



PHOTO: SATS

Sats staff wearing the company's different uniforms from 1973. The peach outfit at the centre is the latest makeover for the company's 1,800 front-line workers. Those working in the premier lounges now don red jackets.

New Sats uniform – 11th since 1973

Leonard Lim

It works out to one change of uniform every three years or so.

That's how often Singapore Airport Terminal Services (Sats) has changed clothes – 11 to be exact, since 1973.

The latest makeover, on Jan 9, saw its 1,800 front-line workers at Changi Airport switch from light blue jackets with floral shirts to peach outfits.

Those working in the premier lounges now don red jackets.

Sats has staff manning the check-in counters, business-class lounges and transit areas.

Asked why Sats changes uniforms so often, Mr Denis Marie, its vice-president for passenger services, said: "To us, the uniform goes beyond its functional purpose."

The change coincided with the launch of a new training initiative, and Sats aims to convey a modern, personable and professional outlook.

It declined to say how much the

change costs though it did say that out of five proposals submitted, two were shortlisted for staff to vote.

The chosen one was designed by Mido Uniforms and the whole process took nearly a year.

But will the public be confused? Can an enduring corporate identity take hold if there are so many uniform changes?

The view of brand consultant Lau Kong Cheen of Temporal Brand Consulting is that a new uniform is only a small component in how people perceive the firm.

What's a more important change is in staff attitudes, he said. "The kind of cutting and the colour of the uniform can help manifest a more friendly and approachable image. But if the staff behaviour remains the same, the customer experience doesn't change."

Mr Nigel Smith, group chief executive of DIA Brand Consultants, agreed and said the uniform is "just a container for the overall service delivery".

Still, he said he cannot "imagine

why they would want to make so many changes", referring to Sats' tack.

Indeed, Mr Raymond Ling, a brand consultant at MakkiMakki, is not in favour of too many changes as "you lose the uniqueness of the identity then".

Industry experts point out that the iconic SIA Girl has donned the same batik sarong kebaya – designed by Parisian couturier Pierre Balmain – for 38 years.

The link to tradition is also preserved at the Raffles Hotel.

Its doormen have worn the distinctive white Gieves & Hawkes uniform – inspired by the garb donned by Sikh military guards during the British colonial rule – since the refurbished hotel reopened in 1991.

Still, there is a time and place for new outfits.

Dr Lau said: "It may be because they want to change the way they approach the customers, or perhaps there is a change in their customer demographics. For instance if the uniform is old-fashioned, you can't relate to a younger customer."

Sometimes, it is also about comfort. Transport provider SMRT reviews its uniform design every five years. It made its most recent change in May last year – from purple/navy blue to red uniforms for front-line staff.

These are made of more lightweight material to enhance durability and suit the hot local climate.