



# STICKY SITUATION

One lady's quest to save her door and neighbourhood from advertisements

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HEN I first set out to track down the masterminds behind the advertisements plastered on my door, I didn't expect to hear stories of survival, resilience, and ingenuity behind each flyer.

Let's be honest. After many futile attempts at clearing pamphlets and scraping stickers (and paint) off the façade of my home, I was ready to wage war against the culprits who market everything from financial services to the sale of adult videos.

Often handwritten or printed in the font of Times New Roman, it's difficult to ignore these sheets of paper that make for ugly wallpaper.

And don't even get me started on the ads that harass me on my way to school, along Orchard Road, at the traffic lights... these advertisers have really got it all covered – the lamp posts, bus shelters and even toilet cubicles!

So, like any typical Singaporean, I did what is considered second nature to us. I shot a lengthy e-mail complaint to my town council, describing:

- 1) The prevalence of ads at my front door
- 2) How I consider it to be vandalism
- 3) The lax in monitoring that led to this problem

Right in that order.

Within hours of my e-mail, I received a call from Margaret, a representative of West Coast Town Council.

"The areas you've mentioned are in our demarcated constituency," she said. "But ads on lamp posts and walkways fall under the jurisdiction of the Land Transport Authority (LTA)."

"I'll forward your e-mail to LTA on your behalf, and they'll get in touch with you directly."

What about the ads in public toilets?

"That's under the jurisdiction of the National Environment Agency (NEA)."

And train stations?

"SMRT."

Before we ended this fruitless conversation, I asked if other residents had similar complaints. She said I wasn't the first. In fact, complaints were so frequent that some town councils decided to construct common notice boards for such advertisers in their neighbourhoods. But the boards often end up overflowing with flyers, pushing ads back onto the streets, she explained.

Still, I hadn't gunned down any advertisers.

Determined to take them on, I dialled the number on an ad that read: "Is your kitchen sink choked?"

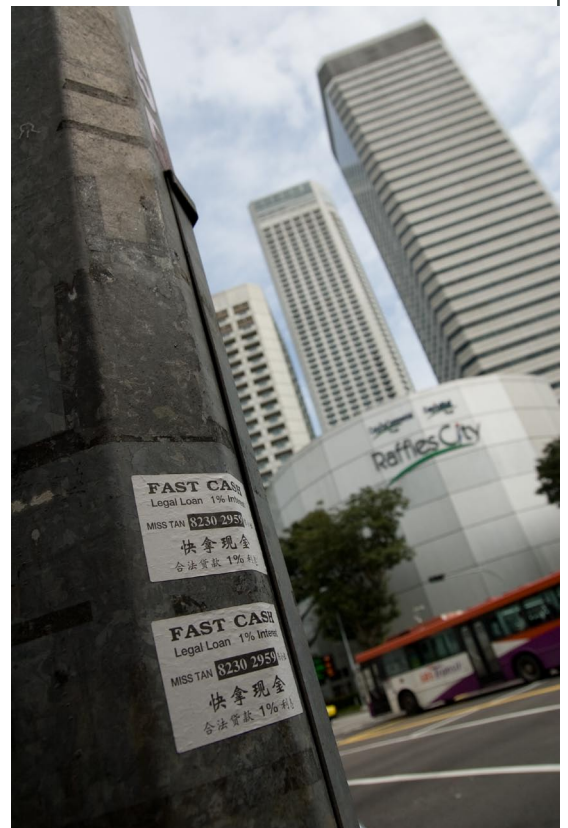


PHOTO | JUSTIN ZHUANG

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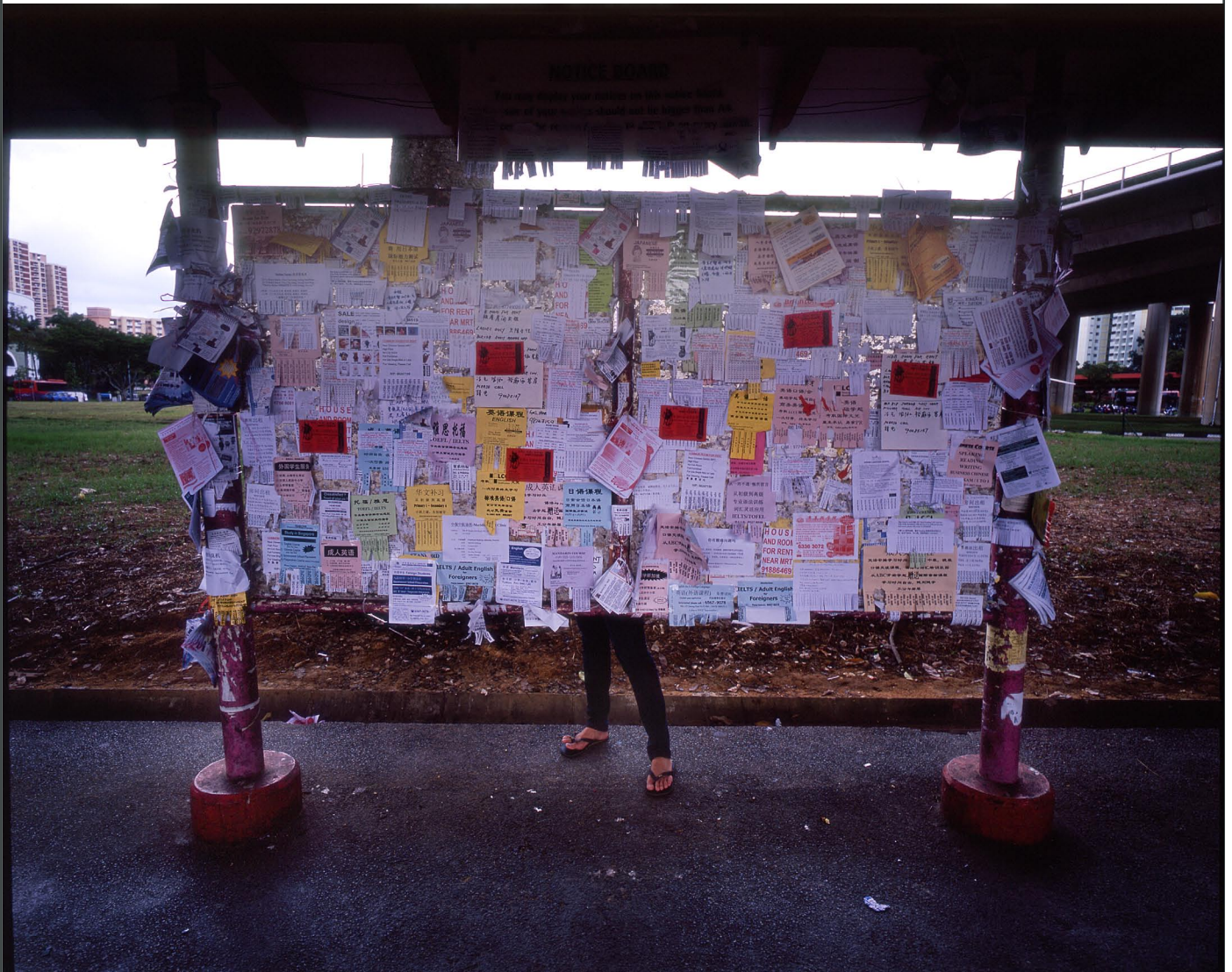


PHOTO | SAM KANG LI

**OVERFLOWING:** The writer checks out advertisements on a notice board at Jurong East train station. Town councils have built these boards for anyone to paste notices on for free, but they are usually so full that street advertisers would rather go direct to homes.

At the other end of the line was Chua, a handyman who only spoke Hokkien.

The man in his 60s explained that he stopped promoting his electrical and plumbing services at public notice boards as competitors would tear up his flyers or cover his with their own.

Instead, he now goes door to door, distributing flyers and sticking them on lift landings. Chua earns only \$400 monthly, so he makes do with whatever free space that works.

Let's do the math: a thumb-size ad in a newspaper, such as The Straits Times' Classifieds, would cost \$33. But for less

than half that amount, Chua says he can reach out to an entire 12-storey apartment block with flyers. Not only do they stay around longer, he gets a good workout too.

But as viable as street advertising might sound, Anne, a freelance property agent was quick to highlight the 'dirty' street situation.

And she wasn't referring to just the pamphlet-littered corridors.

According to the stay-at-home mother, she occasionally receives lewd messages sent by strangers to her mobile phone. On top of that, she has

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DAVID, 38, street advertiser

also encountered her fair share of cleaners and housewives who threatened to call the police when they caught her pasting her ads on the walls.

“When you advertise on the streets, you’re putting yourself out there and providing your personal details to all sorts of people,” said the 40-year-old who sticks her ads on traffic lights and pillars along the walkways of estates.

Finally, I dialled the number on a flyer that offered computer repair services. David picked up the phone.

The 38-year-old, who began placing notices at lobbies more than 10 years ago, has since explored other locations and techniques to reach out to more customers.

“I think I’m creative, and I don’t just take things at face value,” said the ‘veteran’ street advertiser.

Telephone booths, lift landings and traffic lights are just some of the spaces David has plastered his flyers on. But it’s no random act. Instead, he chooses spots based on the level of human traffic and pedestrian demographic.

In 2008, David went a step further. In his latest venture, he teamed up with like-minded advertisers to create what he described as “a mini Yellow Pages” for door-to-door distribution. He thinks people are more likely to throw away single sheets of flyers than a “convenient compilation of ads for all kinds of goods and services”.

“We (small business owners) can’t beat the big conglomerates, so why play their game?” he asked. “Producing your own version of the Classified Ads is so much cheaper, just print black and white *lah!*”

“A spark of brilliance just takes some imagination, Singaporeans can’t think out of the box, is it?” he challenged.

And thinking out of the box was exactly what businessman Teo did in retaliation to such guerrilla marketing techniques.

Actually, to be precise, the box became his solution.

The owner of an apartment along Clementi West Street 2 placed an empty tissue box at his front door to contain the flood of ads that would accumulate whenever he’s away on business trips.

Printed on the box: Place flyers here.

The 43-year-old said he used to return from business trips to find stickers, pamphlets and pieces of paper stuffed into the little cracks and holes at his doorbell, electrical box and even the keyhole!

Now, his front door is usually clean when he comes back from overseas.

So far, the advertisers have cooperated and placed their flyers into the box. “I can just empty everything straight into the bin when I reach home, it really saves me time,” he said with a chuckle.

Yet, having their ads thrown away is not the worst situation advertisers can face. Under the guidelines set by LTA, street advertising is illegal. First-time offenders could be fined up to \$300 and repeat offenders, \$400.

But none of the advertisers I spoke to have ever been fined. In fact, some do not even know such a law exists.

And in case you’re wondering, the authorities never got back to me regarding my complaint.

Perhaps a flyer or two at their doorsteps would help. 📧

This is a story from a journalism project, RECLAIM LAND. You can read other stories and see more photos at [HTTP://RECLAIMLAND.SG](http://RECLAIMLAND.SG)