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**“Multimedia communication:
the art of selling your projects and firm”**

By

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At the outset, the organisers of this forum are to be commended for having recognised something which is so often ignored in the process of regional and urban development – and that is, “Without communication, you may have a plan, but you will not have public support or political commitment.” In the end, the plan could be rejected because of a failure to recognise the most basic of all human needs – information.

Lack of information breeds ignorance and fear. An informed community is a supportive community and while you will never be able to satisfy everyone, it is much better to have a majority of enthusiastic support, than a majority of scepticism. Sceptics, or minority groups often act out of fear and in doing so can muster media support to slow or even stop progressive reforms.

I’ve been to many talkfests, where the focus has been on the rebuilding of communities, restoration of the environment and the management of social or technological change. There is no shortage of information and theories on how to fix the problems or address the challenges of the new millenium, but almost without exception, the issue which rarely rates a mention is “How can we use communication to achieve our goals? Can we rely on the community and its many and varied groups, committees and authorities to provide the support and enthusiasm which is necessary to ensure a successful program of change?”

It doesn’t matter whether you’re trying to rebuild Kuala Lumpur, or sell a new brand of car. Both are products. Both require the successful dissemination of information to effect a sale.

As one great man in history noted, "Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it nothing can succeed. He who moulds opinion is greater than he who enacts laws."

Since the focus of this forum is related to environmental and urban management, it is very appropriate that I relate communication, or multimedia communication, to the major issues which face south east Asia today (apart from the economy), the environment, urban management and urban renewal.

I haven’t been selected particularly because of my world-shattering work in the area of multimedia – I’m not a technician, nor am I a computer boffin. But I am a user – on behalf of my clients – of technology. I am an interface between communication technology and the real world.

I've been working in Malaysia and Indonesia for the past five or six years on projects which are capable of having massive impact on people and the future.

Perhaps without us realising what has happened, some very sophisticated communication technologies have been developed in Malaysia as part of its process of building urban communities, developing regional strategies and managing the environment in the face of the unrelenting onslaught of industrialisation.

The reason I am here is because of the work being done by the Institute Sultan Iskandar and its Malaysian and international band of consultants who are providing a very unique service for the management of change.

I am speaking honestly when I say that the techniques for selling concepts, marshalling information and preparing the community for change which have been developed by ISI and its consultants is perhaps unique in the Pacific region today.

So far, the communication technology which has been used is very simple – the videotape documentary, supported by a host of multimedia tools such as three dimensional animation and of course the obligatory 20 or 30 centimetre thick A3 sized written report which brought forth the comment from one of my friends in ISI, "We should be selling these reports by the kilo – we might make more money!"

ISI had long since figured out that if perceptions and attitudes needed to change, a well written videotape documentary could do it – a written report may take years of explanation and countless meetings, by which time the enthusiasm has waned.

It might be argued that these tools – like videotape and animation are readily available and therefore, what's the big mystery?

The mystery is not so much in the technology – it's in the application of the technology.

Multimedia is not a mystery at all – but the way a story is compiled, the way it's illustrated, the subtleties of the urban, environmental or political agenda – that's the real mystery.

It's time to put multimedia into perspective.

The purists would tell us that multimedia is a combination of written word, vision, sound, graphics and interactivity. Multimedia is, without question, more natural, more powerful and more uniquely human than any other medium of formal communication.

But as far as I'm concerned, it's just another technology which, like the computer, is a useless piece of junk unless you know how to make a program which actually works and which can actually influence change or prepare people for change.

The invention of the printing press back in the 16th Century was multimedia. For the first time, words could be printed in a mass communication system called books.

The invention of television was certainly a form a multimedia because it introduced vision and sound to a mass audience. Videotape was multimedia because it introduced portability and speed to vision and sound.

When you boil it down, multimedia is simply a combination of computer and existing digital and linear technologies with the added ability to telecommunicate anywhere in the world in an instant. A giant step, certainly, but the question to ask is – multimedia – is it help or hype?

As we approach a new millennium, a global view is emerging which places new emphasis on sustainable development, more honest assessments of corporate and government capabilities and longer term planning rather than shorter term profits.

This century has really been the century of productivity

We can safely say we are headed into the century of quality

But quality will not be achieved without a clear understanding of the role of communication. I think it is very considerate of the technologists to develop multimedia and the digital versatile disc right now – when the world needs it most.

But unless we are very careful, multimedia will end up about as useless as 90 percent of television. Television, and certainly, the internet, was supposed to bring good things. It was supposed to make us wiser, but it is mostly blamed for corrupting our children, accelerating violence on a global scale and providing terrorists and the corrupt with the perfect lever for blackmail.

Have you noted that when you walk into the biggest of computer stores and ask for the multimedia department, it is 99% games and less than 1% education (if you can find it at all). Don't even think about asking for multimedia which can assist your business, help you make more money or help governments do their job better.

The one percent of the technology which is good, is mainly about communication.

Communication has become the new corporate science, but despite the technology which has been developed to provide commerce with communication tools, the whole question of communication techniques remains a mystery to the majority of businesses.

Videos were touted as the technology which would change the way companies communicate with their customers or audience.

So why is it that most companies don't even own a VCR and TV set, let alone have a genuine, or viewable, corporate documentary in their sales and marketing portfolio?

Many companies who hired camera crews or so-called video producers to make their corporate videos are often embarrassed about showing them.

This is because not too many executives have the expertise to select a production house with an accomplished corporate script writer. Others don't appreciate that like all things, there is a price differential between good and bad.

In short, the lesson to be learned is:-

Technology is no substitute for talent

This lesson - if ignored - can cost the business world dearly.

Take desktop publishing. The business world was led to believe that desktop publishing would allow cost effective in-house production of newsletters, brochures and other written material.

So why is it that most companies don't use desktop publishing at all and many that do, turn out material which is poorly presented, badly designed and often an insult to the intelligence of their readers?

The fact is that sophisticated desktop publishing programs on the office computer in the hands of those without research, writing, design or marketing skills are a waste of money.

It's about as rational as claiming that with a sophisticated word processing program with spell check on the office desk the average office worker will produce high quality written communication.

If there have been shortcomings in achieving value for money from in-house word processing, desktop publishing and corporate video presentations, how can there be an expectation of dynamic multimedia communication?

Effective multimedia requires the same creative skills as a good movie or corporate video documentary. Without a well researched, cohesive "story" to begin with, multimedia can be a box-office flop.

Apart from anything else, creativity requires passion.

An audience is not stupid. Just as most people can tell whether the person at the other end of the phone line is happy, sad, angry or indeed lying, there is no room for guessing with video. Video can convey passion through a combination of script, narration, vision and even the music track. If one fails, everything fails.

A video documentary audience must be quickly absorbed into the story. If the audience becomes restless because of an embarrassingly poorly written script, you may just as well turn off the player and go home.

Measured in terms of the effect it will have on your customers, or the people you are trying to impress, it will be more than a flop - it will be a serious waste of your stockholder's money and possibly a real inhibitor to future profitability and growth.

You will also be making a big mistake if you throw all your effort into multimedia. No business or government can expect multimedia to do all their work for them.

Put multimedia into perspective – it is merely one of a set of tools in the box of communication and marketing devices you have at your disposal.

There are many fundamental communication techniques which form part of the communication mix, such as media relations, advertising, point of sale material, brochures, trade presentations, video and many more.

Those who are waiting for multimedia to sell their projects and their firm might be sorely disappointed. If your company has turned out mediocre or forgettable colour brochures on your products or services, the chances are you will turn out mediocre multimedia – except you will have wasted a lot more of your stockholders' money. Even worse, once you convey your mediocrity to the internet, on a web site, you are exposed to the whole world.

Multimedia and by extension, internet web sites, are undoubtedly the most exciting tools in your box, because they combine so many techniques into one cohesive, entertaining, interactive package.

Don't be misled by the hype. Multimedia and the internet are here, they are available, but like all new technologies, they are all too frequently 'techno driven'.

The term multimedia is perhaps one of the most widely used and abused buzzwords of recent years.

In the face of technological change, social movement, globalisation, political pressures and much more, we simply must learn more, better, faster. Multimedia technology will be the means by which this can be achieved.

Multimedia represents the culmination of all communicative arts to date. It is a marriage of television's communicative powers with the information storage and access abilities of the computer.

As interactive technologies have become more accepted in training and education, very positive results have been documented.

Key results often cited include significant return-on-investment from reductions in time and cost of instruction, big improvement in performance on the part of those trained and enhanced overall competitive position for the organisation.

Multi-media, properly devised and implemented, is producing better corporate results.

Multimedia, according to its dictionary definition, is information presented in a combination of text, graphics, video, animation and sound.

Added to that is the capability of many multimedia programs to be "interactive" - in other words, the viewer now has a choice.

Unlike video, which is still a powerful tool, interactive multimedia allows an incredible amount of information to be placed on a CD, the new DVD (Digital Versatile Disc) and larger hard disc drives.

'Interactivity' means participation, with its attendant freedom of choice of information, pace and order. Interactivity is best displayed on most internet websites. Major corporations which are spending millions devising websites are effectively putting power back into the hands of the consumer. They know that the consumer of tomorrow is not going to be so easily swayed by pretty advertisements.

Surveys on internet trading already show that where the customer is given the option of managing information flow through a corporate web site, they become more loyal customers. In short, the internet works on the simple pretext that knowledge is power.

In the future, it's this interactivity which will provide the communication edge for multimedia and the internet.

But again, don't be misled by those technical experts who will tell you, "Don't do a video, it's old technology. Use multimedia instead, or develop a web site instead of doing four colour corporate profile brochures." That's just glib sales talk.

Multimedia does not supplant other forms of communication. My personal view is that the videotape documentary is still the most powerful and cost effective communication tool you can produce if your objective is to inform, educate, change perceptions or generate a climate for change.

It is a wise corporation which can determine when multimedia and a web site can be brought into play in a communication program. Often multimedia or website is used in conjunction with video and indeed printed material.

How multimedia is used is determined totally by researching the needs, the objectives, the timing, the deployment of the target audience, the mood of the audience and finally, the budget availability.

You would look pretty stupid if you were coerced into approving a RM500,000 multimedia program to promote a concept and achieve a perception change, when a simple, RM5000 single colour, but powerfully written newsletter could have achieved the same and sometimes a better, result in the time available.

The sum total of this illustration is that multimedia must take its place in the mix of marketing and promotional tools and devices. It should never be used just because it's new and 'everyone else is doing it'. Everyone else is not doing it and about 80% of those who are doing it, are doing it badly or ineffectively and harming their corporation's image rather than enhancing it.

Why is multimedia considered to be so powerful for business....you can't ignore these statistics.

Studies have shown that information is better retained in some modes than others: 20% by hearing, 40% by seeing and 80% by doing. Interactivity brings a vehicle for "doing" to otherwise passive media.

Now, as you can see, multi-media brings a whole new dimension to communication.

The possibilities are endless. All information can be captured by computer systems, graphs can be printed on standard office printers and distributed to executives, pictures can be captured and printed on colour printers to provide internal posters or overheads or reproduced on colour slides for audio visual systems.

The viewer has the ability to retrieve the information which interests them most.

By the end of this decade, most homes and, hopefully, offices in those countries which are familiar with computer technology will have interactive communication centres, where computer and TV are merged into one unit.

The DVD, the digital versatile disc, will make the CD-Rom as obsolete as the horse and cart.

You'll be downloading real time video over the internet and playing it back across your office network.

The new wave of computers coming out of USA and Japan have DVD capability. CD-Rom, which is slow and lacks space, is on the way out.

The internet is introducing us to interactivity ahead of the CD-Rom. Why would you buy a CD Rom of an encyclopedia, when you can access so much more up to date information on the internet – and have the ability to ask questions and have them answered by an expert – often for free.

My philosophy with multimedia or web sites on the internet, matches my video philosophy - that without a well researched script and creative concept, programs will fail to achieve their purpose.

By over-focusing on technology, many new multimedia users can be distracted from their mission.

Without the correct creative input, this technical distraction can lead to vague or unrealistic objectives, which then lead to undefined, less than optimal outcomes, and ultimately to disillusionment with multimedia.

The reality is that quality results require design skills and an understanding of technology best delegated to specialists.

Consider the disciplines involved in the making of multimedia covering the essentials of text, graphics, animation, speech, music, video, interactivity, computer programming and more. Few, if any, individuals possess all of these skills, leading to the conclusion that the best multimedia productions are team efforts.

Multimedia is not about technology but about effective communication

We need to focus on our mission, our business, our purpose. Who are we trying to help and why?

Who are the real end users and what outcomes can they realise through better communication, greater understanding, deeper and faster learning?

What do we want people to know, do or feel differently as a result of our communication?

What are the best strategies to help these people achieve their purpose?

Mission first, method second

When these questions are clearly answered, with all the assumptions tried and tested, then we can ask about multimedia tools and services and how they might fit in.

There is no question that multimedia has the ability to radically shift the way organisations have traditionally merchandised and distributed new products. This shift requires a focus on a systems approach that integrates new technologies into the overall marketing strategy.

We turn now to the techniques of multimedia, showing in a little more detail how multimedia could be beneficial in a real life situation.

I have some perfect case studies drawn from my experiences with the Institute Sultan Iskandar.

Take the plan to revitalise the state capital of Johor Bahru.

This planning project is regarded as one of the most ambitious attempts anywhere in the world this century to rebuild a city which has grown up so fast it is choking on its own traffic, lacks urban form and is struggling with an outmoded infrastructure.

ISI and its team of planners, urban designers, engineers and economists, recognised that no amount of paperwork or academic studies could capture the rationale behind the need to rebuild the city.

They resorted to a combination of videotape documentaries, live presentations using combination video, slides and computer generated graphics and user friendly publications.

ISI produced no fewer than five versions of a videotape documentary on the rebuilding of Johor Bahru during the period of two years covering the pre-study, the study period and post study formalisation of the necessary legislation to make it all work.

Each version of the documentary was designed for a purpose, political and otherwise.

For example, the very first documentary contained a segment of Paris of last century, in which we explored the rationale behind the decision of Napoleon the Third and his master planner to demolish huge sections of the city to provide the space for the grand boulevards and parks which today set Paris apart from many of its contemporaries.

The purpose was to help reinforce the resolve of the government of Johor to press ahead with ambitious building and planning reforms.

Would multimedia have helped in this situation. The answer is NO. As a supporting resource, multimedia may have added value, but we ascertained at the time that the cost did not justify the effort because multimedia technologies were still very much in their infancy.

Now, it's a different story. There is a place for multimedia now to support the adopted long range strategic plans for the city of Johor Bahru.

Developers, landowners and investors would benefit from being given the new plan for Johor Bahru on a CD in an interactive multimedia format. A similar format could be adapted to an internet web site.

This is where multimedia comes into its own.

It can provide the infinite detail of planning, design mechanisms, setback and landscaping conditions, infrastructure contributions and a host of other information in an easy to follow, interactive and very portable manner.

It is at once a powerful resource medium, an entertaining overview of a program to rebuild a city, an educational tool and a device for building relationships between the government and private sector, who, after all, will be required to fund most of the changes which occur in Johor Bahru over the next twenty years or so.

But we don't walk away from the other marketing tools. Not everyone in the population has access to multimedia, nor do they want to be bothered with it.

ISI has proposed the establishment of an information and promotional centre down town, where the locals can gather to look at large wall images of their new city and its road patterns, and be inspired by examples of the street furniture and the graphics which will help transform their visual outlook. There is still room here for simple newsletters and take away brochures and even things like souvenirs and promotional giveaways to help spread the message of the new look city.

The video still plays an important role. It can be converted into a documentary which will encourage the support of locals. It can introduce educational programs to help clean up the city and encourage environmental and social reforms.

The video can even be included on the CD as part of the multimedia presentation, because that will indeed be possible with DVD.

In this application, the use of multimedia can easily be justified from the point of view of its effectiveness in a long term marketing and education program.

The cost of preparing a complex multimedia program could be as much as five to ten times higher than for a professionally produced videotape documentary.

Because multimedia is so dynamic and multi visual, there is a greater onus than ever before on companies that use the medium to pay close attention to content, design and interactivity.

In other words, the more sophisticated the medium, the greater the effort required to make it work and to present the company or product in the best possible light.

Without a strategic plan of content, design and interactivity, the multimedia program or web site can be an enormous waste of money and have no effect on those who are supposed to be inspired by it.

Multimedia is about creating a world. Not a linear story line, but an environment.

The audience is the key in the most appropriate application of interactive media. Any design depends on involving the audience so they push the buttons. This is one reason why many linear stories don't work very well in interactive form. The best illustration of this is those firms which raced to get on the internet with their home pages, but simply converted their written brochures to web pages.

If the audience is left outside looking in, they get bored.

A prerequisite to any multimedia presentation is The Design Document which has to deal with some realities like a basic description of the target audience and the marketing strategies to find and grow that audience.

The analysis stage of designing multimedia documents is much like that for writing a paper, a book, or a motion picture. I prefer to put this in terms of a maxim:

"One day spent thinking before working will save you four days spent working before thinking."

Information partitioning

The most laborious of the Design Document's chores is information partitioning.

Information partitioning is a way of gaining access to the self-contained elements of your information set, as well as to the connections between these elements.

The end result of information partitioning is the development of discrete "chunks" of information. Sometimes called modules, blocks, screens, cards, pages, or chapters, the actual size of the chunks will vary depending on your intended audience characteristics.

The rationale behind information partitioning becomes clearer when you look at the possibilities and complexities created by the introduction of DVD.

For the first time, limitations on space have been lifted, opening up multimedia concepts of unlimited variety and scope. On one small disc, you will have full motion video, as well as a totally interactive site with almost unlimited channels or information "chunks".

As mentioned earlier, DVD will render CD-Rom obsolete, sometime after the turn of the century.

DVD, which first stood for Digital Video Discs but now means Digital Versatile Discs--is a new technology available in several different formats.

One is the DVD-ROM player, a read-only device for the PC, and a DVD movie player for the home market.

A more sophisticated DVD-ROM drive has been developed, which can both read and rewrite the high-capacity discs.

To consumers, DVD means better video and audio quality. The picture quality is twice the resolution of normal videotape and almost 20% better than a laser disc. When watching a movie, viewers will be able to listen to the soundtrack in up to eight languages or with 32 different sets of subtitles. As with CDs, DVD users can instantly access any spot on a disc, repeat any scene over and over, or pause indefinitely. But considering the additional disc space, this opens the door to complex interactive movies.

For computer users, DVD-ROM's capacity means an end to grainy, jerky video clips, which will be replaced by smooth, broadcast-quality images and surround-sound multichannel digital audio. Using DVD-ROM drive software will be equally smooth, with real-time transition allowing for new levels of interactivity.

For writers and multimedia directors, this new technology has as many advantages as there are challenges. The biggest advantage is the increase in space capacity. DVD stores data in a similar manner to CDs. CD-ROM discs contain approximately 680 megs of space. A DVD-ROM disc contains up to 18 gigs of space, almost 30 times the space of a normal CD-ROM.

However, one needs to put DVD back into perspective, just as we did multimedia and all the rest of the new technologies.

Certainly, multimedia does not make the production of corporate, government or manufacturing marketing tools any easier. It's harder to do. In fact few organisations will be able to do it in-house. But we said that once about desktop publishing and video editing. Both can now be done very easily on a home PC.

So the possibilities are that early in the new millennium, someone in your office will be happily writing complex multimedia presentations for your company or product – but like every other piece of technology since Guttenberg invented the printing press, will the presentation be worth viewing? Will it do your company or your project justice?

History would tend to indicate that without professional marketing strategies, backed by proper research and supported by a creative story analysis and script, most organisations will turn out poor quality multimedia.

Look at the invention of the camera. Professional quality film cameras have been available to anyone in the world for the past twenty years or more, yet competent commercial and industrial photographers are still a rare breed. With so many cameras around, why do most companies in the world still pay high rates for professional photographers to shoot their products? No self respecting corporation would let an amateur cameraman loose on their product catalogue.

Don't turn your back on the new information technology or multimedia. You don't have to know how to do it, but you should keep up to date on its capabilities and the value it can add to your communication strategies.

In closing, I give the only advice I can to governments and corporations who are thinking of adopting multimedia solutions to their marketing, public consultation or communication questions.

Look for the multimedia writer who considers a blank computer screen to be the most terrifying thing in the world.

Every writer faces it almost every day of their lives.

It frightens the good ones
and terrifies the great ones.

Only the mediocre take it in stride.

The mediocre have very little trouble filling the computer screen,
Mostly with blank thoughts
which they call Creativity.

And they are always satisfied.

The good ones fill the blank computer screen with sweat
and sometimes good thoughts
which they call effort.

And sometimes they are satisfied.

The great ones fill the blank computer screen with blood
and a few tears.

And almost always great thoughts
which they leave unlabelled because labels are unnecessary.

And they are never satisfied

**If you are searching for meaning and power in the written word,
look for the writer who is terrified by a blank computer screen.**

END