



ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Airport manager Eileen Oh inspecting T3's free Internet kiosks. She spends about 25 per cent of her time daily patrolling Terminal 3.

After falling in rankings, Changi Airport cleans up its act

Retraining for cleaners part of concerted effort to spruce up image and keep the flag flying

Mavis Toh

All 1,036 cleaners at Changi Airport will soon be sent for retraining.

That is one action plan being taken by the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS) in response to Changi's slip to third place in a global airport ranking exercise.

In the survey of 190 airports by British-based consultancy Skytrax, Changi scored its lowest ranking in eight years – behind Seoul's Incheon International and Hong Kong International Airport. It ranked second last year.

It scored highly – among 8,640,552 travellers from nearly 100 countries surveyed – in areas like leisure amenities, duty-free shopping and airport dining. But it lost out in categories like washroom cleanliness and security processing.

In an interview with The Sunday Times last week, the CAAS said it has identified two problem spots where toilet cleanliness may have fallen short.

Toilets at the 28-year-old Terminal 1, the "grand dame", are old. When some are being upgraded, more pressure is put on the remaining toilets.

Mr Foo Sek Min, senior director of Airport Management Group, said: "We know that sometimes the standards there can't even match those of toilets at new malls because they're old."

Terminal 1 is being upgraded. About 15 per cent of the work is done and the process is slated to be completed in 2011.

At Terminal 3, which was opened last year, three sets of toilets in the public area are also "highly utilised" on Fridays and Saturdays. This could be another reason for the lower cleanliness score.

Mr Foo said CAAS will also enhance the monitoring of toilet cleanliness via technology. Full implementation will take six to eight months.

Once the airport gets a full report of the Skytrax survey, it will work to improve security processing.

But a balance between passenger convenience and maintaining security requirements has to be kept.

"We're not in a state of denial. We take the results quite seriously," said Mr Foo.

Changi gets about 500 feedback responses monthly and works to ensure these are answered and investigated.

Daily, about 100,000 passengers pass through the airport where 83 scheduled airlines operate 4,520 flights weekly.

Each month, more than 2,000 passengers are surveyed on matters like staff courtesy and airport efficiency.

These performance indicators are posted monthly on a big board in Mr Foo's office and are analysed by officers and directors.

This quest for excellence saw Changi winning a record 30 awards last year. It has bagged 13 prizes this year, including AsianMoney's Asia Best Airport and Business Traveler's (Middle East) Best Airport in the World.

But it is no easy feat to get all 264 companies in the airport – from government and security agencies to shops – to be on the same flight path. There are about 32,000 workers.

Said Mr Foo: "CAAS is like an orchestra; we get everyone to play his part well so we can get beautiful music. They have to understand the ethos and experience we want to create."

He added that Changi did not start off wanting to be the best airport in the world but rather a "good, customer-oriented one" because it is the face of Singapore. "Many passengers are transiting through Singapore so we focus on service and facilities. That's why we brought the garden into the airport."

Each terminal has about 10 duty managers who report to airport managers.

When The Sunday Times followed airport manager Eileen Oh around, we saw her checking computer terminals and gardens. She also inspected toilets. "It's almost like a habit now," said Ms Oh, who has been with CAAS for three-and-a-half years. "When I see a toilet, I'll go in and make sure it's dry, clean and that there are toilet rolls in the cubicles."

Specifically in charge of facilities and services, she spends about 25 per cent of her time daily patrolling Terminal 3. When she sees something amiss, from a chipped tile to a wet patch, she gets technical support groups to fix it.

Asked if she meets unreasonable passengers, she said: "People have higher expectations of Changi because we're top-rated, so we have to do our best."