

Singapore Girl more crucial now as icon of quality: SIA

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SHE may be taking a back seat in the latest marketing campaign, but top brass at Singapore Airlines say the SIA Girl is far from over the hill.

They told The Straits Times her role has become more critical as the carrier increasingly relies on top-quality service to distinguish itself from its competitors.

"The essence of the Singapore Girl and her gentle, caring ways remain especially relevant today," said SIA executive vice-president (commercial) Mak Swee Wah. "In this ever-changing world, it is even more important for service excellence to be the key differentiator."

This contrasts with days gone by, when SIA led the pack with superior hardware, new planes, flat beds and the latest in-flight movies. Now, these are offered by all top-tier carriers, including Emirates and Cathay Pacific.

In this more competitive environment, the iconic Singapore Girl remains a feature of every branding drive as she helps the airline stand out.

"What has changed is the way she is portrayed," said SIA acting senior vice-president (sales and marketing) Chin Yau Seng.

The airline's latest \$5 million campaign, being launched today, took more than a year to make and cuts across print, television and digital platforms in more than 120 countries. There are three commercials shot in China, Italy and Scotland - all feature the Singapore Girl.

But unlike in the last branding exercise, the spotlight is not on her. "We are putting the whole focus smack centre on the customer," said Mr Chin. "The SIA Girl, who obviously plays a very big role in all the ads, is a symbol of the lengths we go to for our customers."

For example, one commercial starts with her picking jas-

mine tea in China and ends with her serving tea on the aeroplane.

Critics have called the Singapore Girl outdated. But Mr Chin said not many brands have a living, breathing icon. "No matter what, this remains a very strong point in our own marketing and we don't intend to move away from it because it is very rare."

Professor Jochen Wirtz of the National University of Singapore, who co-authored a book on SIA called *Flying High In A Competitive Industry: Secrets Of The World's Leading Airline*, said it made sense for the airline to capitalise on the Singapore Girl image.

"Featuring new routes, new technologies or new products can be done periodically to position an airline as a leader in the industry, but it



SIA's Mr Chin Yau Seng says the gentle, caring Singapore Girl (left) is "a symbol of the lengths we go to for our customers". PHOTOS: DESMOND LIM, SIA

is not a powerful positioning in the long run," he said. "There has to be the superior overall experience on board delivered by cabin crew who are supported by superior products and processes."

Singapore Management University associate professor of marketing education Seshan Ramaswami said the iconic Singapore Girl has served the airline well.

But he added that the image of an attentive Asian woman "may convey a negative stereotype of Asian women not in keeping with the tremendous strides in profes-

sional success of women the world over, and in Asia too".

He suggested showcasing stewards too, adding that SIA must focus on all aspects of its business if it wants to stay ahead of rivals.

Marketing consultant Lawrence Law, 57, who flies with SIA to Jakarta and back every week, said its customer service centre in the city needs improvement. "Getting help from the SIA office in Jakarta can be very trying," he added. "Poorly trained staff are taking longer to answer queries."

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