Selling Singapore's E-Lifestyle Initiative to Late Adopters

Ian Weber
Texas A&M University, USA

Eric T.K. Lim
National University of Singapore, Singapore

INTRODUCTION

Singapore's transformation to a knowledge-based, information and communication technology (ICT) hub in the Asia-Pacific region began in 1992 with *A Vision of an Intelligent Island (The IT 2000 Report)* initiative. This blueprint for Singapore's future was initiated by the government "to spread the use of computers in everyday life and ... to have all households ... linked to the Internet" (Kuo et al., 2002, p. 1). To achieve this goal, the government implemented five strategic themes: development of a global hub for business, services and transportation; improvement in the quality of life by using technology to reduce or simplify mundane activities; boosting the economic engine through pursuit of information and knowledge economies; linking communities locally and globally through a comprehensive information and communication technology (ICT) platform to support civic and social networking; and enhancing the potential of individuals through the use of Web-based learning (Chun, 2002).

In 2001, Singapore's vision was at a crucial stage of development. Both the percentage of households connected to the Internet (49.8%) and computer ownership (61%) indicated strong growth (IDA, 2002, pp. 1-2; see Figure 1). However, underpinning these figures was concern over the low percentage of Singaporeans (47%) who were able to perform online functions. This situation contributed to low usage levels and poor adoption of Singapore's broader e-lifestyle initiative by late adopters of ICT and associated e-services.

Responding to the challenge, the Singapore government launched the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) to coordinate the development and implementation of the National IT Literacy Program (NITLP) in June 2001. By providing non-IT literate citizens with basic computing and Internet skills, NITLP acted as a primer to increase adoption and diffusion of the e-lifestyle framework (Lim & Weber, 2004).

This study examines the communication strategies employed by IDA to market the social benefits of NITLP to late adopters of ICT. The study uses Salmon's (1989) social marketing approach, supported by Rogers' (1995) five characteristics of diffusion of innovations, as an analytical tool to understand how social marketing strategies worked to change the mindset and attitudes of target groups of homemakers, workers and senior citizens in Singapore.

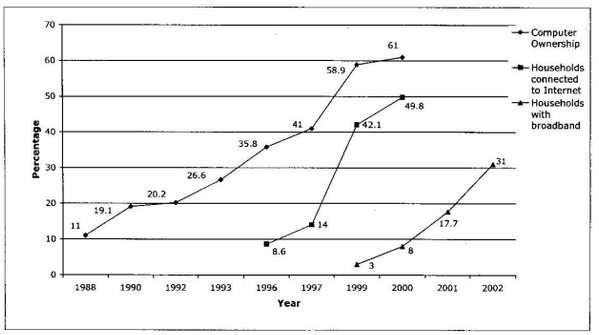
BACKGROUND

Since 1998, Singapore has attempted to narrow the country's digital divide. Of the 1.1 million households, almost 50% have Internet access (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the rollout of the broadband infrastructure reaches 99% of Singaporeans with a penetration level of 17.7% at the time of launching NITLP in 2001 (One big e-family, 2002, L. 14).

In spite of the high level of awareness of e-lifestyle services, usage by Singaporeans remained low. For example, IDA's (2002) survey of households revealed that 92.4% of respondents were aware of online shopping, but only 21.1% had used online facilities (p. 2). In response, IDA set the twin goals of training 350,000 Singaporeans in basic computing and Internet skills by 2004 and achieving a 90% level of information communication literacy by 2010. To achieve these goals, the Singapore government spent $25 million on developing and implementing NITLP from 2001 to 2004 to target late adopters of ICT (One big e-family, 2002, p. L14).

Level 1 NITLP courseware is delivered as a seven-hour, three-module training program in four languages (English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil). The initiative serves to: (1) equip citizens with basic computing and Internet skills essential for improving the economic competitiveness of the country; and (2) promote the integration of ICT into the daily activities of Singaporeans so they benefit from a fun and enriching e-lifestyle where each citizen has equal access to information and communication technology regardless of age, language, social background, or ability (One big e-family, 2002, p. L14).

Figure 1. Computer, Internet, and broadband penetration in Singapore (IDA, 2002, p. 2; Singapore broadband usage, 2003)



Within the first 12 months of the program, 80,000 Singaporeans completed the Level 1 training course. By the end of 2003, IDA had exceeded its target of 350,000 IT literate Singaporeans. During this same period, broadband penetration dramatically increased from 17.7% to 31%, a rise from 950,000 to 1.24 million (Singapore broadband usage, 2003). Usage of online information, interactive services and e-community participation facilities also showed increases of at least 10% across all categories within late adopter groups (Weber & Lim, 2003). Supporting these increases was a sophisticated social marketing campaign that persuaded late adopter Singaporeans of the core benefits of IT literacy in their daily lives.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Communication campaign strategists have embraced social marketing as a way of disseminating ideas and innovations within a social cause framework. A number of researchers (Zaltman & Kotler, 1971; Bloom & Novelli, 1981; Salmon, 1989; Weber, 1999) have contributed to understanding how marketing approaches work to promote social ideas and benefits. Central to social marketing processes is the notion that the objective of selling "commodities" is unlikely to succeed unless the essential conditions for effective merchandising exist, or are made to exist. The conditions are primarily that the audience be persuaded through adequate, appropriate and accessible social mechanisms. Thus, Bloom and Novelli (1981) suggest that the process of social marketing is "… the design, implementation and control of programs calculated to influence the acceptability of social ideas and involving considerations of product planning, pricing, communications, distribution and marketing research" (p. 79).

Kotler and Zaltman (1971) argue that social marketing techniques perform the role of a "bridging mechanism" between the simple possession of knowledge and the socially useful implementation of what knowledge allows (p. 5). Therefore, a connection can be drawn between the marketing of an idea, innovation, or technology and the social acceptability of that product or service through investing it with some social objective or end. A number of researchers (Mackay & Gillespie, 1992; Kinsella, 1993; Weber & Evans, 2002) suggest that marketing plays a crucial role in the social shaping of technology because it can assist in constructing demand. Under the umbrella of modernization, the objective is to harness this symbolic encoding process, within the framework of a strategic marketing plan, to assist the introduction and assimilation of an idea, innovation, or technology into a society.

To achieve these objectives, Salmon (1989) suggests that the process of "social marketing employs mechanisms of social control … inculcation and modification of social norms—to achieve objectives of social change where these objectives are said to be in the interests of the individuals or systems being changed" (p. 20). There are two broad phases that define this process of social change through social marketing and related communication campaigns: *problem definition phase* and *implementation phase*.

Defining the social problem is divided into three steps. First, the communication campaign forms a social intervention that determines the situation as representing a problem in the view of a group or section of a community. Such a situation, as Salmon (1989) describes, can take the form of "some consumers … [are] unaware (but should not be) of some organization's service which may improve their lives; some social systems are insufficiently advanced or modernized (and should change) … or some government is being unresponsive to the needs of certain groups by failing to distribute resources in a manner a change agency considers equitable (so the government should alter its philosophy or allocation)" (p. 21). By defining situations in such a manner that projects the view that there is a "need for change" and then applying efforts to bring about that change, organizations or governments attempt to control change.

The second and sequential step is to consider the "definers of these problems." The ability to control the framing and defining of the problem is paramount to the success of the adopted "solution." Salmon (1989) argues that: "without doubt, the power resides disproportionately with government, corporations and other institutions possessing legitimacy, social power and resources and access to the media" (p. 25). From a government or political perspective, this change is undertaken so as to construct social, political and economic environments that prove beneficial in achieving certain social objectives. The third step of the definition phase combines the second step with the first to focus on the less tangible