

Publication :	The New Paper
Date :	26 November 2006
Page:	14-15
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Headline:	Bring Back Campaigns

**SUN NEWS** THE NEW PAPER ON SUNDAY 26 Nov 2006 14

# BRING BACK CAMPAIGNS?

**X** Enough of government-led campaigns. That solution might have been successful in the past, but it won't work today. We shouldn't aim for a quick fix.  
— Dr Lim Wee Kiak, 37, Sembawang GRC MP

**✓** There's still a place for campaigns, but you must package it differently for the young — subtler, not hard-sell.  
— Grassroots leader Sunny Wee



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**S**AY thank you. Donate blood. Don't smoke. Don't spit. Don't jaywalk. Don't litter. Don't cut queues. Don't waste water. Flush after use. Stop at two. Don't stop at two.

Singapore has been made the unfortunate butt of jokes since the very first nationwide "social engineering" campaign in 1958.

For the next five decades, everything from queueing for buses to being punctual for wedding dinners to having babies became the subject of colourful banners, print slogans, radio jingles, TV ads and even cutesy messages from animal mascots (below).

Can't remember any of these campaigns? Ask your parents.

Singapore's not called "campaign country" for nothing.

Numbering in the hundreds, some of them ran for a month, others for years, as government ministries set aside sizeable budgets, and ministers rolled up their sleeves and got down and dirty with heartland residents to plant trees and scrub corridors.

Most campaigns were mere relics of the times, like the Mass X-Ray, Use Metric System and Eat Frozen Fish drives. Some, like Speak Mandarin and Clean and Green Week, are still going strong, while others like this year's Four Million Smiles seem more like modern-day reincarnations of early-day efforts.

And although the momentum may

have fizzled out somewhat in the late 1990s, there's little doubt that historically, some of these top-down, large-scale drives did help change public behaviour.

Spitting is not so rampant these days. The Healthy Lifestyle message since 1992 also seems to have sunk in, as nearly half of all Singaporeans now exercise at least once a week, according to the 2004 national health survey.

Indeed, the 1960s' Keep Singapore Clean campaigns were taken so seriously that local writers even penned satirical pieces about them.

Singapore Management University creative thinking lecturer Kirpal Singh, 57, chuckled as he recalled one such line: "It went something like how Singapore was so clean, even a pig smelled beautiful."

During the Use Your Hands and Operation Broomstick campaigns, entire floors of neighbouring HDB units would join forces to sweep void decks and common areas.

Compare that with the situation this year up to 31 Oct, where 4,818 litterbugs have already been nabbed — about 1,000 more than the whole of last year — with over half the culprits under the age of 30.

**SOCIAL PROBLEMS**

So is it time to do what Campo, our latest campaigner (left), is saying: Revive intensive campaigns to solve some still-very-stubborn social problems among today's young, like littering and poor service?

Responses The New Paper received ranged from an outright no to a qualified yes.

Sociologist Dr Sharon Siddique, 60, believes campaigns can still work if they're accompanied by a "very big stick".

"Forty years ago, when they started the Don't Litter campaigns, they charged people in court for dropping tissue paper when you're having lunch. It was draconian, but a stick is always



The New Paper's campaign mascot



**Singa the Lion**  
(born 1982):  
Courtesy Campaign



**Teamy the Bee**  
(born 1982):  
Productivity Campaign



**Captain Green**  
(born 1980):  
Clean & Green Week



**Water Wally**  
(born 2005):  
Save Water Campaign

more effective than a carrot.

"So throw out the radio jingles and slap on a \$500 fine."

This "stick" can also be psychological, she said, like shaming offenders in newspapers. Or it can be as crude as punishing service staff with poor attitudes by cutting their pay and hitting them "in the pocket".

However, veteran grassroots leader Sunny Wee, 57, prefers a softer touch.

"There's still a place for campaigns but you must package it differently for the young — subtler, not hard-sell, like producing a TV documentary to tug at the heartstrings. Even mascots and role models are getting cliched."

Otherwise, said Mr Wee, "campaign fatigue" will set in.

Hill and Knowlton's campaign strategist Koh Buck Song, 43, added: "It may mean, by an analogy from my industry, using more of an indirect public relations approach rather than head-on advertising."

Teachers and even "influential bloggers" could be roped in to appeal to today's Net-savvy teenagers. Using a big stick or an in-your-face approach, Mr Koh argued, will backfire.

"When I was their age, I also hated to be told what to do... So use positive means to pull people towards the right behaviours rather than push them away from wrong actions with monetary carrots and sticks."

In other words, let the young express themselves and then slowly engage them. Let them form their own online cliques which push, say, the benefits of using cloth instead of plastic bags or the need to clear their own tables at hawker centres.

Even if this means it'll take much longer to see results?

Well, like it or not, there are "no

quick fixes", said Nanyang Technological University's head of sociology, Associate Professor Kwok Kian Woon, 50.

He said: "Society can't function if it's always Big Brother watching and policing social behaviour. Old-school campaigns are not in sync any more."

Some even view "campaign" as a dirty word. Witness how the Speak Good English and Singapore Kindness efforts have opted to tag on the word "movement" rather than "campaign" to their names.

Associate Prof Kirpal Singh understands why.

"The word 'campaign' is too heavily laden with agendas and propaganda-type thinking... If a government is seen to be too effective via campaigns, a certain cynicism starts to develop."

#### 'OVERKILL'

The 1960s' Stop At Two campaigns to keep families small was an "overkill", he noted. And he cited the 1979-2000 Courtesy drives as an effort which overran so much, it became a turn-off and "collapsed".

Or as he put it: "A shining example of a campaign which worked very well and then started not to work".

Dr Lim Wee Kiak, 37, a first-term MP in Sembawang GRC, summed it up this way: Nobody today will obey a top-down clarion call. As troubling as the littering problem is, we must be patient and aim for "longer-term education", not short-term coercion.

"Enough of government-led campaigns," he said.

So looks like Campo probably won't get his way. In the meantime, we must still bear with the messiness — for now.

## CAMPAIGNS OVER THE YEARS

From the bizarre to the practical, Singaporeans have been exposed to a whole host of national campaigns over the years — some more successful than others.

Here are some samples.

#### ■ Late 1950s:

Anti-Spitting, Fight Extortion, Kill Pests, Learn Malay, Blood Donation, Mass X-ray (for tuberculosis)

#### ■ 1960s:

Stop at 2 (family planning), Tree Planting, Don't Waste Water, Anti-Leprosy, Anti-Mosquito, Eat More Wheat, Keep Singapore Clean, Queue Up

#### ■ 1970s:

No Long Hair For Men, Don't Do Drugs, Use Your Hands (to boost

skills trade), Wear Seat Belts, Use Metric System, Courtesy, Speak Mandarin, Road Safety

#### ■ 1980s:

Save Energy, Crime Prevention, Be Punctual, Productivity, Anti-Smoking, Don't Eat Raw Cockles, Anti-Glue Sniffing, Have 3 Or More Children

#### ■ 1990s:

Clean Toilets, Clean And Green, Healthy Lifestyle, Anti-Aids, Breast Cancer Awareness, Anti-Family Violence

#### ■ 2000 till now

Speak Good English, Romancing Singapore, Drink Newater, Singapore's OK (anti-Sars), Four Million Smiles