

Marketing ... with charm and wit



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Miss Universe pageant is a splendid opportunity to sell Singapore

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WHILE the Miss Universe pageant may come across as a glitzy media event broadcast live at prime time, what the viewers don't see is that the delegates would have by then spent close to a month in the host country, networking, meeting people and representing their country at a high business and government society level.

At the Miss Universe

pageant in Trinidad and Tobago 1999, the delegates met with totally different expectations depending on their national backgrounds.

While Miss Venezuela having graduated from Beauty College and trained from the age of eight to be Miss Venezuela, was escorted by her chaperone as the quintessential beauty queen, Miss Singapore was viewed as a knowledge resource and a business ambassador.

I know, because I was Singapore's delegate in 1999. I met the Minister for Finance, who asked me about the future prospects of Singapore's finance sector. The Minister for Education questioned me about the Singapore government's education initiatives. Key businessmen wanted to know about the import and export markets in Singapore and upcoming conferences and which agencies they might approach if they wanted to do business in Singapore. A Member of Parliament enquired about how Singapore was doing in the new knowledge economy, being mighty impressed with our information infrastructure. I was given every opportunity to act and feel like an ambassador rather than a beauty queen.

When I arrived in the host country, I was absolutely on my own and felt as if Singapore had forgotten me. Yet, I was Singapore's delegate and was determined to do my best in what was less obvious – which was to promote my country off stage. I delighted in it. At the various receptions I attended, I found out that the Singapore government's high ambitions for our country had been noticed, and it was not difficult for me to carry on in the same line.

But, I am sure I could have done a much better job with some official backing.

International standards for what constitutes beauty also vary. In Latin countries, "beauty queens" is an industry. Plastic surgeons sit in the audience to "look after their girls" and dieticians make sure that the girls don't eat any chocolate. In the year I was there, Miss Venezuela fainted after surviving four days on plain orange juice.

She broke down in tears when another girl offered her candy. The Latin countries also believe in sculpted beauties, so all winners go under the knife. In Taiwan, it is the complete opposite. All winners must not be augmented surgically because it is natural beauty that counts. Miss Taiwan should be "a picture of

calm and serenity with the aura of a lotus flower".

International training standards also differ. Most Latin girls are groomed to be the perfect arm candy, they are taught to answer all potential questions thrown in their direction during the show. In addition to Beauty College, Venezuela for example, selects their delegate a full year in advance in order to undergo pageant training.

So, Miss Venezuela 2004 would already have been selected by the end of 2002 or by early last year, so that the moment she steps foot on stage in 2004, she is already a year ahead of most of the other contestants. A private jet flies her to and from Venezuela.

In Singapore, the organisers and I had trouble getting sponsors to the international event. Whilst my roommate Miss Ghana had 20 pairs of shoes, I had three. This might not seem a serious matter but in the business of beauty pageants, shoes – including stilettos – are basic tools of the trade.

Delegates are viewed in accordance with their country's profile. Miss Singapore will be seen in the light of what Singapore is to the rest of the world. I didn't know this until I was on my rounds meeting people. Thus, I learned that a Miss Singapore was expected to play a role of a business ambassador first and beauty queen second.

Who finally makes it to the top is also very much a business consideration. I mean how do you make a fair decision on something as relative as beauty? Of course, bringing the Miss Universe crown to Singapore would be nice, but Singapore also wins when our delegates network behind the glitzy stage scene, create goodwill and bring in business delegations and promote official contacts at a government level. In three weeks, charm and wit can accomplish a lot.

But in order to do this, the model and the beauty queen need to be separated. The two concepts should not be confused. Beauty queens have different agendas and to a certain extent have different body types.

A beauty queen/ ambassador

should be a picture of elegance and sophistication. Skin-tight miniskirts should be replaced with knee-length tea dresses. Elasticised tubes for tops should be replaced by whale-boned corseted bustiers or gowns that gently drape off the shoulders.

Evening wear for the Miss Singapore delegate should be fine tailored couture. It took years before I figured out that pageant gowns are of a type of their own and different from any normal evening wear.

A shoulder-length shag hair-do that leaves hair fraying at the ends should be replaced by a sophisticated coiffeur. If hair is let down, there are only two styles acceptable – the blunt straight-end cut or hair in soft large waves. Shoes should be no less than stilettos with jewellery complementing all clothes, both day wear and evening wear.

Imagine what our Miss Singapore delegates could accomplish if given ample time to train. More than "beauty and brains", she needs charisma.

And charisma can be enhanced through proper training, given time.

In my view, the Miss Universe pageant is a splendid marketing opportunity. It is up to us to take advantage of it.

Singapore's delegate should be a groomed representative who speaks, lives and breathes Singapore, on and off stage, at home and abroad.

For the moment, it would appear that our girls could do with more training. But they are still of the "right stuff", since they were brave enough to try – something we can't say about all couch critics.

We all have to start somewhere and determination is the first step towards being a beauty queen.

With the confidence from training, our delegates should be in a better position to do well.

I did not make it to the top 10, but I hope that the many people I met and made friends with, in Trinidad and Tobago will remember Miss Universe Singapore 1999.

The writer, of Portuguese-Chinese descent, is currently in Sweden, pursuing a PhD at Gothenburg University.

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