how they feel about the experiences that will get them to talk and share with others. It's not just about the merchandise that people buy but the stories behind the merchandise and how they relate to their lives. It is all about the shoppers' story time.

When people dine at DC Comics Superheroes Cafe, they can share the stories of these superheroes, put them up on Facebook and let thousands of others know their stories of how, when and who they dine with.

When people queue to buy Crossover shoes, it is because of the desire to own the limited edition as well their stories in owning these limited editions. Likewise, when people queue overnight during an Apple product launch, it's because of the novel excitement.

All these real-life experiences and stories will permeate across social media and may create viral effects that attract more and more people to shop.

People are buying into "why" now. It is a trend of "showrooming", a trend of shopping for review before buying. Hence, having the key winning retail

brands that know how to create more why's and unique stories will have the advantage to draw more crowd.

Decoration in shopping malls, especially during festive seasons, is a common expectation of shoppers. Hence, it is gradually a norm for mall operators to invest on creative festive decorations with to draw the crowds and create publicity.

Some of the classic festive decorative elements include giant Christmas trees with snowfall during Christmas, a majestic palace surrounded by cherry blossoms during Chinese New Year, kampung houses with nostalgic displays during Hari Raya, colourful *kolam* with unique patterns during Deepavali, dazzling street lightings during year-end celebrations and more.

Shoppers' lifestyles

Mall decorations also present shoppers with plenty of photographic opportunities to share and remember. Malls are capitalising on the lifestyles of shoppers' postings on social media to further create word-of-mouth publicity.

Mural arts that are reflective of today's local lifestyle or past history, and 3D art corners are some examples that can be created which locals and tourists are also very fond of.

Characters parading in theme parks and promoters walking about with unique costumes and appearances are also tactical to offer pleasant surprises and wholesome values that shoppers will remember for a long time.

Shopping malls are also preferred destinations for events with celebrities and artistes' appearances, music entertainment, food fest, sports, licensed characters and community gatherings as major draws.

Surprising shoppers or bringing something unique to the community is a great opportunity to differentiate one mall from another, and works well in drawing crowds.

Shopping rewards

It is important to note that the conventional value marketing still plays an key role in drawing crowds.

While enjoying the new shopping experience, many are still attracted by shopping rewards such as gift redemptions, special discounts, contest prizes, anniversary sales and loyalty programmes.

Creative promotions and offerings are important to entice spending and improve sales conversion. The impact is more significant, especially during the economic slowdown when people are more cautious in their spending and always on the lookout for value for money.

Marketers know that a great experience beyond expectation will build emotional touch and drive loyalty. Hence, for all the good efforts that are done, malls should never forget to close the loop with superior customer care.

Well-trained and friendly frontliners including concierge assistants, security personnel, mall ambassadors, car park attendants, foreign language translators and sales assistants play roles.

Showing genuine care to customers is key to great customer experience. Positive and regular customer engagement will lead to customer satisfaction and hence drives frequent visitations. **FocusM**

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