

Cyber stars help redefine product image, market reach

Companies leverage the social media influence of key opinion leaders who match their character

By HE WEI

The good old branding method of banking only on certain proven celebrities is being challenged in digital marketing, and with no guarantee of success, according to market experts.

"Depending on only a few top stars also means it has become difficult for marketers to uniquely build resonance with their brand," said Maneesh Choudhary, deputy managing director of Kantar Millward Brown China, a global research firm.

Choudhary said matching the brand character with the celebrity character is key to unlocking the true potential of synergy. For instance, snack food brand Nestle Milka successfully married its warm soft persona seamlessly with the "innocence" profile of Zhang Yixing, a singer and songwriter, to drive sustained engagement with consumers.

"This matching of personality

becomes even more relevant for China's lower tiers (the next frontier of growth) where the personality of the celebrity should be down-to-earth and relatable to the people who are less advertising-literate and looking for rational and simple marketing messages," he said.

Meanwhile, brands are starting to reap more success from working with self-made bloggers, converting their own fan numbers into influence with brands.

For instance, counting on her over 3 million followers on Weibo and 4.5 million fans on WeChat, Fan Yimin, who is better known by her online avatar Becky Li, helped sell 100 Mini Cooper Countryman cars within five minutes via her WeChat post last year.

She is a role model to a generation of digital natives who have established viable careers as social media "influencers", and found fame and fortune solely by posting blogs and sharing their preferences online.

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tor at Mulberry, also touted WeChat's advanced functionality and prominence in the daily lives of consumers, predicting it to be "the central tool to communicate with the Chinese audience".

But one caveat about WeChat is that brands should build up a follower base in the first place, industry experts noted.

"Marketers really need to set up formal accounts for their model on WeChat and persuade buyers to stick to their web page, often by providing incentives and promotions for brand new followers," said Neo's Tang.

In this context, he referred to Weibo, the Chinese microblogging site, as a square-like online avenue where its users can easily see posts from anyone, since they really don't need to be connected to them in the first place.

Concurring with this was Domenico di Lieto, CEO of Emerging Communications, a digital market-

ing agency with offices in London and Shanghai. She recommended companies start by building up an audience on Weibo before pouring money into a WeChat marketing campaign.

"We say that Weibo is an acquisition platform and WeChat is a retention platform," she said. "There is no one plan that fits several brands."

While many marketing practitioners regard the WeChat and Weibo duo as the "holy grail", they cannot be safe bets once and for all.

According to MediaCom's Chin, a shift in the online paradigm has occurred where video has taken the top spot, or 35 percent, of time duration of people's internet behavior, followed by social media's 29 percent, among others.

That has given an edge to the likes of Douyin, a high-flying short video app that is fast rising as a staple in the digital marketing matrix of most brands. "The platform allows brands to share short videos, usually in a



Webcasters, wearing cool summer clothes, broadcast online through their mobile phones, soliciting business for a newly opened bar in Tongling, East China's Anhui province. CHEN CHEN / FOR CHINA DAILY

The power of word of mouth is one important reason for blogger success from the cultural perspective, according to Ashley Galina Dudarenok, founder of social media agency Alarice and a veteran social media expert.

"Chinese customers have very deep trust in key opinion leaders (or KOLs) and this psychological bond can be partially explained by the pseudo-intimacy created by social media," she said. "Social media make you feel like influencers are friends, as you know who they are in real life, thanks to the details of their daily

lives shared through Weibo, WeChat and live streaming apps."

Choudhary agreed. He referred to the case of Zhang Dayi, one of China's best-known KOLs, who reportedly earns around 300 million yuan (\$43.2 million) annually, which is higher than what some of the celebrity film actors and actresses earn.

"Brands can leverage the might of this huge traffic to garner short-term gains, and if matched well with a brand's personality it can also result in effective brand building," he said.

Major principles for the choice of KOLs include exposure, engage-

ment and relevance, and the negative check-list involves potential risk, competitor conflict and cooperation feasibility, said Leon Zhang, general manager of social media at MediaCom China, an agency engaged in media operations and content creation.

"Usually clients with sufficient budgets are willing to pay for premium and quality KOLs for peak influence and quality content co-creation, while at the same time applying part of the budget for other lower profile KOLs and social ads to amplify the influence," he said.

fun or interesting format with users ... They also leverage key opinion leaders to help share the content so it spreads quickly among their followers," Chin said.

Established less than two years ago, upstart app Douyin has managed to gain 200 million daily active users in China, according to statistics it published earlier in November. Up to 70 percent of its active users are women, and 85 percent are under the age of 25, who are referred to as the millennials.

Douyin is a good place to start social media campaigns, given that major social media platforms such as WeChat and Weibo have become saturated and yet continually increase the price of inserting advertisements on them, experts said.

Especially after Douyin teamed up with e-commerce sites such as Taobao and JD, users can now find direct purchase links on their phone or device screens while scrolling up

and down funny videos, according to Tang.

This trend dovetails with another massive trend in China — social commerce. (Wikipedia defines social commerce as "a subset of electronic commerce that involves social media, online media that supports social interaction, and user contributions to assist online buying and selling of products and services".)

Avid young buyers tend to indulge in impulse purchases as they browse the net. That spells great opportunities for companies like Alibaba, which benefits from the company's 520 million active users to deliver targeted reach to brands using its e-commerce platforms.

By tracking users across those sites with what the company calls a "unified ID", Alibaba is able to not only tailor product recommendations to individual users but personalize the storefronts they visit. This it accomplishes by analyzing consumers' browsing and buying habits,

according to Chris Tung, the firm's chief marketing officer.

"By combining Alibaba's massive data assets, businesses can identify, segment and build tailored content for the best results," he said.

For example, since last year, Alibaba's Taobao has created webisodes to promote household products. Video storytelling has greatly boosted sales, with sales of the featured cooking pot sets over a 14-hour period exceeding sales over the previous 30-day period by 50 times, following the launch of a webisode series called Night Warriors, the company said.

"The beauty of digital marketing is that it is trackable," Chin said. "The level of consumer engagement is often very difficult to assess. Digital marketing allows for tracking and allows brands to know how many people have seen their ad, clicked on their ad, gone to their website from the ad, engaged with the brand, and even purchased."