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New Technology And The Changing Directions
In News Agency And Print Media Operations -
The BERNAMA Experience

by

S N Rajan
NEW TECHNOLOGY AND THE CHANGING DIRECTIONS IN NEWS AGENCY AND PRINT MEDIA OPERATIONS - THE BERNAMA EXPERIENCE

1. Thank you for inviting us to participate in the conference. Bernama had presented a paper on new technology to an AMIC seminar when we first computerised our editorial operations nine years ago. That step led to a great deal of improvements in our operational efficiency in the supply of news to media subscribers. Since then new technology has played a big role in our diversification efforts to include the supply of news and information to the business community.

2. Bernama is observing its 25th anniversary this year and in that short space of time, we have emerged as a respected and credible news agency, accepted by all media organisations in the country and in the region. Our news services reaches virtually every Malaysian as all the print and electronic media subscribe to our service. We provide a wide range of news services including domestic news, economic news, foreign news, features and photos.

3. The introduction of a computerised editorial system in 1984 helped us cope well in the tremendous expansion we had undergone over the years. When we started off operations as a fledgling news agency in 1968 we had adopted what we now call outdated technology and we were virtually crippled by it, sending news items several hours after it had been reported and edited. The new computer system, the first by a national news agency in Asia, virtually revolutionised our operations as news could be transmitted speedily and efficiently to a multitude of destinations simultaneously. We were for the first time able to operate like a news agency. Editors were for the first time in charge of the entire operations right up to the transmission of news.

4. That system showed Bernama what new technology was all about and what it could do for the Agency. Many other news agencies in the region had in fact followed in our footsteps to take advantage of the benefits of such systems. Staff in Bernama itself who had adapted to the system very quickly asked for more and additional features, and management wanted greater exploitation of such systems especially for commercial use.

5. Bernama's latest tag line says it is an information databank, a one-stop agency providing a wide range of news and information services. The products range from the traditional general news services to specialised services like realtime stock prices, realtime international financial information, database on Malaysian and international public-listed companies, company and credit search information, PR service and custom-tailored services and these require the use of PCs, data communication and sophisticated software.

The customers are no longer just the newspapers, radio and television stations in Malaysia and Singapore but also fund managers, treasury managers, stockbrokers, investors and just about anybody who needs information for trading and business.

6. Bernama's dramatic growth as a major provider of information has come about as a result of its need to diversify its revenue base. Although the agency's main role continues to be as a supplier of Malaysian and international news to media organisations, Bernama had to look for new sources of revenue as the media market in Malaysia was saturated. Government funding had dwindled despite the enormous expansion of Bernama's operations. Amendments to the Bernama Act has also enabled the organisation to take on this expanded role as it can now be commercially oriented. The Act also requires foreign information vendors to distribute their services through Bernama.
7. As a result, information giants like Reuters, Telerate and Knight Ridder make their financial information services available through Bernama. Several others like Bloomberg, Extel and Datastream International are also distributing their products in the country. The goal is to make available a wide range of information services available in the country and help develop Malaysia as a major financial centre.

Bernama has also played a pioneering role in the development of realtime stock prices. In joint venture with the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange, a company called KLSE-Bernama Realtime Services Sdn. Bhd, provides realtime KLSE prices to stockbrokers and remisiers in the country. Over 2000 screens are now in use in the 57 stockbroking firms in the country to access the MASA service.

Variations of the service have been developed to meet the needs of fund managers and investors. The Bernama Equities Service is one such product which is specially tailored to meet the exacting demands of fund managers and investors.

A dial-up service providing stock and money market information is also being made available for home users on their telephone sets.

Bernama has also taken a stake in a company specialising in company and credit search information. In view of the establishment of the Kuala Lumpur Options and Financial Futures Exchange (KLOFFE), Bernama will also be providing an options service specially tailored to the needs of the Malaysian market.

An information retrieval system is also available through Newslink which provides a wide range of general purpose information and specialised packages through desktop PCs, database and local area networks.

Custom-tailored packages are also available through this arrangement for audiotext, videotext, pager and other such arrangements.

Bernama PR offers the full range of press and media relations service. A Japanese language Malaysian news service is also available in Malaysia and Japan. A scrolling news service providing high quality graphics, photos and texts is also available for advertising and for display at high-foot traffic areas and in hotel rooms.

The range of services provided by Bernama continues to grow and Bernama is seizing the opportunities presented by the rapid developments in communications and computer technology to tap the fast expanding information market.

8. Bernama has leap-frogged into the modern world of communications after starting very humbly with old-fashioned technology when it was set-up in 1968.

Much of its news and information services uses high-end desktop PCs, sophisticated software and high speed data lines. It has even started using satellites to distribute its services.

The hallmark of Bernama services continues to be quality. Subscribers, whether they are media or the business community, are assured of a high level professional service in terms of products, customer servicing and technical maintenance.
9. SERVICES PROVIDED BY BERNAMA

a. Bernama and News Services
   - Domestic news service
   - Economic news service
   - World news service

b. International wire services
   - Reuters
   - Associated Press
   - United Press International
   - AFP
   - Kyodo
   - UNI
   - OANA News [News of Asia-Pacific news agencies]

c. Photo Services
   - Domestic photos
   - Reuters
   - AFP
   - AP

d. Telerate Financial Services
   - realtime financial service on money, forex, commodities
     and other financial instruments

e. Money Centre of Knight-Ridder
   - a realtime financial service on money, forex, commodities
     and other financial instruments

f. Telequote of Hong Kong
   - A dial-up service on financial markets for home and
     office use

g. Extel International
   - A worldwide company database
h. Embassy Service
   A daily news service for Malaysian missions overseas

i. Student Service
   A daily news service for Malaysian students overseas

j. Library Service
   A reference service on about 25,000 subjects on Malaysia

k. Bernama Equities Service
   A realtime stock price service for Malaysian investors

l. MASA
   A realtime KLSE price service for stockbrokers run in joint venture with the KLSE

m. PR Service
   Public Relations service

n. Newscan
   A screen-based service providing photos, graphics and texts for use in high-foot traffic areas.

o. Newslink
   A PC-based service providing Malaysian and world news.

p. Japan Service
   A Japanese language newsletter on Malaysia for Japanese businessmen in Malaysia and Japan.
SUBSCRIBERS

Bernama has over 1000 subscribers for its various services and over 2000 screens are in use throughout the country.

The subscribers include:-

banks and financial institutions
commodity brokers
stockbrokers
fund managers
newspapers
radio and television
investors
individuals
Treasury Managers
corporate chiefs
government agencies and ministries
libraries

10. Revenues have been increasing steadily with surpluses recorded in the last three years. Non-media products accounted for 53 per cent of revenues last year. Government grants on the other hand have been reduced gradually and last year it was less than 15 percent. Steps are underway to corporatise the agency to enable us to operate on more business-oriented lines.

11. We have barely scratched the surface in our efforts at diversification. The success of our initial efforts has given us confidence to tap the tremendous market that is opening up in the information sector especially through the use of new technology.

S.N. RAJAN
Marketing Manager
BERNAMA