



Insight > Internet

## BuzzCity taps 'unwired' to retain buzz

By Kevin Kwang, ZDNet Asia  
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**newsmaker** On the company's blog site, Lai Kok Fung, co-founder and CEO of BuzzCity surmised: "Life doesn't progress like a spreadsheet." With that philosophy firmly in mind, one of Singapore's few surviving dot-coms has managed to outlive and outsmart its peers.



A decade after its inception in 1999 as a company that enabled Internet users to track updates to their favorite Web sites, BuzzCity has since evolved into a mobile advertising company operating in and targeting an "unwired" segment. It also hosts its own wireless community, called mygamma.com, and is a month away from launching a new portal offering free-for-download games.

Speaking to ZDNet Asia in an exclusive interview, Lai, who participated in a panel discussion at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) SME Summit 2009 held this week in Singapore, details his future plans for BuzzCity and shares how his children influence his business decisions. Himself a researcher-turned-technopreneur, Lai also dispenses advice to entrepreneurs looking to follow in his footsteps.

### Q: What made you describe your target audience as the "unwired"?

Lai: The "unwired" refers to two groups of people: the newly connected, emerging middle-class in developing countries, and the blue-collar sector in developed regions. These two groups are growing, especially in the past two to three years when mobile phone penetration had accelerated together with mobile Internet access.

The past one or two years also saw mobile Internet users surpassing PC users in our key markets like South Africa, India and Indonesia. In these countries, consumers don't have to pay expensive, and often confusing, subscription and data plans imposed by telcos like the ones we experience in Singapore. Instead, what they have is mass-market pricing based on daily rates or cheap data packages. This, together with improving yet cheap mobile technology found in copycat-iPhones and other such handsets, is growing in the unwired demographic.

### What differentiates BuzzCity from its competitors?

Today, we operate in the mobile advertising space catering to the unwired consumer segment, and there isn't anyone targeting this segment in the way we are. Not only do we have mobile advertising, we also produce our own media through mygamma.com and our soon-to-be-launched free games portal.

By providing these media, we are able to better understand our users compared to pure advertising networks. Also, the more ads we serve in our own mobile property, the higher profit margin we have as we don't have to pay any third-party publishers.

Besides games, I am also currently observing and learning about the music and e-commerce industries as potential verticals we can launch in the future.

Ultimately, it's important that we configure our business not just based on price or efficiency, but to also compete in how we piece our business together. In terms of market identification, and how we put our media products together, I think we are very unique in our space.

### What are some current challenges you are facing?

One of the issues we face is that premium publishers--people like SPH (Singapore Press Holdings)--are too slow in moving into mobile media, or not doing it well or are trying to impose charges for consumption of such media. This creates a problem for advertising networks because there are not enough reputable sites to put ads on.

Today, there are a lot of mobile ads found on user-generated content sites, but advertisers are wary of putting their ads there because they cannot control the type of content these users produce. It won't be good, for instance, if their ads appear on a site that professes suicidal intent!

### Is the BuzzCity company culture the same now as it was 10 years ago?

It's still the same. One of the key features here is that we present a casual image, so whether it's a presentation or meeting our clients, we are dressed casually. Of course, if the event is filled with VVIPs (very very important persons) and important people, we would dress accordingly, but otherwise, I like to tell people that I've earned the right to dress casually.

Another thing I like to tell my people is that there's flexibility here, but there's also discipline. They ought to treat the company as a platform to advance their core competencies and career. If employees take advantage of our casual culture, then they are just cheating themselves of their youth and time.

### Who do you turn to for inspiration?

There are many people whom I turn to for advice in specific areas of my business, and some of them are our existing board members.

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Nearer home, my children who are 16 and 14 years old, are great references for me. How they use the media is much different from how it was used when I was younger. Back then, my parents would worry I was watching too much TV, but I don't have this problem with my kids because they don't just watch TV! They would be watching *Singapore Idol* on TV and at the same time, be searching and viewing YouTube clips.

Nowadays, children engage in participatory entertainment, and the way they use their mobile phones--when they text, they only use two words--is different from how I use mine. While they are younger than my target audience, it's good for me to observe the media consumption habits of the younger generation.

#### **BuzzCity has been around for a decade, and is one of the few remaining dot-com startups in Singapore. How do you feel about this?**

When I realize the company is still around after three to four years, I just think we should try to last even longer. Otherwise, it would mean we're simply dying a slower death, and I would prefer a faster, less painful death.

#### **How do you think the Internet empowers SMEs (small and midsize enterprises)?**

I recently spoke to a young man who isn't very educated but is a BMX enthusiast, and is connected to a like-minded online community. After speaking to some of the online members, he decided to sell bicycle parts that he had sourced from Taiwan to these members.

I asked him why the manufacturer wasn't able to sell directly to these people, he replied that it only knew how to manufacture the parts but did not possess the necessary knowledge to assist customers on what parts were suitable for certain bikes and for specific conditions. He also mentioned that he was making a 100 percent profit from reselling these parts.

This young chap has shown that the Web allows you to get out of one's physical constraints. These days, as long as you can identify small needs, aggregate the demand and provide for these small markets, you will be able to make money. Previously, you had to commit to a large shipment of products and find a similarly large enough demand in order to do business.


#### **Any pearls of wisdom for technopreneurs looking to emulate your achievements?**

They have to enjoy what they do, and not do it for the money.

For those who are younger, they should build something that is unique and that they can service, while making sure it is aligned to their skills and interests. Of course, the venture must be able to support and feed them.

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