



Don't Block out the Blogs

The court case against two bloggers by a big media company recently shows the power of this relatively new communication tool. Rather than trying to suppress it, the smarter thing to do would be to use it to our advantage.

THE nation's maiden court case by a media group against two vocal bloggers can be aptly termed as the coming-out party for Malaysian bloggers.

The country's diversified publishing group, The New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd (NSTP), and people aligned to it are suing bloggers Jeff Ooi and Ahiruddin Attan. This is the first time bloggers are being dragged to court for their comments.

One thing is certain: Blogging is here to stay. Love it or hate it, understand it or be overawed by it, blogging is not about to go away. It will impact political parties as well as corporations.

So, how should corporations react? How should they respond to this growing phenomenon? Is there actually an opportunity lurking somewhere in that sphere for them to ride on?

In a recent event, Malaysia's state investment arm, Khazanah Nasional Bhd, showed some maturity in handling blogger comments. It involved comments made by Ahiruddin, a former NSTP editor, now blogging with the handle *Rocky's Bru*. In a recent posting, he blogged that Khazanah had given a plum public relations deal for the Iskandar Economic Region to some former editors. In news parlance, this would be a newsbreak, a scoop, something every business reporter worth his salt would be aiming for.

Khazanah reacted admirably. Instead of clamping up and pretending nothing was happening, the powerful local investment

agency came out with a clarification, effectively denying Ahiruddin's suggestion. Its head of communications and external relations Ahmad Shahizam Shariff actually called up Ahiruddin, a former business editor, to deny the comments.

In a follow-up email, Ahmad Shahizam told Ahiruddin to call him directly to verify any sources of information about Khazanah in the future.

What prompted Khazanah to respond? Khazanah, say its officials, has a framework to evaluate action when it comes to the media. The response was based on those internal policies.

'We responded after evaluating from the basis of impact and influence. If it were an unknown blogger, someone in our judgement who is not widely followed, our reaction may well have been different,' Ahmad Shahizam tells *Malaysian Business*.

That's good to hear. Khazanah did not ignore the story. It took proactive measures to clarify it. Likewise, politicians and businessmen would do themselves a favour by understanding better the growing blogging phenomenon.

They can choose to ignore bloggers, who can be, at times, irritating and smug, or they can choose to unleash their anger with libel suits and other heavy-handed actions.

In recent months, top officials from the Government have been pretty cold towards the blogging fraternity, with one deputy minister even suggesting that this new

medium should undergo similar restrictions faced by the mainstream media.

'Unfortunately, Abdullah has decided to tighten the screws. He cannot control the situation and now wants to control any rampage on the web,' says Opposition-based Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Keadilan) information chief Tian Chua.

Is piling pressure on bloggers the only way out? There is an alternative. Politicians and the business people can learn how to engage this growing constituent.

For them, here's a piece of advice from *Naked Conversations*, a book on how blogs are changing the way businesses deal with customers:

'When we began this project less than a year ago, many of the business community dismissed blogging as a passing fad. Now many managers and executives are acknowledging it with trepidation Blogging has passed the denial and most of the anger phase. Now, businesses see blogging's huge potential and have begun to adapt it to business needs.'

The authors of the book doubt that blogging's 'conversational capabilities' will disappear in the near future. 'It's the first technology to enable a simple conversation to go instantly global,' the book says.

Khazanah did it. Now, the time has come for politicians and corporates to start their own little conversations with the blogging fraternity. In this fast-moving world of today, the little things do matter. Their little conversations can make a big difference. **mb**