

16/05/1997

Multimedia merger

W L Wong in Melbourne

VICTORIA in Australia, which aims to be a major player in the global multimedia industry, is seeking to forge strategic alliances with Malaysian companies.

There are immense opportunities for private sector companies from both sides to embark on synergistic joint ventures. It is no secret that Victoria wants to be at the competitive edge of technology and communications and wants to emerge as a prime mover in the global multimedia industry.

Why the emphasis on multimedia? According to Yau Su Peng, advisor on international business development at Multimedia Victoria, multimedia is far more encompassing than information technology. 'Multimedia is not just the use of computer technology and telecommunications,' she says. She points out that the term, from Multimedia Victoria's perspective, refers to combinations of images, text and sound which utilise converging telecommunications, computing and authoring technologies to render traditional media and information services in new and innovative ways. Multimedia Victoria was established in April 1996. It views itself as a facilitator for private companies in Victoria to forge strategic alliances with partners overseas and has placed Malaysian companies high on its target list. Says Yau, 'We identify opportunities for private companies from Victoria and Malaysia to embark on joint ventures that are synergistic. Australia and Malaysia have a long history of links in education and defence, and these partnerships will build on those linkages.'

Australian companies, asserts Yau, are at the forefront of creative and innovative development in the multimedia industry while their Malaysian counterparts have the investment capital and expertise in developing and penetrating markets. 'Together, this will be a strategic alliance and the collaboration will reap rewards for both sides,' she enthuses.

The driving force behind Victoria's agenda to build a vibrant global communications and multimedia industry is its Premier Jeff Kennett. Victorian firms, declared Kennett, will carve out a major role in the global provision of multimedia products and services. The government will use the power of communications technology and multimedia to transform the way it provides services to and communicates with the public.

Although its traditional rival New South Wales has attracted IBM - to establish one of its three global multimedia centres - and Digital Equipment Corporation to its shores, Victoria has an impressive blueprint that is being implemented to achieve its Victoria in the 21st century vision; Victoria 21. In its court are IT corporations like the Olivetti Group and Fujitsu which are making significant multimedia related investments in the state. These foreign investments are significant considering Australia's lack of tax incentives compared to countries like Malaysia and Singapore.

Recognising the challenges and constraints in a rapidly developing and changing industry, the state established Multimedia Victoria and appointed Australia's first multimedia minister. A taskforce comprising key industry figures advise the government on its multimedia and communications strategy and initiatives are being undertaken locally and abroad to promote and showcase industry capabilities and to attract investments. Its multimedia minister Alan Stockdale has already made overtures to the

Malaysian government and companies during a visit there late last year to collaborate in envisioning a regional multimedia network where Asia-Pacific countries can share beneficial outcomes. Stockdale was full of praise for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's bold initiative for the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) and observed many parallels between the MSC and the Victoria 21 strategy.

Stockdale says Victoria has a coordinated strategy to facilitate and stimulate development and investment, raise industry and community skills, stimulate content development, accelerate technology uptake and build the infrastructure for electronic service delivery. He adds that the commitment from both countries to develop centres of excellence in multimedia 'distinguishes us as partners who can be the early catalysts for the development of an effective neighbourhood network'.

Accessibility of information to the public is integral to the pursuit of the Victoria 21 strategy. For instance, proceedings of the state parliament, The Hansard, are already electronically transcribed and put on the Internet.

Its 'electronic government' vision would see all government departments delivering services online (electronic service delivery) by the year 2001. In fact, several local councils have already gone on-line. Multimedia service kiosks will sprout all over the state. It is part of an ambitious plan to network the state and provide people a point to obtain information and conduct transactions with governments and even private enterprises.

Applying for a new driving licence or paying council rates would be similar to transactions on banking ATMs. Such transactions could also be accessed from the comfort of one's home and office via the Internet or telephone. A consortium of Australian companies has been awarded the contract - A\$10 million over five years - to provide high-speed data networking services and supplying the multimedia service kiosks.

Multimedia Victoria's current collaboration with the Department of Education aims to establish Melbourne as a centre for educational content development involving educators, trainers and members of the interactive multimedia industry. On the cards are the development of SOFNet which transmits programs live to classrooms in all Victorian schools via satellite, an international interactive multimedia R & D centre and a high technology enterprise development centre.

Other multimedia projects that have attracted considerable interests are in the health sector. Telemedicine initiatives involving a group of government hospitals are already under way (trailing) enabling face to face communication between patients in remote areas and centrally located medical specialists. The use of computer technology to transmit and view x-rays, magnetic resonance imaging and CAT scans will aid diagnosis and provide the basis for a more effective and efficient administration.

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