

## **New ways of reaching out: Dialect for seniors and Facebook for young people**

**When it comes to explaining policies, government agencies have moved away from a one-size-fits-all approach.**

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A QUIRKY heartland uncle, known for going everywhere with his pet bird, visits a doctor for a cough.

Outside the clinic, he sees a notice for the Community Health Assist Scheme, which gives lower- to middle-income Singaporeans subsidies for medical and dental care.

Inside, the female doctor encourages him to get his blood sugar and cholesterol levels checked. She then breaks out into a rap and dance - complete with cartoon animation of vegetables in the background - to remind people to cook meals using less salt and oil.

The quirky uncle is getai veteran Wang Lei, and the doctor, Mediacorp actress Kym Ng. It is a scene from an episode of *Jiak Ba Buay? or Eat Already?*, a half-hour dialect drama serial commissioned by the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), which concluded its first season earlier this month.

Watching Ng in a short feathery skirt and a bird headpiece breaking into a dance makes for hilarious viewing, but the clip also contains some serious messages.

First, it gives the elderly a glimpse of the health benefits they can get.

These videos received the highest viewership across the Govsingapore YouTube page - which has videos of government campaigns and policy information, plus peeks at the making of these visuals - and various Facebook pages.

Second, it urges them to stay healthy by eating well and keeping active.

It is one of hundreds of videos and drama episodes helmed or commissioned by the Government in the past three years, all sophisticated, slick and every bit as good as those put out by established industry players.

At the same time, Insight also found that ministries' own video equipment, production staff strength, and even the precision of counting video statistics, have been beefed up in the past few years.

All this signals a shift in the way that the Government is communicating its policies and messages to Singaporeans. Its way of winning hearts and minds is becoming more sophisticated, to keep up with the times.

It has gone from the posters of yesteryear with walls of dull text, to stylish infographics with key points, and from issuing wordy media statements, leaving it to the press to disseminate information. Now, it is coming up with its own social media posts and videos.

The Government's messages also used to be more "in your face", say well-known industry players like film-maker Royston Tan, who directed *Jiak Ba Buay*?

As Mr Tan puts it: "Last time, messages were really a hard-sell. A video would have four people of different races holding hands and running in a field."

With the Government still feeling its way around new media, the jury is out on just how effective such communications are.

Are feel-good videos better suited to helping explain schemes like the Pioneer Generation Package healthcare subsidy? Does the bitter pill of population growth to counter the low birth rate really go down easier with shiny communications?

Cynics also wonder if the Government's new-found interest in communications and engaging people is merely skin-deep - or whether it in fact, signals a deeper shift in policy and political thinking that emphasises reaching out to people.

### **The New Playbook**

In the past, the Government was known for a more top-down, officious approach to making its policies known.

Actor-director Jack Neo tells *Insight*: "The Government's old style was very heavy on information and less focused on being entertaining. But if you want to spread a message, you need to have more entertainment and information. This is the way to make people remember."

Merely issuing press statements and information sheets and relying on traditional news outlets to spread the news is also no longer enough, although it is still essential, say communications agencies.

Instead, they now make an effort to break down complex policies and changes into bite-size pieces that are easy to grasp.

**Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Carol Soon says this reflects how people's preferences and information-processing habits have changed - they are drawn to visual content such as videos and pictures rather than text.**

Gone are the days when govsgap, the Government's official YouTube channel, would only upload video footage of MPs' speeches in Parliament. These days it has self-produced video summaries of Parliament debates, animated clips on how to fight the spread of the Zika virus, and even hipster-style features on heritage buildings.

Additionally, policy changes are presented in snappy infographics, or videos with policy details woven into compelling narratives.

As the population gets increasingly tech-savvy and media consumption habits shift, the Government has to evolve to keep up with the times, say communications officers.

To do that, the Government these days works more with industry players - ranging from award-winning local film-makers to local humour sites.

Officials are also figuring out how to tailor their messages to different audiences, coming up with unconventional content once inconceivable to the Government.

Dialect programmes have been commissioned in a bid to reach the elderly heartland folk who may not speak much Mandarin - a move that raised eyebrows, as the Government has long discouraged the use of dialects on national television under its bilingualism policy.

But now, *Jiak Ba Buay?* will have a second season next year. Additionally, Mr Neo will helm a new dialect variety show, *Happy Can Already*, which aims to tell elderly folk about government schemes, that will premiere this Friday.

Mr Neo, who will play his heartland auntie alter-ego Liang Ximei, says: "They understand that to reach this group of elderly (people), it is important to use a language familiar to them.

"If the Government insists on doing things like they have done so in the past, where messages are communicated mainly in English and Mandarin, then we may never be able to effectively reach a specific segment of the community."

Reaching a younger crowd also means having to be more, well, cool.

To encourage younger Singaporeans to join the National Steps Challenge and to walk more for fitness, the Health Promotion Board teamed up with, of all things, local humour site SGAG last month.

SGAG is known for its slapstick humour using memes and wacky captions. About three-quarters of its followers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are young people aged between 18 and 34. The result: One video shows a man encouraging his girlfriend to jog by dangling chicken wings in front of her.

And to help young couples work out their finances when purchasing a Build-To-Order flat, the Housing Board recently uploaded a series of infographics on how much applicants will need to pay in cash and Central Provident Fund savings if they are keen to buy a flat.

**Dr Soon says that the Government is making an effort to understand citizens' concerns and anxieties, and it is willing to go out of its comfort zone and engage them in new ways and on new platforms.**

For officials, it has been nothing short of a major shift. Says Ms Karen Tan, senior director of MCI's public communications division: "We need to rewrite the playbook for government communications to reach out effectively to the public.

"It is no longer about the mass audience. People consume information and news differently, so you will need to tailor messages to meet the needs of your audience."

To support this shift, communications departments across ministries have been beefed up. When Ms Tan joined MCI's public communications division in 2011, its content development team had around 10 officers - a quarter of the 40 staff today.

It is a similar story over at the Ministry of Education (MOE). Its design branch, part of the ministry's communications division, was started more than two years ago.

The team, which has designers, artists and writers, creates infographics and maps of new policies. Its new media team, which handles the ministry's social media platforms, has also been expanded. The team recently recruited Mr Jimmy Tang, a tech advocate and co-founder of popular forum Hardware Zone, as its senior deputy director.

At the Environment and Water Resources Ministry, some marketing communications staff have a film school background, and have no issues with picking up a camera to make images and shoot videos.

Minister of State for Communications and Information Chee Hong Tat tells Insight that the ministry wants to build up its ability to analyse data, track sentiment on the ground and use behavioural science to better target communications.

### **Tracking The Shift**

While it is hard to pin down exactly when the shift took place, experts believe the impetus was the 2011 General Election, when the ruling People's Action Party lost a group representation constituency to the opposition.

Political observer and Singapore Management University (SMU) law don Eugene Tan says: "The Government probably saw that policies have to be better communicated, with different outreach strategies for different audiences."

Mr Woon Tai Ho, a media veteran and chief executive of RHT Digital Media, says the election results were a reminder not to take the support of the people for granted.

Indeed, the Government, which did not have a strong online presence prior to 2011, got started on building an online profile.

"Social media, when done well, is a godsend for politicians," says Mr Woon, citing the Facebook page of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

PM Lee has more than 1.1 million likes on Facebook, about 430,000 Twitter followers, and another 274,000 followers on Instagram - making him the most popular politician here on social media.

His online persona adopts a fairly casual tone, a deliberate approach which humanises the man, says Mr Woon.

"Social media democratises - now everyone is someone with a voice and an opinion," he adds.

The Our Singapore Conversation, a year-long public engagement exercise that took place in 2012, also showed that people appreciated the engagement from the Government.

SMU's Eugene Tan adds that the national dialogue showed that "people wanted small-group engagement, and a very personable communication style".

"We want to be spoken with, not spoken to."

### **An Emotional Connection**

Mr Chee is quick to say the Government's attitude towards public communications is not merely about marketing, or dressing up policies. He says the outreach also aims to build "the feeling of connection and care".

Indeed, Ms Genevieve Chye, divisional director of the MOE's engagement and research division, agrees that at its core, communications must connect with people and help them understand why policies are implemented and why changes are made.

She adds: "It is not just about the technical details of a policy and getting people to understand the mechanics of it."

This is especially crucial for MOE, which deals with the highly emotive topic of education. Not long ago, it launched an innovative way of explaining recent tweaks to grading the national Primary School Leaving Examination (see side story).

Indeed, videos and dramas on the Pioneer Generation Package have been a hit. Mr Chee, who is also a junior minister for health, has met elderly residents who enjoy the programme as "they feel that the Government cares about them, is trying to help them, is reaching out to them".

Still, however slick and snazzy the videos and infographics are, they cannot replace face-to-face outreach, which must still remain a key pillar of engagement, he says.

Citing roadshows, dialogues, and the 3,000 Pioneer Generation Ambassadors on a mission to educate the elderly about the various schemes they can use, Mr Chee adds: "We don't want to lose this human touch because it is the face-to-face interaction that brings out the element of care, and of building a relationship."

A timely example: The Ministry of Health has organised a roadshow to be held today in Ang Mo Kio to raise awareness of MediShield Life, and to address queries the public may have about the scheme, and how it affects their Integrated Shield plans. Common misconceptions about both plans will be discussed.

### **How Effective?**

Whether this shift in communication works depends on who is asked and what is assessed.

How familiar the elderly are with the Pioneer Generation Package can be figured out by asking them if they know features of the scheme.

Parents can also be asked if they understand the new Primary School Leaving Examination grading system which does away with the aggregated score, for another.

Such measures give policymakers an idea of how well the population understands the technical details of schemes.

But what is more complex and harder to measure is the change in perceptions, attitudes and behaviours.

Do youngsters understand why they need to plan for retirement now, and are they already doing so?

The same goes for the level of engagement the Government has with the population. Do the people feel that their political leaders understand what they are going through?

There are also limits to jazzing up some things, and some messages lend themselves to such forms of packaging better than others.

Schemes where the Government gives out goodies to poorer people, or which have feel-good messages such as staying healthy or planning for retirement, will be better received than sensitive and controversial policies.

For example, the main argument of the Population White Paper the Government released in 2013 - that calibrated immigration and population growth is needed to sustain economic growth as Singaporeans are having fewer babies - was completely overshadowed by people's focus on the headline figure of a projected 6.9 million population by 2030.

Still, digital marketing expert Pat Law says the current communications effort has gone some way towards softening the image of government outfits and ministries.

"If ministries were previously perceived as somewhat cold and removed, I think they are on the right track to changing that public perception," says Ms Law, founder of social media consultancy Goodstuph.

The bottom line is that glitzy marketing cannot paper over bad, unsound policies, even as the Government adopts a more nuanced approach on communication, say experts.

SMU's Eugene Tan says Singapore "should not go the way of spin-doctoring" if such policies come about.

He notes: "Soft selling cannot cover weak policies; instead, go back to the drawing board bearing in mind the feedback and concerns.

"Ultimately, the substance and effectiveness of a policy is what will win people over, not the bells and whistles."