

Mtel – Expanding globally through smart digital solutions

Willy Wong still remembers the mix of scepticism and excitement greeting mobile applications – or apps as we now call them – when they came out about a decade ago. “They were generally viewed as something gimmicky in those days. Few companies were ready to invest much in them. But today, mobile apps are part of our lives,” he says.

For the CEO of Mtel, a digital enabler and leading mobile app developer in Hong Kong, to have witnessed closely – and played a part in – how mobile phone technology has shaped our lives has been an exciting journey. “Many people may have forgotten how things were like in the early days when one could go online with mobile phone but without any apps. We have been part of the evolution, and things will only get more complex yet exciting,” he says.

Founded in 1999, Mtel started as a small company devising digital solutions. In the days before mobile apps, businesses that wanted to get connected with their clients via mobile phone had to rely on telecom firms. Banks, for example, could only offer mobile banking service to their customers through online portals provided by individual telecom service providers. Mtel was one of the few digital wizards behind the scenes, creating those digital platforms to support its many telecom company clients.

By the time mobile apps came on the scene, Mtel had already grown to become a seasoned digital solutions provider with substantial technical knowhow and a solid clientele, making it possible for the Hong Kong company to play a major role in the new mobile trend.

Over the years, the scope of its services has expanded significantly, covering the design and development of mobile, web and social applications, sales presentations tools, e-learning platforms and more. Headquartered in Hong Kong with branch offices in four other cities in Asia, Mtel hires more than 150 IT specialists and business development executives, many of whom are young people in their 20s and 30s.

The company counts leading corporations in various industries as clients, including retailers, financial companies, banks, telecom companies and public utilities suppliers. As an industry leader, it has a host of awards under its belt. Recently at the 2018 Mob-Ex Awards, an award programme that celebrates excellence in mobile marketing in Asia Pacific, Mtel bagged eight awards, including four top prizes. Its other milestones include creating Citibank’s first mobile app in Asia; developing for Hong Kong International Airport an app that provides travellers a wide array of airport information; and designing for the Hong Kong Jockey Club a WeChat platform that features horse race information and interactive games.

“If the digital space is a house, then we’re like an interior designer. The house is already there. Based on what we know of our clients and what they need, we come up with ideas to design the interior, execute the ideas and help them solve problems.”

Wong makes it a point that Mtel is not a digital marketing agency. “We don’t just come up with an idea for a short-lived marketing campaign and then pull it out after the campaign is over. What we create will stay and we will refine and upgrade them if needed,” he says.

Such a positioning implies a commitment to clients, and it has been one reason for Mtel's expanding clientele. Today, Mtel has offices in Taipei, Ho Chi Minh City, Bangkok and Guangzhou. According to Wong, Vietnam and Thailand are relatively less experienced in the realm of digital solutions development. At the same time, many local companies are keen to tap the potential of using technology and innovation solutions to grow their businesses. To this end, they turn to experienced digital enablers such as Mtel.

Recently, Wong and his team have developed an app for the biggest cinema chain in Thailand. It is not merely an app that sells tickets to movie-goers, but it is also a tool strategically designed to help the cinema chain boost profits.

"For instance, when you buy a ticket, the app will, based on the analytics we collect, automatically suggest you to invite certain friends who may be interested in joining you. If the friends buy tickets, too, you may get a discount for buying popcorn or something," Wong explains. "It's about being business-oriented and thinking strategically to generate spending by users of the app."

In its efforts to stretch its tentacles abroad, Mtel also has a role to play in more technologically advanced countries in the region, usually when companies seek to expand their international footprint. A case in point is a South Korean film production company that wanted to distribute its smart films abroad. It turned to Mtel, which played the role of an overseas contact point providing technical support.

As for the equally technologically advanced Japan, Wong believes Japanese companies whose plans to build an international presence involve making use of the digital space can also seek outside help.

"Japan is an advanced economy and the market may already be saturated for some industries. That's when companies start to contemplate going global. But expanding abroad is no straightforward matter. Language barrier can be an issue, and then there is the opportunity cost of setting up from scratch an operation in a foreign place. Turning to an overseas partner who has a good network and experience can make things much easier," Wong says.

"As technology continues to advance, digital solutions will only get more sophisticated yet complicated, and industries of all kinds will need more of them. Digital enablers are there to help them collect data, devise solutions and, above all, improve their businesses."