A sparkling effort for a better mall experience

BY JESSICA LIN

IF YOU want a shopping centre to rock, just ask the mallrats. Recent finalists of the Capitaland Marketing Awards 2007 proved as much, when they chose to focus on what youth wanted from retailers.

The competition, organised by Singapore's largest retail manager, yielded such mall-reviving ideas as shopper maps, concierge services and an electronics catalogue. Targeting nine Capitaland-managed shopping malls, teams from tertiary institutions worked with a budget of US$60,000 ($88,000) to draw shoppers there.

Six finalist groups then presented their campaigns, with mock-ups of marketing collateral, to a panel of four judges — SMU's senior vice-president Lynda Wee, head of marketing communications Belina Low, Golden Village managing director Kenneth Tan and Straits Times Youthlink editor Serene Goh.

The winners, a three-woman team from Singapore Management University (SMU), chose Funan DigitalLife Mall as their project. It was urged among young shoppers which spurred Team Allspark to field ideas for a shoppers' map, Internet kiosks and product catalogues.

"We searched for quotations and made sure to stick to the budget. We stayed over in school for two nights without sleeping to make sure we had the presentation down pat. We wanted to do our best," said Miss Zhang Xuewen, 21, a third-year business major.

The runner-up was Nanyang Technological University's team, which came up with the idea of a family living in a glass house at Lot 1 with the tagline Living Life @ Lot One, while the third prize went to the National University of Singapore team, which suggested cosplay at Bugis junction.

Youth see malls as community centres. And, in their hours there spent window-shopping, coffee-sipping and LAN gaming, they have also devoted a strong sense of ownership in how they are run.

What's more, they have become a key consumer group for malls. Although according to statistics, those aged between 15 and 29 number 729,609 — about 20 per cent of residents here — their spending habits belie those numbers.

The Straits Times reported in 2003 that the age group — no longer the near-quiet-listener age — spends more than 25 per cent of their monthly pay on shopping, pubbing and travel — higher than the older Singaporeans, who put only 20 per cent of their income into non-essentials.

Supporting this is an Asian survey by global research company Synovate released in July 2005 — which surveyed youths under 24 across eight Asian economies including Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan and India.

Singapore emerged tops with 820 youth surveyed saying they spent $50 to $80 each month on electronics and games; more than 15 per cent above the regional average.

Other than Capitaland, other leading operators — Magnum, which runs VivoCity, and Frasers Centrepoint, which runs Causeway Point — are also harvesting ideas from youth.

Majorelle saw local and international student designers competing to come up with interactive street furniture for VivoCity and "extensive market research, was done to "understand the needs of different segments of the market".

And Frasers Centrepoint makes sure young people are represented at its malls. Said a company spokesman: "All Frasers Centrepoint malls have shops that youth can shop at. However, Causeway Point, Compass Point and Northpoint have shops of these shops including 7th Street, Action City and Converse, among others, to cater to the higher volume of youth from the educational institutions in the vicinity."

Peer pressure, too, cannot be underestimated. Though as individuals they may not have access to a lot of money, young people influence their friends and throw their weight behind ever-changing trends.

Mr Ronald Rajan, editor of men's lifestyle magazine Men's Health, whose readers are aged between 20 and 45, said: "Youth have fewer obligations elsewhere and are more susceptible to advertising. That makes them very lucrative to marketers."

"They spend a lot on what is hot in a short period of time, then invest again later as a totally new range of things."

Fun, he added, with the economy thriving, "they probably have more spending money and are more inclined to work for their own money."

So it pays for operators to keep them entertained.

Mr Simon Ho, chief operating officer at Capitaland Retail, sees the marketing awards as a way for the company to develop marketing strategies and "gain greater insights".

"Youth form a very big component of our customers," he said.

"We want to engage the youth actively and create buzz so what malls become real-life case studies for youth to hone their business skills and develop innovative marketing solutions in response to the challenges of the competitive retail sector." Capitaland, which manages 82 retail assets in Asia, is going a step further too.

The competition's top prizes of a seven-week internship for each member is also a means for the company to identify future employees. Last year's winner, Ms Fanny Ang, 23, also an SMU student, has been a marketing communications executive there for the last four months.

She said the competition let her "take theory out of the classroom to formulate realistic business strategies."

This year's winners may get to experience that too — at Funan, if discussions play out.

Said SMU's Miss Zhang: "The thought that our proposal might actually be implemented is wonderful. It is encouraging to know our efforts were good enough to be used in the corporate world."