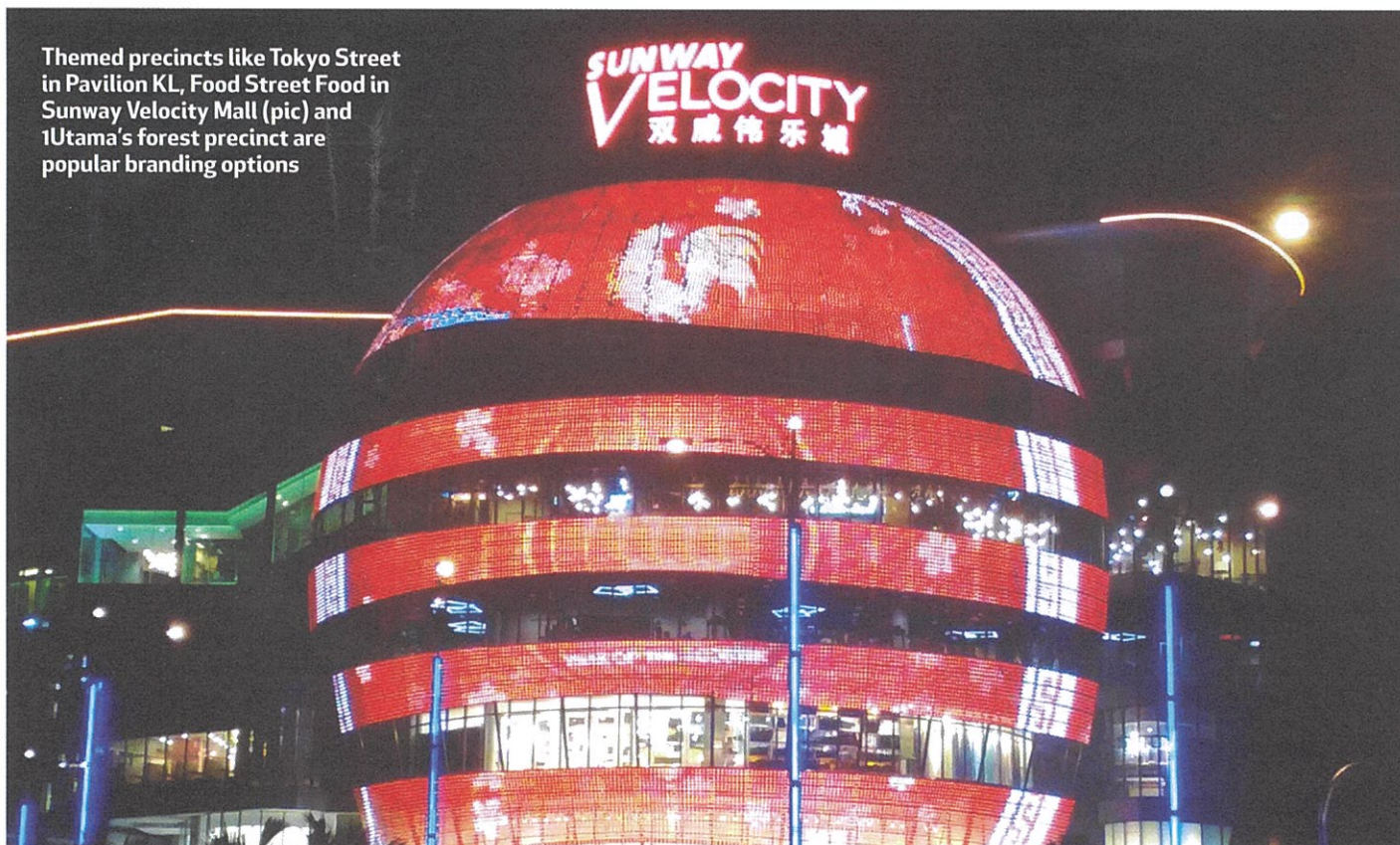


Themed precincts like Tokyo Street in Pavilion KL, Food Street Food in Sunway Velocity Mall (pic) and iUtama's forest precinct are popular branding options



It is not hard to imagine why shopping malls have taken off in such a big way in Malaysia. Air-conditioned, comfortable, clean, shop variety and the fact that one can do almost everything under one roof, they have become immensely popular.

Shopping malls are so integral to our modern life that it is hard to imagine life without it.

PPK Malaysia estimates that there are around 670 shopping malls in the country.

The largest concentration is in the central region, particularly the Klang Valley, which sees the highest percentage at 39.1%. The northern region makes up 21% while southern (20.7%), east coast (6.3%) and east Malaysia (12.8%) make up the rest.

But what is astounding is how fast the number of shopping malls grew. The first shopping mall, Ampang Park, was only established in 1974. In just a short span of 45 years, that number grew by leaps and bounds to over 670 malls today.

That is an average of about 15 malls built every year for the past 45 years. Growth has been phenomenal. And this does not include developments which are in planning and construction stages.

It is foreseeable more shopping malls will enter the scene in the future. The lure of potential recurring income is one of the most compelling catalysts for the growth of malls.

While the abundance of malls is great for consumers as they have ultimately opened up more choices, it is a different story for the malls.

The intense competition means shopping malls have to find their brand differentiating factor to stand out from the rest.

And this can be tricky given the homogeneity of retail mix in shopping malls. What makes one mall stand out in terms of branding from another?

Answering this question requires deeper understanding of the changes that are happening and how the malls want to position themselves.

Changing trend

Shopping malls often become the de-facto destination for the weekend. PPK Malaysia estimates that one in five Malaysians frequent shopping malls on any given weekend. This is actually a high number.

But this trend is reshaping. There is a growing trend of malls becoming a destination for weekdays, too.

The growth of integrated developments comprising shopping malls, offices, commercial and even high-rise residences sees

Branding comes alive in malls

- An average of 15 malls were built every year for the past 45 years
- This intense competition means shopping malls have to find their brand differentiating factor



by Darren Chear

a higher use throughout the week.

Often enough, we see meetings taking place in cafes and deals being struck at restaurants located in shopping malls. They have become a venue for leisure and business.

The change in the purpose of visiting shopping malls has an enormous effect on the way these complexes are run, particularly raising the question as "brands" as to how they maintain relevancy in consumers' lives.

Rising affluence, urbanisation and high-rise living, travel exposure, communal changes, leisure growth and others, also fundamentally change consumer behaviour and affect how shopping malls are perceived as brands.

The hard aspect like architecture has always been a favoured form of mall branding.

Take Suria KLCC, Sunway Pyramid and The Starling as examples. Suria KLCC earned the distinction from its world-famous tourist icon twin towers while Sunway Pyramid and The Starling adopted themed settings.

Across the borders, Icon Siam personifies this but the Thailand-based mall took



Thailand's Icon Siam infused Thai cultural elements featuring a floating museum as a tribute to King Taksin

it to the next level with the infusion of Thai culture as a strong brand differentiating factor.

Mall branding can also be attained through retail mix, particularly anchor tenant selection. In the past, novel anchors like Kimisawa, Isetan and IKEA had created tremendous brand association for shopping malls to capitalise on.

Done right, it is still one of the more enduring ways to heighten a mall's brand awareness to the general public. But as homogeneity takes place due to retailers' need for economies of scale, this novelty can easily be replaced.

Themed precincts

Themed precincts are also popular branding options. Tokyo Street in Pavilion KL, Food Street Food in Sunway Velocity Mall and iUtama's forest precinct exemplify this. It is not hard to fathom the use of architecture – it is the most prominent, visible and easy to deploy aspect of a brand. Think of it as the "fashion" that one wears.

But the real question is beyond the fashion – how does a shopping mall showcase its "personality" – or the soft aspects. This is a difficult question to answer as a deeper thought process is required.

This requires shopping malls to look at their brand personality and find ways to propagate that in multiple platforms. The closer that personality reflects society's social aspirations, the greater that mall's brand personality gets across.

As society progresses, civil issues and social causes will be in the forefront of communities. We have seen many instances of this from retailers – L'Oréal's Hairdressers Against AIDS and Body Shop's Forever Against Animal Testing are great examples.

Malls have also taken this approach in setting their brands apart from their peers. On the international front, Australia's Garden City Shopping Centre's creation of a memory café helped to build an inclusive space for those with dementia and India's Viviana Mall calls for "stop acid sale" awareness in view of acid attacks on women.

Advocacy marketing

Closer to home, Sunway Putra Mall's advocacy marketing strategy to bring out pride experience as a branding differentiator saw it emerge as Malaysia's first autism friendly mall.

The brainchild emerged after the mall's team members opened up and found there are people within their extended families living with autism, often in silence. Such a stand to include all parts of society works wonders in branding.

Culture can be a great brand differentiator. Not only does it create a sense of pride, it can be hard to emulate. When it comes to this aspect, Thailand shopping malls have done a good job.

By carefully looking back at its historical and cultural roots, shopping mall developments in recent times were able to weave, curate and honour culture. Take for instance, Icon Siam infused Thai cultural elements featuring a floating museum as a tribute to King Taksin.

As more shopping malls emerge and converge, branding will increasingly become an important strategic tool. While its importance cannot be denied, the formulation of a good brand is never easy.

But how does a shopping mall know if it has done a good job in branding? It is when the brand itself belongs to the people and not the mall anymore. When people rejoice, react or reject, it tells that the brand has come of age. **FocusM**

Darren Chear is associate director of branding, communications and special projects of Sunway Malls, which is a member of Malaysia Shopping Malls Association (PPK)