



Now in its fourth year, Fridae.com's astoundingly successful Nation party is the first and only one of its kind in Singapore specifically designed for the gay community to celebrate National Day

NATION

In a conservative Asian society where discussions on homosexuality are still largely taboo, and those in the gay community still face discrimination, Fridae.com has broken phenomenal ground by conceptualising a web portal bridging GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) individuals in Singapore. Officially launched in 2001 "with the vision to create an international company serving the needs of Asian gays and lesbians," the online medium afforded them an avenue for peer acceptance and opportunities to meet like-minded individuals says Dr Stuart Koe, CEO and co-founder of Fridae.com. The website now boasts 150,000 registered members from all over the world, with Singapore contributing less than 40 per cent of the database.

That same year, the first Nation party was held at Fantasy Island, Sentosa, attracting a modest but impressive turnout of 1,500. It has since become a tradition to hold the event on the eve of National Day, allowing the GLBT community an opportunity to celebrate the nation's birthday with the rest of the country. And in a lifespan of four short years, the number of partygoers has swelled to a whopping 8,000 this year, a quarter of which are tourists (gay or otherwise) who are likely to boost Singapore's economy by nearly \$10 million over the three-day party weekend. That's a pretty decent validation of Fridae's philosophy of seeking to "effect social change through economics."

Nation04's consecutive three-day weekend kick-started with the Military Ball at Suntec City on 8th August followed by the main party at Sentosa's Musical Fountain, and ended with a closing party at Zouk.

Tell us about the first Nation party and the public response.

Stuart Koe Nation was conceptualised as a party for the Singapore GLBT community to celebrate National Day. There are scant opportunities for gays in Singapore to feel part of the 'system', so the intent of Nation was to create an event where this community could celebrate our country's independence with everyone else, in a safe space where they will not be discriminated against. In time, the popularity of this event has grown to such a level that we have people from all walks of life, straight and gay, who come to celebrate with us. As such, it's not a strictly 'gay party', but really a party that attracts a diverse crowd that shares a common view of tolerance and diversity, and a love for a good party. It is a celebration of differences, and a symbolic recognition that everyone in Singapore has an important role to play in nation-building. It is also an event where everyone can come together to feel a part of a much larger community. Being in the company of literally thousands of other like-minded people, it is both inspiring and empowering.

What has the media response to Nation been like?

SK The media response to Nation has been overwhelming. Time magazine hailed Nation a 'Three day festival of international proportions' and DNA magazine (Australia) named Nation one of the top 12 circuit events in the world.

What makes Nation so provocative, besides the 'gay' tag?

SK Two reasons: One, all our events use very unique venues. They're usually venues that nobody has thought of using before so the setting is very special. And when you use a space like the Sentosa Musical Fountain, it is spectacular. It is visually already out-of-this-world. The second factor that makes Nation very unique is that it is set in an Asian setting. There are big circuit parties all over the world and many people who go to parties in America, Europe and Australia, they're all Western. This is the first time a party of this scale is set in an Asian setting so when all Asians come to this party, it's a completely different feeling when you're not the minority. When all the people you see are friends, it feels like one big family.

What makes this year's Nation so exciting?

SK We invested a lot of money in state-of-the-art visual effects, pyrotechnics, sound, lasers and the quality of our DJs. We brought in six DJs and produced a dance CD compilation. It was really the whole experience and providing a good experience as far as possible. In terms of surprises, it's the timing of the whole experience. There were constant surprises throughout the whole evening, in terms of drama and visuals. We never rely on shows. As party organisers, we do things very differently from most event organisers. We don't rely on traditional things like a show or a host. The decor we use is different. We learn a lot from what we experience from parties overseas. We don't recreate what people usually do.



Fridae.com's management team comprises Stuart Koe, CEO and co-founder, Jim Chow (sales & marketing communications) and Gary Siow (business development), all in their early 30s. Besides Nation, Fridae's two other annual signature parties are Squirt (usually outdoor) in April and Snowball in December, held on the weekend between Christmas and New Year's Eve.



Nation04 party flyer

Do you really have to be gay to appreciate Nation?

SK Not at all! In fact, we're seeing more and more cool, straight people. Essentially the people who come to our parties can be from any walk of life but generally, the people who come are cool about the whole thing. They're just there to have fun and sexuality is really the last thing on their minds. Arguably, it's one of the best parties in Singapore because our focus is different. It's not just big-name DJs. We don't spend a fortune bringing in big-name DJs and hope that makes a fun party. We concentrate on the visuals, we concentrate on the whole experience, the party vibe, the atmosphere, the energy. People who leave the party all have this look of amazement and bliss on their faces because it's very inspiring, very empowering.

What gave you the confidence to think the first Nation party would be a success and push ahead with it?

SK We had no idea. But people in Singapore are always up for a good party if it comes their way. The major achievement was in building our tremendous international following. This year, we are expecting more than 2,000 tourists to travel to Singapore for Nation, and this number has grown steadily over the years. Based on audited statistics generated last year, they are expected to generate close to S\$10 million in tourism revenue, just from this three-day weekend.

How difficult was it getting sponsors at the beginning, considering the alternative nature of the event?

SK Initially, many corporate sponsors we approached had reservations about sponsoring an event of this nature. We have been fortunate that we have the support of several companies that had the foresight and commitment to the GLBT community early on, such as Subaru, Anchor Beer and Qantas/British Airways. Now that the reputation of Fridae events has grown, this is no longer the case and many more companies now realise the tremendous potential of having a presence at an event such as Nation, where they can cost-effectively reach a very valuable demographic group. This year, joining our esteemed list of sponsors are blue-chip brands such as Heineken, e33, Moët & Chandon, Motorola, Cathay Pacific and Visit Britain. Since we do not rely on traditional media and marketing strategies, the lack of media channels has never been an obstacle to us. In fact, we market our events very cost-effectively through our own channels, as well as rely heavily on the strong word of mouth of our thousands of loyal 'ambassadors' who go out and nag all their friends who are not going to the next party. To these loyal Fridae members, we are indebted.

Subaru was a main sponsor of Nation this year and last. Do you think having the support of such a major corporate brand sponsor 'legitimises' the event in any way?

SK We're not seeking legitimacy but having support from a company like Subaru shows that this market demographic is very important to companies and they cannot ignore this group of people. And now there's a very effective way to reach these people. And that is what having companies like Subaru, Cathay Pacific and Motorola mean. It means they realise the importance of this group of people. The major obstacle is really in the mindsets of the decision makers. Some are simply not ready to take what they see as a major step in niche marketing, not realising that this community has the potential to become very loyal and important customers for any brand.

Are there any limitations to publicising Nation?

SK Considering how big this party is and how much we spend on marketing, you'll be very shocked. We spend next to nothing marketing this event. We don't run any ads. We print a few flyers but we don't even need to print flyers honestly. We just have to announce when the next party is and everybody will know about it.

Do you consider the promotion of Nation to be 'underground'?

SK We're always very open about who we are and what we do, so it's not underground in that we keep it a secret and very few people know about it. Literally tens of thousands of people know about it and they come to our event from all parts of the world. And we've been featured in Time magazine and on the national news. It's far from being underground.

How do you feel about all this worldwide recognition and publicity Nation has received?

SK Oh, we're very excited about it. We're very happy that Singapore is able to play host to all these people coming in from all over the world and that Singapore can be seen as a progressive nation. We're very grateful to be able to host something like this. We don't see it as underground. If we're underground, we'd be very secretive about it.

There's a perception that Nation is targeted more towards gay men rather than gay women.

SK If you look at all our publicity, we've actually taken very strong care to keep it neutral and open to everybody. There are a number of women who come because they enjoy a good party but I think we do find internationally, women don't enjoy big circuit parties as much. I think it's just that they choose not to come. Other than that, we don't say 'This is for men'. There's one dancefloor, whoever wants to come, comes. Gay, straight, lesbian, whatever. Women tend to like more private, cosy events like a bar or a small club. But we do hope more women will come.

How 'daring' has Nation or Fridae gotten over the years?

SK We don't seek to be daring but the very fact that we are visible and we are who we are, some people might consider that being very daring. But we really just see ourselves as being very honest and open, which is important to the companies we work with. It's important to stakeholders, our members, and the people who come to the party as well as any other agencies and people we work with. It's really about being transparent and visible. Other than that, the parties themselves are never really daring. We don't go out there trying to shock or provoke people. If you look at all our flyers through the years, we've never done anything provocative. In fact, it's good, classy design and we never use sex to sell.

Now that Nation has gotten so hyped-up as a gay circuit party attracting throngs of tourists, is it important for you to maintain the niche cachet that a gay event represents or do you champion the idea of Nation becoming more mainstream?

SK Nation is an event for those who buy into the ideology of diversity, tolerance and love. Anyone who is on the same wavelength is welcome, no fears of 'dilution'. We ARE mainstream in many ways. We are your brothers and sisters, your sons and daughters, your uncles and aunts. We will not plan for Nation to grow too big. We intend to keep the 'cosiness' of the event, paying close attention to the elements that make Nation special. Many large events suffer when they grow too big and impersonal, which is a trap we are very careful to avoid. It is very important to us that Nation remains true to its roots, and keeps on being a fun party, a celebration for all. But most importantly, our vision for Nation is to be the best party in Asia, and one that symbolises a celebration of COMMUNITY and LOVE. We want everyone who comes to Nation to leave inspired and empowered.