

Inside retailing



A woman's domain

She understands what constitutes a positive retail experience

■ By Joyce Yap, Loke Poh Lin and Evelyn Lo

Fact or myth? In an industry where the focus is on women, where its life blood is fuelled by women, shopping centres today are still predominately designed and managed by men.

A simple survey of the retail management industry will reveal that there are generally fewer top management posts held by women, aside from those who are there by blood ties, especially in family-run operations. Women generally occupy middle or junior management jobs and those who rise in rank by virtue of their capability, competitive nature or seniority are the rare exceptions.

To understand why such a situation prevails, we have to examine the background of retail centres and the various aspects of centre management.

In the 70s and 80s, centre management essentially involved "maintenance and facility management". The complex manager's main role was to ensure that all the mall's technical aspects were operational and functioning at all times. The job involved irregular hours and technical know-how, all hallmarks of a male dominated profession.

But over time, the shopping centre management industry has become more sophisticated and competitive and has evolved and expanded to include aspects such as:

- Retail planning during the development phase;
- Leasing of shopping lots;
- Marketing, which includes advertis-

- ing and promotions;
- Public relations;
- Operations which includes building maintenance, mechanical and electrical maintenance, car-park management, housekeeping and security;
- Administration and finance;
- Human resource management; and
- Asset management.

Shopping centre management has therefore grown to encompass more than just facility management. In today's context, aggressive marketing and promotions strategies are crucial to a centre's competitive edge and success. Commitment and passion also play a vital role and the issue of gender has become less relevant.

So this brings us back to the question at hand: Has women's role in shopping centre management grown in Malaysia as well as on the international scene?

The answer is yes. Recognition has been given to women in retail all over the world. Take for instance Kathleen M. Nelson. Nelson is the newly elected chairman (2003/04) of the International Council of Shopping Centres (ICSC). As the head, she is the first financial service industry executive to steer the 44,000-member association and manage a US\$40 billion (RM152 billion) mortgage and pension fund.

In Singapore, the president of The Association of Shopping Centres, Singapore (TASC) is Vivienne Tan, who is also the general manager of investment properties in Centrepoint

Properties Ltd, which owns shopping centres, office towers and a high-tech industrial park.

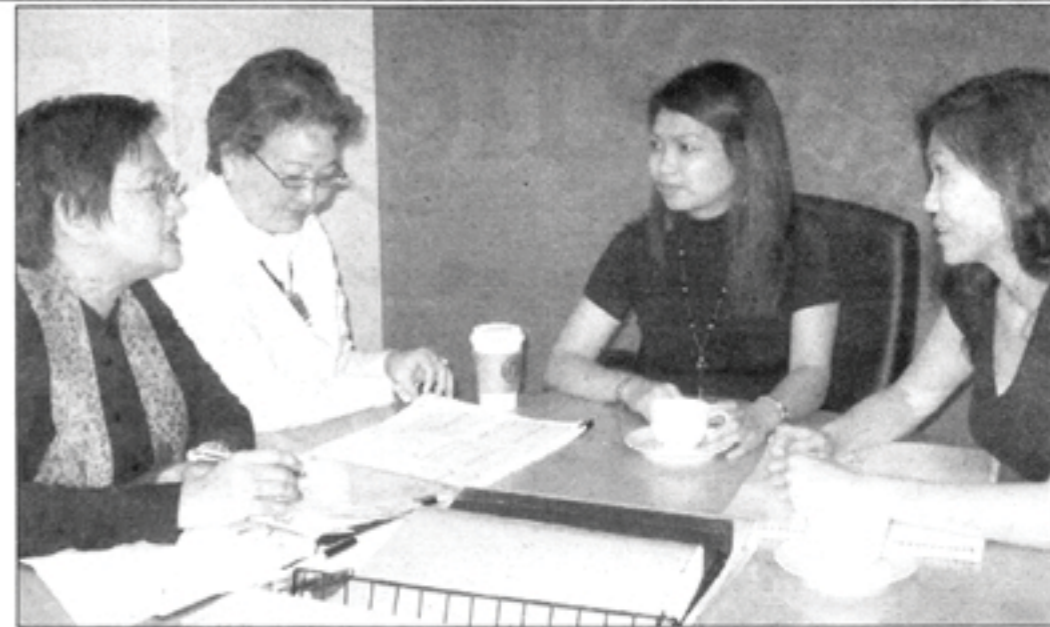
Closer to home you will find such prominent women members of the industry such as Patricia Qua, general manager of Central Market; Eva Hew, senior manager of marketing and promotions of Leisure Mall; Datin Rafidah Jalil, senior marketing manager of Suria KLCC; and Chong Swee Ying, general manager of 1 Utama.

A recent market survey has also indicated that the majority (between 60 and 70 per cent) of middle management in the industry is predominantly women and the number is on the rise each year.

Why has the trend changed? The answer may be that women now have greater opportunities to higher education and employment. They are equally qualified and just as capable as men in doing the job.

Physical constraints are also no longer a deterrent with women having learnt to manage the work. Besides, well-managed centres involve good business planning and teamwork, where operational systems and monitoring have become more crucial than the gender of the manager.

There are, of course, some barriers women still need to overcome. Women seeking out jobs are sometimes asked questions on their role as wife and homemaker. Some shopping centre owners are still sceptical about employing women as centre managers because of their biological differences, often perceived as "constraints".



Women in the game: Yap (second from left) with her Pavilion KL team (left to right) Loke, assistant leasing manager Cynthia Lim and assistant marketing manager Melissa Chan.

But it is very short-sighted thinking on their (the owners') part as all these perceived setbacks are, in fact, only temporary and can be overcome by good time management, skillful delegation, effective teamwork and monitoring. In fact, according equal respect and opportunity to women will usually yield better returns on investment as women are generally more committed, have more patience and perseverance. They are less demanding and usually prefer stability.

The industry needs to realise that shopping centre management is an ideal career choice for women as no one understands what constitutes a positive retail experience more than women. And certainly, the woman of today has the right qualities to be an outstanding centre manager, given the right training and opportunity.

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Certification of managers

PPK together with RCMC Sdn Bhd will be conducting a Certification Course in Shopping and Highrise Complex Management this month and next.

From Feb 16 to 18, Parts 1 and 2 of the course on Marketing and Leasing, and Administration, Finance and Human Resource, will be held at the Melia Hotel in Kuala Lumpur. Parts 1 and 2 on Operations and Maintenance, which is the third core discipline of the course, will be held on March 15 and 16 at the same venue.

The batch of participants who have completed the first two parts of the three core disciplines of the course last year will be sitting for their examinations under Part 3 over this period and should, by end of next month, be certified.