A retailing tale

Three SMU students talk about their prize-winning retail project, reports OH BOON PING

Imagine you are rushing home after work and, while passing along the CityLink Mall, the thought of buying some groceries suddenly strikes you. Wouldn’t it be nice to know there’s a mini grocery store nearby, so that you don’t have to make a detour to some shopping mall for your purchases?

In fact, this idea is one of the recommendations made in a prize-winning retail management project by three final-year students from the Singapore Management University (SMU).

“Having shops retailing such products there makes sense since they will be able to capture the working crowd during the after-work hours,” said the team comprising Patricia Low, 26; Gwen Soh, 22; and Jace Loi, 22.

They said shops presently located along CityLink’s stretch leading to Suntec City are often “up-market” ones that cater mainly to leisure shoppers with a taste for the pricey.

“However, the retailers, whom we surveyed, said that their customers are often busy executives, meaning shops selling ‘quick-grab’ items should be able to better serve their needs,” said Ms Low, the team leader.

Targeting the young

Another recommendation made — retail more products such as shoes or apparel at mid-range prices to target the younger crowd. Said Ms Soh: “Perhaps, there could be more shops selling funky clothes and the like so as to draw youths to shop there.”

Work on their projects started four months ago with the group brainstorming about the ideal shopping mall for their study. They eventually decided on CityLink because the concept was refreshing. Ms Soh explained: “We wanted to work on something that was different from conventional projects.”

“So during one of our discussions, the issue of how some underpass could be better utilised popped up — and CityLink came to mind instantly,” she added.

Moreover, according to the team, land space there was always a limiting factor.

Soon after, the students started gathering information on such underground malls in countries such as the US, Hong Kong and Japan so as to better understand its concept and structure. The formulation of a questionnaire followed soon after, which according to the team, is also one of the challenges they faced in this study.

“It is tough because you don’t want a questionnaire that will skew your findings and at the same time, you want to reconfirm some assumptions,” Ms Loi said. “So we had to use our intuition (and) gut feel to design and rework the questionnaire.”

They also enlisted the help of their marketing professor, Thomas Tan, in working out the survey questions. The entire process took about two weeks to complete.

Getting respondents to answer the survey did not prove to be any easier either. Said Ms Low: “Most people declined to be surveyed and there were also others who might not have been entirely truthful in their answers, thereby skewing the results.”

Given that their team is relatively smaller compared to other teams — which have around four to five members — this also meant that each member had to shoulder a heavier workload. “Each of us had to get at least 40 respondents in about two weeks and we had to filter the results as well,” said Ms Soh.

They eventually managed to compile 124 survey results and came up with the recommendations accordingly.

Did they expect to win? “Still pretty overwhelmed, we least expected ourselves to win as the other teams also came up with very good presentations and ideas,” said Ms Soh.

She added: “The mall that we worked on was also relatively much smaller compared to those from the other teams and we thought we might have lost out in that aspect.”

The three students are still keeping their career options open. But Ms Low said the “exciting and challenging nature of the retail industry” definitely makes a big draw for them.