Digital Marketing

The starting point to digital marketing in China is to understand its importance in personal and commercial life when compared to that in the UK. The second point is to not try and force practices that are familiar in the West into becoming digital practices in China. The operating systems and consumer behaviour are often vastly different. A positive aspect of Chinese digital media is that one of the most popular subjects is the UK, which includes both product information and travel.

Chinese Website

The same design and development principles of the West also hold true in China - accessibility, usability and engaging content. The Chinese web design landscape has traditionally been held back by a lack of creative input and inferior hardware and technology. However, this is fast becoming a thing of the past.

Registration

- Registering a domain with a .cn suffix will improve search engine performance in China and prevent your domain name from being pirated by someone else.
- The law states that only Chinese-registered businesses can own a .cn domain name. This law can be bypassed by requesting a marketing agency or law firm in China to register the .con domain on your behalf. ChinaContact can help with this.
- It is important to engage with a reputable company that can provide references for its services. Alternatively, a Chinese company can be established and the domain that is created could then be transferred to your business.
- Protect your brand with trademark registration. Conduct a trademark search for your company name and register the trademark in China under the relevant classification.

Hosting

- Accessibility is one of the key mechanisms for Western company websites in China. With both geographical and regulatory inhibitors, having a website hosted within the great firewall and geographically relevant to your target audience is essential.
- Externally hosted site access capacity is constrained. Companies and organisations that want Chinese viewers to access their website should know that it will be frequently unavailable, timed-out or it may load at such slow speeds that users might become frustrated and go elsewhere.
The best solution to access capacity restrictions is to host your website on a server inside China (licenses permitting). The next best option would be to host a server in Hong Kong.

Use referrals for determining the best intermediary to use and be sure to research it thoroughly. Caution should be exercised with Chinese companies found online offering cheap services; always ask for portfolios and past testimonials.

Web Design

When designing a website for a Chinese audience it is important to adhere to the unique characteristics of the online experience in China; design and usability parameters are quite different to what we are used to in the West. Here are the key steps for ensuring the success of your website in China:

Make it information-heavy and colourful

- Chinese websites are often busy with animation and colour.
- Home pages tend to be longer and contain a full site-map of links to most pages on the site. Due to the slower typing speed in Chinese, Searching is abandoned in favour of finding a link to the user's destination on the home page.

For an illustrative example, see the below screen caption of the homepage of the most popular online travel agency website in China, Ctrip.com.
Name pages in both English and Chinese

- There are no standard conventions for page naming and URL structures as this does not play a role when searching in Chinese.
- For convenience and easier access, it is recommended to name destination and product pages with both their English and Chinese names. For example, http://www.hotel.cn/location_didian.html. Users can then find your product whether typing the English name or the Chinese name (this is an SEO strategy in cases of multiple locations).

Localise fully to avoid cultural barriers

- The website must not only be presented in Mandarin, it has to be built in Mandarin. From day one the wire-framing, design, coding and content must be tailored to a Chinese user experience.
- A website that is not localised correctly will serve to damage the brand as it presents a less than professional approach that Chinese users may find amateurish or even insulting. Examples of failure to localise fully include:
  - Not translating all text on the site to Chinese
  - Using too much flash-based graphics
  - Linking to pages that are not translated into Chinese
  - Showing the Taiwanese flag to represent the traditional Chinese version

Don't underestimate browser compatibility

- When designing a website in the West, compatibility is no longer a consideration, but with more than 20% of China still using basic IE6 browsers, having ‘inferior’ fall-back capability built into development is necessary to reach all audiences. Consider device compatibility.
- As with all areas of Chinese digital media, the rise of the Smartphone is a key consideration in website design and development.
- Having a fully responsive and fluid website is necessary to ensure that consumers have the access they require.

Comply with China's Regulations

- Websites in China must be fully compliant with internet content regulation.
- Any website with a commercial element must have a valid ICP Licence (Internet Content Provider). There are two main ICP license types to cater for both brochure and eCommerce sites. ISP’s are obligated to remove any commercial websites that do not hold valid ICP licenses.
Example of a localised website

[Website screenshot showing the interface in Chinese, including options for London education and tourism.]
Search engine optimisation and marketing

In regards to search engine marketing, what China shares in common with the West is the domination by one big search engine platform: Baidu, which has the lion’s share of search traffic in China. There are significant rivals, but the prime concern for all companies targeting Chinese markets is to effectively manage SEO and SEM on Baidu. Search engines in China operate similarly to those in the West, but their use by consumers is different. There are also other key factors to understand:

Language

- Understanding how language relates to browsing habits is essential. Pure translation is not enough. Mandarin is a language in which context is used to express tenses, gender, plurals, as well as many other intricacies.
- The words used in the browsing habits of Chinese consumers are very different to those used when translated from a Google translation engine.

Hunger for Information

- There is demand for much more information than consumers normally require in the West. Chinese behaviour is based on thoroughly browsing search results rather than skimming information.
- The desire to investigate is also the reason why Chinese websites often appear to be so cluttered and content heavy.

Technology:

- Legacy factors dictate the way that searches operate. Slow loading speeds have made users competent in multiple-page search operations. For companies that use digital marketing in China, it means thorough analysis is needed in tracking consumer journeys.
- The other side of the technology coin is that with just over half of Internet users accessing the Internet via mobile phones, it is important to be aware of how meta-copy must be presented to browsers.

Chinese Search engines

Baidu

- Chinese equivalent to Google, captures the largest market share.
- Also owns China’s most popular travel meta-search website Qunar.com, which is mainly used for comparing flight and hotel deals. Since most Chinese users start searching online without knowing where they want to go, some investment in advertising will make your website more prominent and accessible.
- To begin with, try typing your company or destination name in the Baidu search box and see the number of results you get in Chinese.

www.baidu.com
Qihoo 360

- Most popular Chinese search engine after Baidu, its market shares are growing.
- Offers a large product line including: anti-virus software, web browser, mobile anti-virus Software and a mobile Application store.

www.so.com

Sogou

- Literally the ‘searching dog’ (搜狗; pinyin: Sōugōu, Sōu means to search and gǒu means dog); it was launched on August 3, 2004.
- It has a cost per click advertising fee that is lower than Baidu.
- Sogou Chinese Input is the most popular input software in China which helps users to increase their typing rate.

www.sogou.com

Google

- Google.cn was shut down in 2010 because it did not comply with China’s Media censorship laws.
- Google Hong Kong (www.google.com.hk) is authorized but not always accessible due to China’s Great Firewall and it is regularly blocked.
- As of 2013, Google’s share in China accounted for only 1.6% of the market.
Social Media Marketing

The power that social media has and its intense use by nearly every demographic means it is not simply an opportunity but a necessity for any company selling in China. Social media derived from the West has quickly gone way beyond commodity based messaging to becoming a vastly different universe in which social e-commerce is commonplace. There is an ever growing number of dynamic and unique platforms from which Chinese social users pick and choose.

- The landscape as a whole is much more diversified than the Western equivalent, with many networks serving niche audiences that are interested in given subjects, such as bicycles, travel or watches.
- An interest in racing cycles, travel to Britain, men’s sports watches etc. are all catered for and have followers in their hundreds of thousands and frequently millions.
- Identification of target audiences and their choice of platform is necessary to engage the appropriate consumers.
- Although there are many specialist outlets, there are still several mainstream networks – the equivalents of Facebook and Twitter - though they are used and operate very differently. Between them the big players capture the majority of the Chinese netizen community.

Most prominent Chinese social media platforms

Sina Weibo / Tencent Weibo

- Twitter equivalent platforms in China are called “Wei Bo” in Mandarin (Wei means micro, Bo is blog).
- Sina Weibo was launched in August 2009, and Tencent Weibo in April 2010, both support multimedia sharing including photos, music and videos.
- Sina Weibo is linked with Taobao; most popular Chinese e-commerce platform.

[www.weibo.com](http://www.weibo.com)

[http://t.qq.com](http://t.qq.com)
Examples of Weibo accounts

The May Fair Hotel:

Eurostar:
Wechat

- Has developed significantly in terms of user growth during 2012.
- Has become a location-based social platform for Smartphone users in China.
- Is available in a large number of languages and thus also used by a great number of overseas users.
- Available for iOS, Android, Blackberry, Symbian and Windows Phones.

Video-sharing platforms: Youku/Tudou

- Youku and Tudou, are among the most popular video-sharing websites in China,
- Youku is the leading video network in China. Tudou was ranked 5th in 2013.
- The two companies announced their merger into Youku Tudou Inc. in August 2013.
- Both offer user-generated content, full-length videos of TV series, TV shows and licensed movies from all over the world.
- Youku also broadcast its own original content.

www.youku.com
www.tudou.com

Other popular Chinese video websites include:

- sohu.com (www.sohu.com)
- iQiyi (www.iqiyi.com)
- v.qq.com (http://v.qq.com)
- Le tv (www.letv.com)
- PPTV (www.pptv.com)

Successfully interacting on Chinese social media

When interacting with consumers via social media it is important to know both your audience and the environment in which you are planning to operate. Some specific considerations include:

Regulation

- Although the social environment is more relaxed than the more heavily regulated search and ICP industries, any content that is posted by official accounts may still be monitored and regulated by the Government and platform Regulators.
- Few companies come close to infringement, but a good understanding of the do’s and don’t’s is necessary to avoid Regulator intervention.
Carrying Authority

- One of the main reasons that social media has such a prominent position in the Chinese social landscape is due to the scepticism regarding the official media. Along with the cultural desire to find and share information, it has led to a growth in the prevalence of peer-to-peer content.
- Alongside the scepticism of officialdom there is an innate awareness of ‘fake’ brand pages. It is therefore important to establish your credentials as the true brand owner. This is enabled by digital platforms providing ‘official status’ schemes that visitors can see. Obtaining recognition and providing good and engaging content establishes the required trust levels.

Mobile

- The rise of mobile internet is contributing to how users interact with digital media. For example, there is connectivity on all underground rail systems in China and buying from PCs at work is moving to buying when travelling to work. Therefore, it is important that content is mobile friendly and engaging on both traditional hardware and modern devices.
- There are social platforms specifically designed to engage people via mobile technology and the rise of WeChat (WeiXin) is just one example.

Platform functionality

- The social media landscape in China is still in its infancy and ever-changing. It is important to constantly monitor developments.
- Early adopters of new platforms are able to establish themselves as thought leaders and engage with eager Chinese audiences keen to try out new functionality. But equally important is the need to ensure that the forms of messaging and content keep pace with changes.

Key Opinion Leaders

- The value and influence of Key Opinion Leaders (KOLs) in China is unprecedented in the West. Once again, heavily routed in Chinese culture, having the right champions backing a brand provides a powerful message and enables companies to reach target audiences in a very positive light.
- The investment in gaining the support of KOLS can pay for itself many times over.

Internet Word of Mouth

- The growth of peer-to-peer knowledge sharing presents both an opportunity and a threat. The key to taking advantage of this fast paced environment is representation, engagement and honesty through Internet Word of Mouth (IWOM).