

Technologies that make the difference

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Adoption of the New Media

Yesterday, millions around the world and a strong 2-million US crowd witnessed the inauguration of the 44th and the first African-American US President that turned a new page in US history. While Mr. Barack Obama promised bold and swift actions and decisive steps to restore America's standing in the world disillusioned with its power and a call to a new era of American responsibility; one of the most significant differences in his election campaign was the vast use of the New Media to reach younger voters.

Mr. Obama's campaign teams were so successful in the use of website, video-sharing site YouTube and social networks such as Facebook and Twitter that the 2008 US Presidential Elections were dubbed the "Facebook Elections".

While the New Media is not really new, governments and political parties around the world are increasingly becoming aware of the need to embrace this media as a means to engage their younger citizens/party members, address their concerns, counter accusations that can be posted on the web anonymously as well as solicit online funding and donations for election and party campaigns. The Singapore government mindful of the power of the internet has also recently approved the use of podcast and blogs for the next general election.

According to Associate Professor, Zhang WeiYu, NUS New Media academic, more political actors, non-governmental organizations and interest groups will spend more time and resources on exploiting New Media this year. "There is no turning back," she said.

The Shrunken Notebook

For the first time, the number of notebooks shipped in Asia-Pacific in last quarter of 2008 outstripped that of the desktop PCs. The frequent introduction of new models of mini-notebooks by renowned PC makers such as Acer, Dell, Fujitsu, HP, Lenovo and even Sony helped push the popularity and adoption of these mini-notebooks by the consumers.

This year, Intel planned to launch an improved and smaller version of the Atom processor which is currently powering most mini-notebooks rolled out to date. Codenamed Moorestown, this chip will give users more speed and capability in their mini-notebook. For storage, improvements in performance for solid state drives (SSD) since mid-2008 have been giving a boost to the reliability and faster boot-up times for mini-notebooks. One of the hurdles that manufacturers have to overcome for SSD is to reduce its high cost per unit storage compared to other more established storage medium.

Coupled with more portable gadgets such as the first micro-projector/multimedia player that weighs only 160g, mini-speakers designed specially for notebooks that give reasonably good HiFi quality, USB TV tuner to watch and record TV programmes, 500 GB portable harddisk to store videos/music and parents wanting to give their young ones a head-start, it is safe to predict that mini-notebooks will continue to be in great demand this year despite the deteriorating economic situation.

Large is Beautiful

While mobile phones and notebooks are shrinking in size, 50-inch TV panels are now common living room feature even in some public housing in Singapore. In a number of local showrooms, panel size of 100-inch TV monitors is commonly found.

Currently, besides being bombarded by technological terms such as HD ready, HD enabled, etc; consumers have also to decide whether they should choose a plasma or a LCD panel considering price, size, colour reproduction, brilliance, refresh rate and power consumption.

Even when there is a consumer trend towards using LCD panel given the improvements in quality of image reproduction and reduction in price, consumers are now sometimes made to decide if they should pay a "little" extra to use LED back lighting for their LCD TV or notebook panel as opposed to the traditional CCFL (Cold Cathode Fluorescent Lighting) backlighting. Retailers of LCD panel with LED back-lighting point to the use of mercury or other regulated heavy metals in CCFL tubes, thinner panel, environmental friendly and cost savings from using LED back-lighting.

While such confusion will continue to baffle the consumers and the more advanced users, it is of little doubt that our living rooms, show rooms and retail malls will be flooded with huge monitors that that dazzle us with life-size images and advertising.

Multi-Touch Technology

The success of Apple's multi-touch based iPhone has led to manufacturers following up with designs that make use of multi-touch technologies. Windows 7.0 operating system to be introduced this year will port elements of Microsoft Surface to the desktop PC.

As opposed to the single-touch technology that is commonly found in the newer generation of Automated Teller Machine (ATM) and touch-screen information kiosk, multi-touch technology provides a touch-surface with an user interface that can accept or recognize inputs from more than 1 finger simultaneously. This technology is actually not new and dates back to 1992 at the University of Toronto. Later in 1999, Fingerworks, a Newark-based company run by University of Delaware academics produced a line of multi-touch products. The company was acquired by Apple in 2005. Extending on Fingerworks development, the first phone with multi-touch capability was introduced by Apple in 2007.

In Aug 2006, this author was introduced to a huge multi-monitor touch-screen video wall at a research lab in France by a leading consultant. Several applications of the multi-touch video wall were presented; e.g. video wall can be concurrently used by multi-shoppers to search for products, prices and shop location while displaying advertising messages. In schools and offices, students and co-workers can work on different parts of the video walls on different components of a collaborated project. Government such as the military can use this large video wall in the War Gaming room to display & interact with online feeds derived from the field. Singtel in Singapore has begun to use big multi-touch panel in some of their retail shops to let consumers browse/compare products or download music online.

The success of the iPhone and its mass consumer appeal will lead to the rapid improvement and development of new consumer-oriented multi-touch applications this year. The keyboard and mouse will become less of an input device eventually.

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