

Brands blaze digital trail

Advertising sees tectonic shift toward online channels for the consumer mind

By HE WEI in Shanghai
hewei@chinadaily.com.cn

For advertisers and marketers, China's still-evolving digital landscape has suddenly become the holy grail. It was not so five years ago.

Things like online searches and microblogs have assumed such immense potential in terms of access to the consumer mind that they are now seen as worthy advertising channels — even legitimate, more effective, alternatives to print and broadcast media, experts said.

Online and digital channels are projected to attract a whopping 377.5 billion yuan (\$54.4 billion) in advertising, or 64 percent of the total, this year. Traditional broadcast, print and outdoor media will be relegated to the background (208.3 billion yuan or just 36 percent).

Advertisers never had it so good in the digital space. Avenues abound, from messaging apps and chat rooms to short video apps, Q&A destinations and e-commerce platforms.

From the advertiser's perspective, that is a virtual bonanza. China is home to over 772 million internet end-users, according to the China Internet Network Information Center. For perspective: their number is more than double that of the web population in the United States.

Within the digital space in China, the mobile channel is something that brands simply cannot do without, experts said. Over 95 percent of the online population use mobile devices to access the internet, according to the Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, which was published in August.

The rise of e-commerce has brightened the allure of the digital medium, said Iris Chin, general manager of media agency MediaCom China. The country is a hub for digital innovation, given the massive contributions by the Tech Trinity, or BAT, a phrase that refers to Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent.

Now, the scene is getting even more exciting with the advent of a string of new players that are poised to challenge BAT, Chin said.

In the last three years, the percentage of mobile ads in terms of overall internet spends jumped tenfold to over 60 percent, according to consultancy iResearch. It forecast the number will eventually grow to 80 percent by the end of next year.

As internet-based services hog the lion's share of people's internet usage, firms that offer them are vying for user attention, experts said.

For example, people spend a solid 76 minutes per day on Tencent's iconic messenger WeChat, the company said last year, while time spent on fast-rising rival short video app

Douyin reached about 60 minutes, according to its parent Bytedance.

"Going digital is a big part of our strategy that drives our success in China," said Philipp Cai, general manager of Innisfree China, the South Korean cosmetic house.

It has opened flagship e-stores on Tencent's WeChat and QQ for a seamless online-and-offline experience.

"It's no wonder companies are spending big on digital given that marketing dollars follow consumer behavior," Chin said. "This constant connection leads to a constant demand for new information, new platforms and new ways to engage with consumers through digital."

Fixation with mobile means that consumers in China, who used to compare prices of products online and in shopping malls, are now utilizing apps to make purchase decisions, said Jacky Tang, general manager of Neo Communications, a Shanghai-based agency dedicated to digital marketing solutions.

"To navigate through the highly complex and segmented digital landscape, the safe bet is to start with WeChat and Weibo, which we deem as the 'twin pillars' of China's social media," Tang said.

Probably China's most popular mobile app, WeChat has become a default way of life for the Chinese to pay bills, access news, book taxi rides, or even make a doctor's appointment. The troves of data generated through this all-in-one killer app have given Tencent a leg up in the digital marketing landscape.

According to Tang, three built-in features of WeChat help enhance brand awareness: mini programs, WeChat Moments advertisements and WeChat public accounts.

A mini program is an app-like functionality that aims at driving sales directly. Moments is an e-space for brands to engage with prospective and existing customers through content marketing, storytelling, and more interactions with potential consumers.

And through an official account, "companies can broadcast messages and articles to their followers like a blog, but brands and service providers can also use these accounts to serve customers," Tang said.

Foreign entrants to China's digital scene are embracing these new tools. Christopher Bailey, Burberry's chief creative officer, told *China Daily* in an earlier interview that WeChat opens up "a huge new world of opportunity" in the digital space.

"The exciting thing for us is the deeper and more meaningful way that we are able to tell our stories using this platform," Bailey said.

Anne-Marie Verdin, brand direc-

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