

Social media use in China to promote luxury goods

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Since the advent of the internet, e-mail and social media, people around the world have gained the instant ability to see and buy things they never knew they wanted before.

Thanks to its booming economy and growing middle class, many Chinese citizens can fulfill previously unconceived material fantasies. In the 1970s, most people in China would have been thrilled to attain the “Four Big Items”: a bicycle, a radio, a sewing machine and a wristwatch. Since then, these desires have changed from bicycles to cars, radios to iPods, sewing machines to name brand ready-to-wear clothing and wind-up watches to Rolexes. Given current trends, combined with the Chinese cultural concept of “face” (面子) or the equivalent of “keeping up with the Joneses,” luxury-brand merchandise, particularly those which are imported, will continue to be among the most in-demand goods and products in the Chinese marketplace. In China, being seen wearing something like a genuine Rolex or driving a Maserati will certainly give “face,” as will openly discussing where it was purchased (preferably on a shopping trip overseas) and its cost. In addition to internationally renowned products such as accessories and cars, consumables such as wine, chocolates, cognac and coffee can hold a much higher status in China than in their country of origin. That being stated, many imported goods can be catapulted to luxury status based on their foreignness, packaging – which oftentimes is modified to suit Chinese preferences – and even Chinese names.



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Choosing Chinese brand names

Even though the mystique of luxury goods being brought in from other continents is alluring, it is important to note that the content written to launch a social media campaign, such as marketing material, not be a straight translation of what is being pitched to a Western audience. Whenever possible, Asian models should be used, especially for clothing, to show Chinese consumers how clothes could look on them. Chinese names for foreign companies are essential and there are three ways to go about choosing a Chinese name.

The first is literal. An example of this would be Western Union. 西联汇款 literally means *western link remittance* in Chinese. The second is phonetic. 麦当劳 (mài dāng láo) is the phonetic equivalent of McDonald’s and does not have a particular meaning attached to it. The third is a combination of literal and phonetic. A good example is the Chinese name for Almond Roca. 乐家杏仁糖 (lè jiā xìng rén táng) uses the phonetic *lè jiā* in Mandarin or *lok ga* in Cantonese (meaning *happy family*) for Roca, and the literal *xìng rén táng* (meaning *almond candy*).

Within the translation and localization industry, it is common knowledge that improperly translated names and campaigns can chase away potential customers. In Mandarin, as in other dialects of Chinese, combinations of characters and syllables are used to create new words, particularly for new inventions and Western concepts. In the case of goods to be marketed as luxury goods in China, it is a good idea to have translators choose Chinese names that give the impression of opulence, such as 宝马 for BMW; the two characters mean *precious* (or *treasure*) and *horse*, respectively. In-country reviewers can also be instrumental in helping to determine if a Chinese name for a foreign company is suitable for the market.

Social media promotion

A common theme globally is that social media is used to keep in touch with family and friends and as a marketing tool



P1. cn magazine's gourmet section, featuring wine, dessert and pizza.

for many companies. Americans, for example, consider reading online reviews of restaurants and hotels before patronizing them. Chinese tend to visit Bulletin Board System (BBS) forums to get feedback on brands and virtual “word of mouth” before making major purchases.

Product placement initially paved the way for social media to play a huge role in luxury product market in China. An example is *Sufei's Diary* (苏菲日记), which quickly became a national sensation. The online show, based on the Portuguese miniseries *Sofia's Diary* (O Diário de Sofia), is about a teenage girl who relocates from Beijing to Shanghai to attend school, complete with the trials and tribulations of living with her father, stepmother and younger brother while dealing with homesickness, growing pains, mean girls and dating dilemmas. It features Sufei's choices of a cell phone, laptop and makeup, and scenes revolving around this merchandise. One of the attractions for viewers is that they are able to play a role in the show's development by virtually casting votes and helping Sufei decide who to go out with and what to wear. Show updates, via cell phone SNS messages, are available to fans following the program.

Many companies promote these campaigns themselves, oftentimes through ad agencies. To spread awareness and

increase wines sales, the government of Chile, along with Chilean wine producers, started a Chinese social media campaign, in part through seeding information on BBS forums. The campaign featured links to videos to educate participants about wine itself, such as how to pair wines with food and even how to open a bottle of wine. This resulted in Chile moving up a spot of foreign countries exporting wine to China and tied in well with the previously discussed “face” concept. Being well-versed in wine, and the ability to be able to afford it, gives Chinese consumers an air of class and sophistication among family and peers.

On its part, BMW mailed invitation letters to entice its Chinese customers to become members of its social media network through the www.myBMWclub.cn website. Members can create profiles and connect with like-minded people to share experiences and advice. At the same time, BMW is able to promote its brand through advertising new models, events such as auto shows and even by organizing road trips.

In terms of consumer-produced content, P1.cn is an exclusive, invitation-only social media website targeted to the beautiful and wealthy, and covers content related to luxury consumer goods, from gourmet cuisine and electronics to cosmetics and automobiles. One way

that invitations are extended is through P1 staff photographers who scout potential members at fashion events, stylish nightclubs, high-end shopping malls and on the streets of Beijing and Shanghai. This exclusive social network features member-generated profiles, blogs and galleries (often with photos of members' brand name shoes and accessories) as well as information concerning fashion shows, nightlife, product launch events and high-profile parties to celebrate international holidays for expats and Chinese alike. Users can also connect to Sina Weibo, a Twitter-like platform, through the P1.cn site. Weibo (微博), meaning, *microblogging* or tweeting, is used by several foreign luxury brands as a social media tool. The buzz created by consumers and celebrity microbloggers promotes the products, increases hype and provides clues as to consumer demographics and what “works” in the Chinese market.

There is also a magazine section of the website. While advertising materials are provided to P1.cn by ad agencies and are published in conjunction with campaigns, advertorials, which are very common in China, are also posted by in-house staff, freelance writers and columnists to feature products and exclusive destinations. Members also post comments about the items spotlighted in the advertorials, which can give luxury goods manufacturers invaluable market data. On the whole, Chinese people feel more freedom to express true opinions, rather than saying what they think you want to hear, which can change outcomes of in-person focus groups. P1.cn conducts online market research and creates reports for both internal use and as a service to its clients. Companies do not have direct access to post advertorials, but previous campaigns with client content have been translated into Chinese for use on the website.

To accompany the advertorials and advertising, the website also features an online mall where luxury brand name items — YSL, Juicy, Prada and Fendi, to name a few — are made available to members at discounts. E-mails alerting members of special promotions are sent weekly to members.

The July 2010 Statistical Report on Internet Development, from the China Internet Network Information Center, showed that the number of mobile



P1. cn magazine's nightlife galleries.

internet users reached 277 million over a year ago, which accounted for nearly 65% of all internet users. In keeping with this trend, P1.cn is launching a smartphone app internally in August and externally in late September/early October 2011. Based on P1.cn's research, Chinese people use mobile phones to reach online services at a larger extent than in many other countries. In its most recent internal survey, it was found that more than 80% of P1.cn members own smartphones.

Tips and challenges

Although search engine optimization is a consideration, foreign companies need to remember that the market is dominated by Chinese equivalents. For example, Baidu (百度) and Tencent (腾讯) replace Google and Yahoo!, and Youku (优酷) trumps Youtube. That being said, to increase ranking on Chinese search engines, it helps to use a .cn or .com.cn domain name and to host sites in China.

In addition to the usual advice of watching color schemes and avoiding acronyms where possible, it is important to note that Chinese government policies can suddenly change. An example of this is that in March 2011, the Beijing Administration for Industry and Commerce instituted a ban on certain adjectives, such as *luxury* (奢侈), *royal* (皇家) and *supreme* (顶级) on billboard advertising; violators are subject to fines of up to 30,000 yuan (approximately \$4,638). Although at the time of writing there did not appear to be any regulations that forbade use of these words in online marketing, LSPs can additionally help luxury merchandisers and ad agencies wishing to use social media in China by raising the issues that can affect linguistic styles and remain compliant with Chinese law.

While writing content targeted to the Chinese user is not as rigid as technical writing guidelines and specifications, it is crucial to keep up with trends. The Chinese market and social media are evolving and changing as quickly as the skylines of its major cities. Through the monitoring of government policies and keeping luxury good manufacturers of abreast of new opportunities in the Chinese social media sector, LSPs can be well positioned to play an important role in their development. **M**