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Older generation also to gain from MSC

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IN world enamoured of the magic of youth, the Multimedia Super Corridor project is perhaps one of the most hip ideas to hit town since the Internet.

It is easy to see why, as the MSC concept lies on the cutting edge of the coolest techno trends and reflects the exuberance of which only those young at heart can expect to fully exploit.

The downside of this imagery is that adults and the more senior generation are bypassed, except for parents furiously buying latest multimedia computers for their children, together with access to the global computer network Internet.

Since they see their kids as forming the MSC generation, they are willing to invest almost everything to ensure tomorrow's adults will be able to be on par with their peers.

And in the meantime, these parents and their own older parents dismiss the MSC as not being relevant to them as they do not expect to enjoy its benefits in their lifetime.

As any reasonable-minded person can tell, this is a false assumption. But why is this fallacy still holding sway amongst most Malaysians?

To some extent, the Government itself is partly to blame - mainly due to linking the MSC to its Vision 2020, thus giving the impression that the project's benefits will take almost 20 years to manifest.

Further, the Government also gives sporadic alarmist warnings about sedition and pornography content on the Internet to scare adults off the Internet - despite it being the driving force behind the MSC.

Still, the Government is too easy a target - the main cause of this fallacy actually lies among us average Malaysians.

For years now, we have been too complacent in letting the Government play the leading role that the rare bright spark who took his ideas to success really stuck out like a sore thumb.

The late Tan Sri Yahaya Ahmad was one such bright spark, as was the late Tan Sri Loh Boon Siew. As for others in the corporate limelight today, their success are often dismissed too easily as arising out of political influence, instead of acknowledging their actual genius and hard work.

History shows there need be only a few outstanding individuals to change the lives of many, and statistics show that there will be few who can be expected to emerge from our population of 23-odd million.

Given this outlook, a radical change in our attitudes is needed - especially amongst our adult population.

As former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Musa Hitam said in a conversation last year, he is not interested in corporate manoeuvres after a political lifestyle. Instead, he is seeking to better himself intellectually.

Unfortunately, he is a rare individual amongst Malaysians.

How do we address this issue so as to ensure the MSC will also benefit today's adults and senior population?

The key to it all seems to be marketing - pitching the benefits to be gained amongst our own population, while our consummate salesman and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad woos foreigners to our shores.

However, as the Ministry of International Trade and Industry has acknowledged, marketing is yet to be a skill that has been mastered by Malaysians.

Perhaps what we should do is to take the example of Coca Cola, which

wrote a textbook formula for marketing when it created a demand for its sweet carbonated drinks.

For starters, we have to look into how we can overcome the problem of less than half the population knowing how to work with a personal computer and only 150,000 citizens at most (or less than one per cent of the population) actually having been on the Internet.

The answer is simpler than expected, since there is actual demand for the benefits promised by the MSC - as long as the message is pitched properly to generate local interest.

Take mobile telephones. Despite being introduced on the early eighties, it took the entry of Cellular Communications Network (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd or Celcom to actually get the pent-up market demand unleashed and pave the way for the eight cellular services in operation today.

Video recorders, which had previously been known as a "hellish" machine to operate, are now used by all and sundry.

Personal computers, however, have yet to reach that stage - but all that is expected to change within the next two years when the Internet-capable television set is introduced.

And that is exactly where our marketing efforts should be focused.

In particular, today's youth-oriented culture means very few computer-related products are designed for use by adults - except for the bare minimum related to work.

For every work-processing and accounting software, there are thousands of computers games. And for every database application, there are numerous more information software pitched at children.

Given this imbalance, it is surprising that the computer industry actually developed one useful new application for adults - namely that of presentation software.

Since Malaysia is spearheading the MSC, perhaps this is one area where the focus should be on, - that of creating useful computer-related applications mainly for adult use.

Actually, the idea is simpler than it sounds - as the way out has already been suggested by the introduction of the Internet via the idiot box.

Television programming is one area where adult interest is not in doubt. The issue now is how it can be taken advantage of to tempt adults to use it to gain benefits via the MSC.

Another area where MSC applications can well be embraced by adults is that of instant information - it isn't only children who have short attention spans despite the computer industry's view to the contrary.

There is a huge market out there for information on demand, as has already been proven by the growing number of premium-charged 600-number services.

Like television in the fifties, the MSC is a new medium in which successful pioneers can carve out monopolies for themselves.

Also, digital signatures, as envisioned for the MSC project, is not unfamiliar - we already have some form of it in the automated teller cards' PIN numbers and that used for most digital cellular phones.

Why can't services which bring more convenience and information to users be offered, since these personal passwords can be easily verified for billing purposes later? Anyone would be willing to pay extra for convenience.

Still on the subject of phones, and with apology to telecommunications firms, why not have a new device which can take advantage of the Internet services to offer international calls at local call rates?

These are but few examples in which the MSC can be geared to benefit today's adults.

At the end of the day, it is far simpler to ignore this population segment as being too entrenched in their ways and not really being interested in learning new technologies and services.

But, can the private sector venturing into the MSC afford to ignore this population segment? As banks have already discovered, it is the older generation which has sizeable savings and income to be tapped.

So, how can MSC entrepreneurs tap into the vast wealth pool? By simply finding out what interests adults, especially the older population who have vast amounts of time on their hands.

Like video recorders, the slant should be on entertainment and useful information. Stuff like telemedicine and distance learning should not be slanted only to specific population segments but should cater to the masses.

In short, it is time to get rid of the elitist tag being slapped on the MSC. Perhaps what should be done now is to create another body to just market the concept and benefits to the local populace.

Better yet, perhaps the local advertising community should be roped to spread the message that the MSC is for all Malaysians, with specific examples of how the benefits can be gained.

The message should ideally be carrying the theme of the MSC for today, so that adults and the older population will not feel left out of the grand ideas that are developing.

In short, perhaps the theme should be: "Living the MSC project today for a better tomorrow."

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