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Changing online game culture

Rina de Silva

DURING his frequent business trips to South Korea and Hong Kong, JOC Technology Sdn Bhd's chief executive officer C.S. Chin observed the rapid progress of the online game industry. He noticed the cybercafes with always-on high-speed Internet connections were cramped with youngsters. Chin was amazed, but at the same time sceptical about the response to such games in Malaysia.

"You need a decent Internet speed to enjoy playing the online games without any interruptions. Broadband Internet access is the best way to go, but that comes with a high price tag, which many homes here cannot even afford yet," he says.

But recent developments such as the availability of TM Net's Streamyx broadband services has encouraged Chin to distribute online games locally. The customers are not those patronising cybercafes, but rather children at home who can come under close watch of their parents.

JOC is one of the resellers of Streamyx, and Chin believes that TM Net's target of signing up 200,000 users by end of next year can be achieved.

However, he was cautious initially when he started to distribute game titles three months ago. He began by distributing non-popular game titles because according to him, the Hong Kong vendors of popular titles demanded "upfront" money. And Chin was not ready to gamble on an untapped market.

"In the beginning, I was unsure if there was going to be a market in Malaysia after all," he says.

So, he started distributing the non-popular titles to gauge the demand. He managed to sell 8,000 copies in three months.

"Actually, I expected a higher volume of sales," he says. Still, the initial results convinced him to continue with the new business venture.

Next month, Chin expects sales to rise significantly when he brings in more popular titles. But his long-term plan is to start developing local online game software. He has started developing a local portal to draw a community of players.

Chin insists that the games he is bringing in are not violent. "They are all about strategies, like how to build a country, form a government and manage a marriage," he says.

He has used a wide variety of distribution channels such as cybercafes, electronics outlets and bookstores to reach a wider audiences.

Chin agrees that the games can be addictive but if played at home, the detrimental effects can be curbed under the watchful eye of the parents. "Sometimes my wife and I have to restrain my 11-year-old son from playing too long," says the father of four.

Chin adds that playing online games is one way to create a wider interest in using the Internet. "My son even asked me on how to use the search engines to do his research," he says. "He is not addicted to the game as he has other interests such as playing football and golf."

Chin was persuaded to join JOC Technology two years ago by his brother Edwin, who is one of the company directors. He had formed a large network of business associates and friends from his five years' stint at Telekom Sales & Services, and prior to that, a decade at a start-up company called Senico.

At Telekom, where he started as a senior sales executive, he enjoyed a good stint, doubling sales in his first year and building the work force from one to 80 in three years. He was later promoted to the post of

general manager.

Right after graduation, Chin made a surprising decision to join Senico, a company set up by several ex-IBM staff, despite getting good job offers from IBM and Mimos.

He recalls that he made his decision based on a long-term goal of having his own business some day, an interest which started from childhood observing his father operates a hotel in Taiping and a coffeeshop in Selayang.

"I thought the best way was to learn from scratch, to start from nowhere, learn from mistakes, and how to instill customers' confidence," he says, speaking of his 10 years' experience at Senico.

One of his fondest memories at Senico was sitting outside Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's office for two hours as a stand-by for the boss of PNB-IT. His client was briefing the Prime Minister on an information technology (IT) application, and he had to be there should any problem arises.

For Chin, how he planned to make a living was a difficult and confusing task. "All I knew was to do something where I would be paid a lot of money," he grins. It was until his final year pursuing a Bachelor of Science degree at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) that "he saw the light".

He spent three months working at IBM as an intern engineer. He learned the IBM culture, its business, mingled with the executives and observed how the company staff talked to the customers.

"The experience changed my life. If not for those three months in IBM, I don't think I would have started my career in the IT industry," he says.

To Chin, tackling his new business is all about grabbing opportunities when they come. If it fails, he'll move on to something else. "It's all about staying afloat in an economy which is becoming rather unpredictable frequently," he says.