

Submission to the World Chambers Competition 2005 for the Best IT Project

Title: The IT Trinity

Chamber: Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry



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Executive Summary

The IT solution delivered by the Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry is divided into three components and was implemented in three stages. The approach is a unique one. Instead of merely launching websites, or merely utilising sophisticated software to deliver information to members, the Chamber relied on an innovative combination of three media to effectively produce an all-round IT project that will help companies, especially the small and medium enterprises, grasp the importance of IT in actual business practices. Hence, the Chamber's role in the project is that of a catalytic information provider to quicken the pace of the economic development in Singapore.

The premise of the IT project is to enhance the IT usage amongst the local companies, by creating an online business directory, a corporate website containing business information, leads, useful links and an event calendar, as well as an annual IT conference that allows the local companies to be in touch with the latest IT solutions on which they can leverage to increase their bottom lines, strengthen the internal management system, and shorten the transaction procedures to satisfy both suppliers and customers.

The first stage saw the completion of an online business network of world Chinese Businesses (www.wcbn.com.sg) in 1995. The corporate website (www.sccci.org.sg) was launched in 1996. The final stage was the inauguration of the Internet Business Conference (later renamed Infocomm Commerce Conference) in 1997. Together, the websites and the annual event bring much needed trading and business information to the business community served by SCCCI.

Understanding the first of its kind, the World Chinese Business Network (WCBN) has garnered increasing popularity amongst the enterprises literally from Australia to Ukraine. The website is also closely linked to a biennial conference – the World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention – which has been hosted in Asian, North American and Australian continents, giving the website a much-needed exposure in the international community, and thereby creating an impressive range of business opportunities worldwide.

SCCCI's corporate website is an information gateway to the members, and the larger business community. Members can register and pay online, shortening the registration process between the event organiser and the participants. The website also hosts a series of important links to government organisations, a news portal, as well as foreign trade agencies around the world, so that visitors are able to get information they need real time.

The annual conference and exhibition gathers the top-notch IT players, both international and domestic, to collectively impart the latest updates on IT, and how SMEs can customise various solutions to increase business efficiencies. The event also encourages the collaboration between international companies and local partners to widen the business network. And, with the integration of those components, members are in the best position to progress with the global economic pace through strategic employment of IT.

The Origin of the Project

The usage of information technology (IT) in daily business practices surged in the early nineties when computer hardware and Internet were made increasingly affordable for business and personal usage. Instead of relying on snail mails and faxes, business practitioners turned to e-mail for communication to save time on business transactions. Companies eyeing the global audience started building websites to attract cross-border customers. With the establishment of different online payment gateways and worldwide directory listings, it indicated an irreversible trend to conduct businesses in a virtual environment.

As the leading ethnic chamber in Singapore, Singapore Chinese Chamber of Commerce & Industry responded to the calling of the members and spearheaded an IT project that would address three aspects of their needs. In addition, not only does the Chamber have the mission to encourage active economic development in Singapore, it is also involved in promoting the Chinese language and culture. Hence the IT project is implemented in both the English and the Chinese language. Appropriately divided into three stages, the IT project consists of a business directory of all Chinese enterprises in the world to widen the members' network, a corporate website showcasing pertinent business information and broadcasting the Chamber's activities to the larger business community, as well as an event that gathers the top-notch players in the IT industry and provide the SMEs community with IT updates and solutions.

Established in 1995, the World Chinese Business Network (www.wcbsn.com.sg), or WCBN, addresses the members' needs to widen their business network globally. It also provides them the opportunity to source potential business partners from different continents. The network is now a repository of more than 127,000 companies, most of which supply updated contact details. All companies are categorised according to countries and regions, as well as products and services, so that visitors can locate a company easily and efficiently. The bilingual website is accessible to the public and is free of charge.

The corporate website (www.sccci.org.sg) was launched almost a year later. Initially, it was merely a promotional tool broadcasting the Chamber's corporate profile to a worldwide audience, with a brief introduction of the Chamber's initiatives and operating mechanism. However, in early 2003, it was completely redeveloped into an information portal for local businesses to tap on our resources in the Asian market. Besides publicising the Chamber's activities on the home page, allowing members to register for events and pay online, the website is also divided into several sections including a members' online directory, SME one-stop service listing financial assistance programmes that SMEs can obtain through various government agencies, and news on different markets like China, India and Malaysia, just to name a few.

The event held in 1997 was considered the last stage of the project, and would eventually become an annual event for the Chamber due to its popularity and positive feedback from all participants and exhibitors. The conference cum exhibition is a unique platform for members to share their concerns with local and international IT players. Incorporated with the ICC is a Solutions Clinic for IT experts to provide professional diagnosis of IT problems faced by SMEs and offer practical solutions to each set of challenges. It is an educational platform for members and the public to understand the

evolution of IT in corporate practices so that they are more well-equipped to keep a cutting edge in the business community.

Therefore in the IT project, the Chamber identified three needs of the members, namely the need to expand the business network, the need to collate and disseminate business resources, and the need to create greater awareness of developments and trends in IT. As Singapore is a small country, heavily reliant on international trade and business networking, the IT project initiated by the Chamber is an amalgamation of all members' needs and creates a comprehensive approach to equip members with necessary hardware and software to achieve greater efficiencies and resources deployment.

In summary, the Chamber adopted the role of a pioneering educator and information provider to enhance our members' profile through the innovative implementation of the IT project in the three identified areas. The spin-offs from the project have successfully created business opportunities between our members and the larger business community in the region, and launched an IT platform to encourage a more visible and transparent communication between the Chamber and its members. It enables the Chamber to share resources with members and gives them the key not only to the local market but also to the international market.

The Project

WCBN was conceptualised during the 2nd World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention when the then Senior Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew recommended the establishment of a virtual network connecting the global Chinese enterprises so that business opportunities can be found anywhere, anytime, as long as organisations are linked to the Internet. The proposal came about when IT and Internet development was still in its infancy. However, it inspired the IT project that would become a strategic focus of the Chamber over the next decade.

Building up a network of Chinese enterprises was not an easy task, as communication channels were not as advanced as it is today. The Chamber had to leverage on the Chambers of Commerce in other countries, in order to build a substantial database. When first launched, the website offered basic information on various Chambers around the world, trade associations mainly from Singapore, global trade opportunities and other Internet resources.

Initially, the project faced a variety of technical hindrances. Updating the database was laborious as the website administrator was barred from accessing the information directly. Real-time updates and amendments could not be made. Instead, all information had to be sent to the web-hosting company in batches for uploading on a daily basis. Often the data became corrupted and produced duplications, and jumbled into different fields. Users were also unable to obtain direct access to contacts provided in WCBN. Hence, the network was burdened with data that was either archaic or outdated. It frustrated our ambitious aim to capture value-added information in every part of the world and hampered our effectiveness.

After considerable review of workflow and resources, the Chamber resolved to engage a new web hosting company in 2002, which provided a more efficient search engine and categorisation programme to allow the administrator to update and extract information instantaneously. As a result, it greatly facilitated the maintenance of the website and we

were able to provide many web statistics on viewership as tools to enhance our effectiveness. The website currently needs a website editor and a web developer for administrative operations.

The strength of the website lies in its huge database of ethnic Chinese enterprises now numbering more than 127,000 worldwide. Overall, the WCBN is organised into 3 main categories – namely, Chinese Companies, Chinese Business Associations and Global Trade Opportunities, with the last listing all trade opportunities available in the world and not restricted to the ethnic Chinese companies. Besides containing a friendly search engine that could filter the information according to countries and regions, as well as industries, in both languages, there are also vital links to conferences and trade fairs, government agencies in the world, and an electronic marketplace, in a strategic alliance with Alibaba.com.

Currently, the website is maintained by a web editor with technical assistance provided by the web hosting company. The homepage of the website was redesigned recently to reinforce the branding image of WCBN. To facilitate the exchange between the Chinese-speaking community and the English-speaking community, the Chamber has invested much resources in translation to ensure that information can be retrieved in both languages so that visitors use the version they are most comfortable with, and therefore find the directory user-friendly.



The corporate website on the other hand was measured against a different set of challenges. Unlike WCBN which has a clear identity – that being a business directory, the corporate website was first launched to be a broadcast station of the Chamber's

corporate profile and operating mechanism, without much value-adding elements to the members. Also, the technical functionality of the first web hosting company also limited the prospects of the corporate website.

After migrating to a new web portal with upgraded technology and webpage designing tools to enhance the website features, the corporate web became a crucible of business information specifically targeted at the local audience. The homepage of the site boasts a calendar of events that allows members to register and pay online, shortening the registration process for courses and seminars conducted by the Chamber. It is also the home to the online Members Directory, which categorises our members into different industries and trades, so that global traders wishing to tap into the membership network can do so in a few clicks.

In addition, the corporate website has also become the host of several one-stop service sections, most notably the SMEs One Stop service that lists the institutions and consultancy services that may assist local SMEs in different aspects of corporate operations. Besides, the section also contains a list of comprehensive government assistance schemes so that visitors can directly contact the relevant agencies, without having to scan through different government websites to obtain the similar information.

There is also a news section co-branded with Channel NewsAsia, the leading news television station in Singapore, providing our members the most updated news in both Chinese and English languages. The website is also a broadcast centre for many government-related schemes and projects, most noticeably the recent Teachers Work Attachment Scheme which encourages our members to offer teachers various short-term attachment positions in organisations so as to deepen the teachers' understanding of the corporate world.

The IT Connection section is a platform for IT partners to announce the latest development in technology, guides to better comprehend IT applications and IT news, making the website an informative resource centre for the members.

Currently, the website is also maintained by the web editor supervising the web development of the WCBN. Both websites are financially supported by advertisements.



Managed by a five-member team, the Internet Business Conference launched in 1997 (later renamed Internet Commerce Conference, and now known as the Infocomm Commerce Conference) attracted over 300 participants learning the tools to conduct business via the Internet-related platforms, with a Solutions Gallery attached to showcase the latest Internet and Intranet products and services potentially beneficial to corporate operations by 26 IT companies. The event soon grew to become a definitive annual IT user event in Singapore, with more than 150 IT companies, comprising both local and international conglomerates, exhibiting their products and services to 1,400 participants.

Organising an event like this with the SME community in mind was especially difficult because it had to contend with overcoming the mindset of the SMEs, and their initial aversion to IT applications. Because of the delicate juggling of different components, matching the experts' advice with that of expectations of the SMEs themselves, the Chamber was able to develop a well-respected and accepted programme that became increasingly popular over the years.

Currently, the numbers of the exhibitors and participants have increased dramatically. The growth has also financially supported the operating costs of the event, while bringing immeasurable benefits to both the users and the service providers.



Scene from the Solutions Gallery



The Infocomm Commerce Conference

The Impact

WCBN has since managed to collate 127,000 Chinese enterprises from 120 countries and regions. Besides giving easy access to vital corporate information, the website has also embarked on a strategic partnership with Alibaba.com to provide an e-Marketplace, creating a business-to-business (B2B) trading platform to encourage an ongoing flow of business exchange on the portal globally. As new information and data are entered into the portal daily, whilst old data is either purged or updated, it would one day become the *de facto* search engine for Chinese companies in every part of the world. This is a unique website in its attempt to provide relevant and useful business information for the benefit of the Chinese business community and for all who are interested in tapping into the market.

In terms of visitor statistics, the bilingual website has attracted visitors globally, and has become a role model amongst the South Korean business community who continue to be impressed by the extensive amount of information within the website. An average of 25,000 visitors browse the website monthly, 20% of whom are repeat visitors.

The corporate website fulfils an important role of facilitating communication between the Chamber and its members. Most members who are more Internet-savvy are now relying on the websites to extract information on the Chamber's activities, especially for registration and payment for the seminars and events organised by the Chamber. Almost 30% of the participants in each event register through the virtual portal, improving our service quality to the members.

Also, the corporate website is also now a multi-functional website for visitors. Our mandate is to provide a rich matrix of information and resources easily used by all to access contact details on members, key business agencies and statutory boards, domestic and overseas centres, a repository of business leads, and many other sources of information developed through multiple links set up systematically within the website. We also integrated feedback forms and uploaded all kinds of presentation materials, adding to the convenience of work operations and reducing unnecessary paperwork.

The Chamber's corporate website is one of the most comprehensive ever developed by a local Chamber of commerce integrating a breadth of information with ease of use in two languages.

The Infocomm Commerce Conference (ICC) is now one of the biggest IT user forums in Singapore, branding IT as the chief facilitator of changes and improving business processes. The event has also travelled past several landmarks since its beginning when Internet and IT-related applications were still a novel idea in the business sector. The Solutions Gallery, the service provider exhibition, now houses 150 booths, and is visited by 1,500 people who participate in the forum annually.

After eight years of effort, a recent survey was conducted in 2004 amongst the 1,500 participants in the conference. A total of 279 respondents replied. The survey results suggest that almost 65% of local enterprises now possess the basic IT infrastructure as well as related applications, and are looking at more advanced solutions, such as wireless applications and mobility solutions, to keep their competitive edge ahead of their counterparts.

In the survey, the SMEs community also revealed a greater reliance on external consultants for IT implementation. This has created a number of business opportunities for local IT companies, and proved that ICC is a platform for IT vendors and solutions providers to showcase their services to the local SME community. The event bridges the distance between IT vendors and users, bringing in key business insights and strategic infocomm tools that allow SMEs to build on the strengths of their businesses.

In summary, the short-term impact of the IT project produces a salubrious and nurturing environment for members to adopt IT in daily business practice, with signs indicating a slight increase each year through the implementation of the project. It has created a comprehensive business network connecting global ethnic Chinese companies, a informative resource centre specifically targeted to enhance our services to members, and an educational forum which matches the service providers with SMEs users, thus helping to upgrade their business processes.

In the long term, the resources devoted to the IT project are continually incorporating new IT applications into the project as it matures. The aspirations of the Chamber are to convert a more significant percentage of its membership base onto an IT platform, whether it is in retrieval of information for sourcing business partners, improving their connectivity to multiple sources through our corporate website, or access to IT knowledge and expertise through the Infocomm Commerce Conference to benefit their respective business.

Worldwide Application

The project divided into three components is a comprehensive and yet innovative approach to strengthen the members' abilities to embrace IT applications while backing them up with necessary network and resources to complete a business cycle. The immediate beneficiaries from the IT project are the SME users who derive much-needed advice on IT applications to drive their business and equip them with critical tools to widen the business network and opportunities.

The first component, which is the business directory, is a crucial tool for a Chamber of commerce to distinguish itself from its counterparts, by specialising in a niche market that will appeal to its members. The virtual business network can also help the Chamber break national boundaries and reach out to a worldwide audience that can benefit from the initiative. The business network can be co-branded with the Chamber's corporate website to achieve a back-to-back information provider strategy, which makes the collaboration a one-stop service to the browsers.

The second component is a digression from a standard corporate website that normally emphasises the operating mechanism and corporate philosophy of a Chamber. Instead, the model reaches out pro-actively to members in constant search of knowledge in an increasingly globalised digital era.

In the third component, by recruiting an impressive panel of IT professionals (many of whom are industry leaders and represent MNCs) as speakers at the Infocomm Commerce Conference, to speak at a conference which is virtually free for members, it provides an indispensable platform for the SME community to gather reliable and sound

advice, free consultancy at the Solutions Clinic, and get acquainted with a wide network of IT service providers in Singapore.

The ideas in the Chamber's IT project can certainly be applied in other parts of the world, as it would be relevant to all other Chambers with similar missions and visions of promoting business and encouraging their members to tap on IT applications and resources to gain a competitive edge.

Raison d'être

We feel that our IT project should be selected as a finalist and presented at the 4th World Chambers Congress because of its unique nature. We feel strongly that we have adopted a sustained, integrated and comprehensive approach in driving this project thus far. We are probably the only Chamber to have taken on such an ambitious project which goes beyond the borders of our own membership to embrace all in the business community, and not only in Singapore but worldwide. Being bilingual (in providing both Chinese and English versions) had compounded our difficulty but this did not prove to be a deterrent. Instead, we had to work doubly hard to achieve the current level of sophistication and that is something we are extremely proud of.

A comparison can be made with the websites of other Chambers, which for instance very seldom go beyond providing news regarding their own events. Here, we are cognizant about the developments in other parts of the world, and build up sub-markets within the website to carry economic news and trends.

For the World Chinese Business Network, it is uniquely the only type of business networking portal which lists an ever-increasing list of ethnic Chinese enterprises throughout different parts of the world, and which undergoes frequent updates to maintain relevance. Whether the Chinese enterprise originates from the United States, mainland China, New Zealand or Lithuania, these are all properly captured and in sufficient detail to facilitate contacts.

The Infocomm Commerce Conference is also the only IT user forum that has been organised by a Chamber of Commerce anywhere in Asia that has achieved this level of success, which features top-notch professionals in the IT industry and has the staunch support of the Singapore government.

Overall, these 3 components of our IT project provide an inviolable case to make us a strong forerunner as a finalist for the 4th World Chambers Congress and worthy to be selected for presentation.