

RTM is changing, and listening too
New Straits Times (Columns)
25 Aug 2007
Suraya Al-Attas

LIKE the proverbial sleeping giant, RTM has awakened. The national broadcaster, long regarded as the dumping ground for sub-standard programmes, has decided it's time for an image overhaul. Not an easy task, but one the good folks up at Angkasapuri are determined to carry out.

When RTM announced a new open tender system for obtaining local programmes a couple of months ago, the last thing it expected was resistance from content providers. After all, this system — unlike previous ones which benefited only a select few — would give those in the production business equal opportunity to provide programmes for RTM.

And on RTM's part, it's pretty straightforward, really. The wider it casts its net, the better its chance of obtaining productions of high quality which, let's face it, has been a perpetual problem for the station.

The lack of transparency in past systems has certainly contributed to this long-standing problem. To be sure, with every system it has introduced thus far, RTM must have hoped that it would be the one to lift its poor image. Unfortunately, they (the old systems) were abused by producers, some of whom had been allotted hundreds of hours each, but had shamelessly delivered "rubbish" to the hand that fed them.

So why is it that the new system — which ought to take care of the oft-heard accusation that RTM plays favourites — has been met with disapproval by most content providers, even those who have never enjoyed any "privilege" from the station?

Well, here's the thing. Apparently, things are not quite as cut and dried as they're made out to be. While the intention is good, most feel the implementation could have been better.

Under the open tender system, a production company has to be registered with the Information Ministry before it can submit programme proposals. Once its registration is approved, the company's technical and financial capabilities are assessed, after which it is classified "A", "B" or "C".

Companies that fall under category "A" have a wide selection of programmes and the promise of prime time slots. They can propose to do reality series, drama serials, telemovies, documentaries and musical/entertainment programmes. While the "B"-grade companies' package is not much different from that of "A", the "C"-class outfits have a limited choice, with only magazine programmes, documentaries and drama serials offered in their category.

Though there were some grumblings about the classification method, it wasn't the biggest worry for these content providers. What they were more concerned about was the high investment they'd have to make before securing a project.

You see, under the new system, they're expected to submit a detailed proposal, which must include full scripts (drama serials), synopses (magazine programmes) and complete lists of guest artistes (for 13-episode magazine programmes), in addition to the standard requirements of programme treatment and running order.

This means producers would have to fork out a substantial amount of money to pay scriptwriters. And after all that, there is no guarantee that the programme would be picked by RTM.

There's also the matter of intellectual property protection. Who's to say their rejected proposals wouldn't make their way to the screens, albeit with some changes, they asked.

In recent weeks, the media has brought up the numerous concerns of producers and discussed the pros and cons of the tender system. And the good news is RTM has not only heard the grouses but also acknowledged the validity of some of the points raised.

A dialogue session between senior officials of Information Ministry and RTM — chaired by the convivial Datuk Kamaruddin Siaraf, the ministry's new secretary-general — and entertainment journalists showed that RTM is really serious about changing its image.

Where there was no room for discussion or negotiation before, Kamaruddin has assured that his "door is always open" now.

While he agreed that the new system was not completely flawless, Kamaruddin said it's far more superior than the old one.

"Our objective is to improve quality and to give everybody — not just a handful — a fair chance.

"It's not our intention to make it difficult for content providers; we feel this is the best way to ensure that what we get would be of a certain standard and weed out fly-by-night production companies."

He added that content providers need not be overly upset about the classification of companies because "it's not permanent".

"An 'A' company could well end up being a 'C' if it doesn't deliver. We're opening tenders every three months. There're plenty of opportunities for companies to prove themselves. "And rest assured that all issues raised have been noted; we're already taking steps to improve on the system."

Just how sure is RTM that the present system would bring in quality productions? For starters, it has set up six teams — each comprising four or five members — that would be working practically round the clock to assess scripts.

And of those still doubting its sincerity in making decisions based on merit, Kamaruddin had this to say: "I will personally lead a 'surveillance' team to make sure that everything is done above board."

Sounds like a fair deal to me.

Copyright © 2007 NST Online