



BY ANDY SEE

MARKETING

EFFECTIVE GRASSROOTS COMMUNICATIONS: ESCAPING THE “BANGSAR TRAP”

IN a recent media engagement session, a senior editor reminded communications professionals about the “Bangsar trap” and the danger it posed to effective communication with the grassroots.

The media industry leader underscored the fact that most marketing and communications professionals in Malaysia tend to be individuals who live, work and play in the developed Klang Valley, including Bangsar or other up-market areas

The fact that our perceptions tend to be shaped and reinforced by the people within our social and professional network have contributed to the implementation of communications strategies with a heavy urban bias.

As such, most of the communication strategies resonate only with the “Bangsar types” in the Klang Valley but they may not necessary reflect the perceptions of the rest of Malaysia particularly in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak.

MALAYSIA, TRULY ASIA

As our Tourism Ministry slogan so nicely captures it, Malaysia is Truly Asia.

We are a multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious society and as such, our audiences or stakeholders are a very diverse mix, reacting differently or maybe not reacting at all to the same messages.

I have often said that the days of Mass Communications are over. In today’s connected and digital world, people are used to having Google, Facebook and other social media tailor their newsfeed to their personal preferences.

In his essay “Death to the Mass”, American journalist and professor, Jeff Jarvis, argues that treating the public as “a mass” and giving them a “one-way, one-size-fits-all product” isn’t going to cut it anymore.

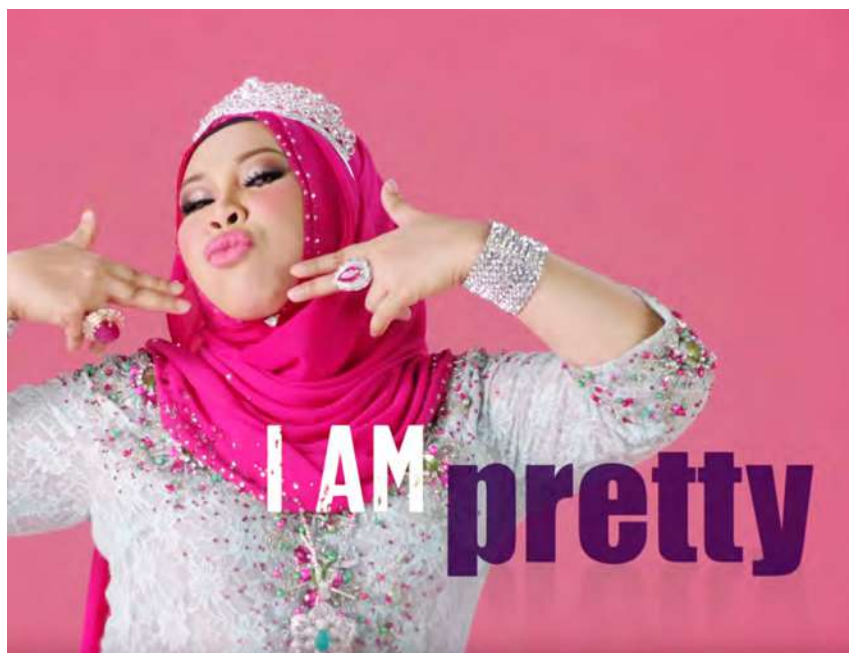
Thus, effective communication today really comes down to accurate segmenting, targeting, and personalisation.

Whilst this is not news to us in the communications industry, we must realise that in the Malaysian context, we are not just up against the challenge of understanding a very diverse racial and cultural demographics in the country.

Indeed, the world view and values of someone in Kota Bahrū or Gua Musang compared to someone in Kuala Lumpur are most often extremely different.

For example, most “Bangsar types” would not have heard of Kelantan-based cosmetics entrepreneur DS Vida, or Datuk Seri Hasmiza Othman, until newspapers reported in 2016 that her terms of sponsorship for the Kelantan

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Aliff Syukri, another Malaysian cosmetics millionaire, has 273,000 subscribers on Youtube, 1.4 million fans on his Facebook page, and 2.8 million followers on Instagram. While many have criticised his outrageous stunts (like sobbing over

football team included painting the stadium bright pink (the team jerseys had to go pink as well).

The general reaction among the “Bangsar type” urbanites was to snicker at DS Vida’s over-the-top demand.

Of course, many urbanites were even more dumbfounded when she came up with her outrageous “I Am Me” single (complete with a cougar meow) the following year.

LITTLE-KNOWN FAMOUS MALAYSIANS

While we laugh at the cringiness, perhaps we “Bangsar types” are missing

the point here.

That video (or at least one of several versions) garnered over 12 million views on Youtube alone! And this popularity is not an isolated phenomenon.

DS Vida has two million followers on Instagram, 113,000 followers on her Facebook page, and 59,000 subscribers on her Youtube channel.

That makes for a very engaged audience base comprising people who WANT to know what she is up to.

DS Vida is not an isolated case. There are several other hugely popular Malaysians who are virtually unknown to the “Bangsar types”.



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For example, 30-year old Aliff Syukri, another Malaysian cosmetics millionaire, has 273,000 subscribers on Youtube, 1.4 million fans on his Facebook page, and 2.8 million followers on Instagram.

While many have criticised his outrageous stunts (like sobbing over his burning Ferrari and or ranting over his poorly received movie), it's undeniable that his business success was built on cleverly reaching his targeted audience.

Ling Big Yong, a Bintulu-born 21-year-

old video production entrepreneur, has 1.1 million subscribers on Youtube, 650,000 Facebook fans, and 362,000 Instagram followers.

Now based in KL, Ling produces predominantly Chinese language videos and has built up his huge following since he joined Youtube in 2009.

Penang-based music label PU4LYF Entertainment has a comparatively modest 156,000 Youtube subscribers and 125 thousand fans on Facebook.

The diversified company is shaking

up the Malaysian Indian music scene, producing predominantly Tamil hip-hop tracks. Many of the company's music videos have millions of views on Youtube.

Why have so few of us "Bangsar types" heard about DS Vida - who built her multimillion ringgit business empire in only eight years - or any other of these highly successful influencers?

Perhaps some pertinent questions to ask are: how are they leveraging their brands to build up such a huge audience base? What are their communication strategies that have allowed them to engage their audiences so successfully?

KATAK DI BAWAH TEMPURUNG?

I "work, live and play" in the city so I would probably count myself among the "Bangsar types".

But our experience working with some of our clients to reach out to the rural folks did open up our eyes to the fact that there is a big communication gap in Malaysia that is begging to be filled.

If we don't stretch our imagination and appreciate the diversity, we will not only be missing many opportunities but will also be frustrated by our lack of appreciation and understanding of the larger market place.

The 2016 US Presidential election is another prime example. The Democrat-supporting liberals were shocked when Trump won the elections, despite the massive noise they made on social and even mainstream media.

Trump had discovered and tapped into the vein of discontent and successfully communicated to that large but silent core of voters.

Similarly, in Malaysia, urban liberals celebrated that rural voters had finally "woken up" and decided to vote against the previous administration.

But after the elections, many liberal urbanites were shocked that the rural folks actually held diametrically opposite world views on many issues of national interest.

While we may question their values

and views on a number of issues, we cannot deny that they comprise a segment of society experiencing a communications void with the "Bangsar types".

Strangely, many brands have not realised the potential to tap into this space and fill that gap yet. Instead, they invest enormous amounts of money into the already very noisy and saturated space that is only consumed by the like-minded urban folks.

DISCOVER THE WORLD OUTSIDE

In my own experience, I have conducted media training for many Brand Leaders and from these sessions, many were shocked to find out that for a small market like Malaysia, we do have a diverse media landscape.

Many are unaware that the Bahasa Malaysia (BM) and Chinese dailies have a much larger readership base than the English media.

According to the Audit Bureau of Circulation, between July and December 2017, the total number of BM newspapers in paid circulation daily was about 1.1 million copies, Chinese newspapers were about 545,000 while English dailies came in last at only about 466,000.

Some were not even aware of the numerous media titles that exclusively served the Sabah and Sarawak markets! Their perception had been formed by the "Bangsar trap".

Minister of Communications and Multimedia Gobind Singh Deo recognised this gap between the "Bangsar types" and the rest of Malaysia in an interview with BFM when he said that many Malaysians still depended on Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) for news and entertainment.

This is in stark contrast to residents of the Klang Valley and other urbanites, who feel it is irrelevant without ever trying to understand its importance to audiences in the rural areas.

Interestingly, in a 2006 interview, DS Vida shared with the media that the turning point for her business was when

she chose to promote her products through RTM's Kelantan FM Radio station.

This was her last shot before calling it quits as she had lost millions investing in advertising campaigns on private radio and TV stations previously.

She spoke about her products for two days and on the third day she was convinced that she was going to shut down her business.

To her surprise, the momentum picked up and customers gathered outside her premises to buy her top selling products! This once again underscores the fact that to win the grassroots, our communication strategy must be targeted and most of all relevant!

ESCAPING THE "BANGSAR TRAP"

The new media landscape does indeed present many challenges. Media organisations are faced with financial pressures and traditional ad revenues are dipping.

Therefore, to capture the marketplace's imagination and effectively engage their audiences, communication and marketing professionals need to be more creative and effective in how they deploy their resources.

As a first step, Brands and Companies need to recognise and acknowledge the reality of Malaysia's diverse audience segments.

Secondly, we need to more carefully craft and strategise our messaging in order that the intended target audiences and stakeholders can relate to and act upon.

This diversity remains a challenge to communications practitioners and marketers. It becomes an opportunity to those who can get out of the "Bangsar trap" and really start talking to their audiences, rather than over them. **mb**

ANDY SEE IS THE FOUNDER AND MANAGING DIRECTOR OF PERSPECTIVE STRATEGIES, A STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND ISSUES MANAGEMENT CONSULTANCY. ANDY IS ALSO CURRENTLY THE PRESIDENT OF THE PUBLIC RELATIONS CONSULTANTS' ASSOCIATION OF MALAYSIA (PRCA MALAYSIA). HE CAN BE REACHED AT ANDY.SEE@PERSPECTIVE.COM.MY.