

'Iron butterfly' in flight

Bangkok Post Public Company Limited

Mall Group chairwoman was quick to respond to the Covid crisis, offering help to staff, customers alike

Supaluck Umpujh, 66, chairwoman of the Mall Group, one of Thailand's biggest retail conglomerates, is one of the most successful businesswomen in Thailand's retail sector. She was once dubbed by the well-known global magazine, Fortune, as "the iron butterfly".

For over three decades, Ms Supaluck has helped the Mall Group overcome a slew of challenges including the novel coronavirus crisis.

"When Covid-19 started in Wuhan, China and later spread to Japan, being a pharmaceutical science graduate, I immediately sensed the situation was going to be serious," she said.

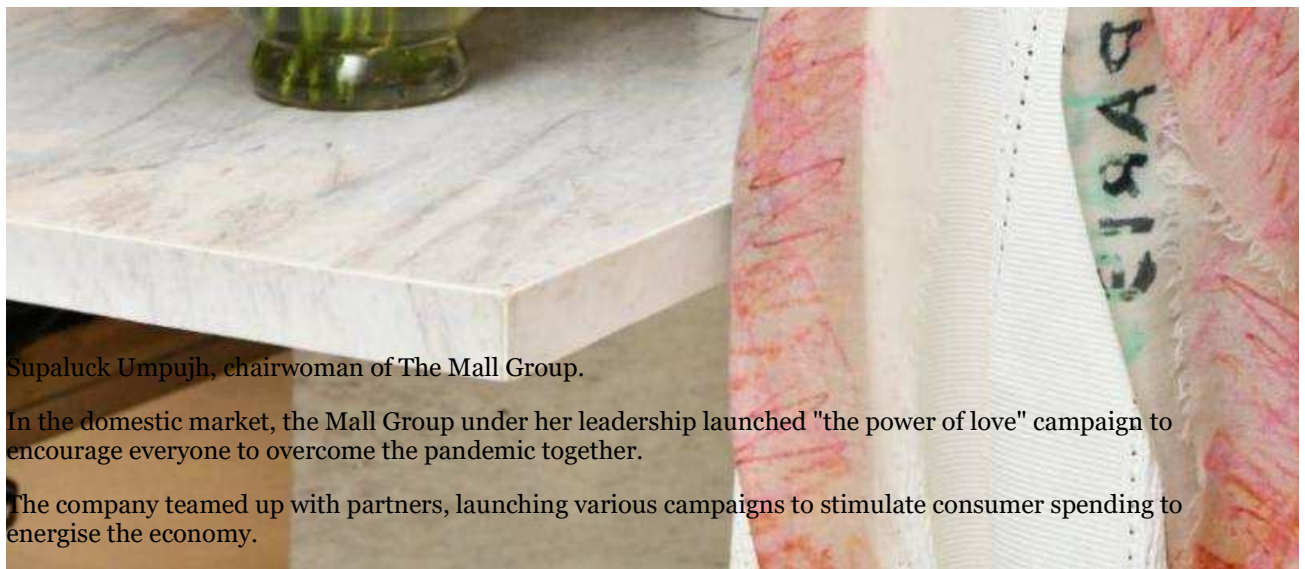
"Even though the outbreak was far from Thailand, I held an urgent meeting with management teams to find protective measures.

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"At the same time, I also created a campaign to give moral support to the Wuhan people in the hope they return to our shops when the situation improves."

Ms Supaluck graduated with a master's degree in pharmaceutical science from Purdue University in the US after earning her first degree from Mahidol University.





Supaluck Umpujh, chairwoman of The Mall Group.

In the domestic market, the Mall Group under her leadership launched "the power of love" campaign to encourage everyone to overcome the pandemic together.

The company teamed up with partners, launching various campaigns to stimulate consumer spending to energise the economy.

In stores, the company launched preventive measures to help protect the community and make shoppers confident while shopping.

The company also cut rent to help its tenants who had to cope with falling customer numbers during the lockdown.

"Stronger people have to help weaker ones. I talked to partners to launch a campaign to stimulate consumer purchasing power. We share the pain together," Ms Supaluck said.

Last year, the Mall Group saw a sales drop of 20%, which was a better performance than some industry players.

The company has fewer physical stores than some operators, and only two complexes are located in tourist destinations, so was not hit by the economic contraction as badly as some of its rivals.

Travel restrictions have offered a windfall to The Mall because customers with high spending who failed to go overseas moved to shop for luxury products at her downtown retail complexes.

Internally, Ms Supaluck likes to offer moral support to staff via mobile short message, cards and gifts during the crisis. She believes such approaches are more meaningful than simply handing out money.

"The retail business last year was like a patient in an intensive care unit," she said.

"This year, it has started recovering but still cannot walk fast. Next year, we hope it can walk faster or even run.

"The situation will return to normal within the next three to four years with a 'new normal' lifestyle."

According to Ms Supaluck, her company is stepping into the digital retail sector. By the end of this month, the Mall Group will launch a digital store in Thailand. However, she refused to give any details.

"We move slowly digitally but it will be stable," she said.