

Dos and don'ts of advertising in China

Ada Ooi and Elliot Polak, Text Appeal, provide eleven 'rules' for advertisers

HOW GLOBALLY CONSISTENT can your brand be when it goes to China? What must be done to make it locally relevant and engaging? The differences of Chinese consumers may seem daunting. Fortunately there are clear cultural and advertising trends to take advantage of, as well as mistakes you can easily avoid.

1. Do reposition

McDonald's advertisements in the West are often simple, snappy and full of life. They reach out to almost everyone including children, teenagers and lower income brackets.

In China, McDonald's has repositioned itself to appeal not only to family and teenagers but also to a more sophisticated, growing middle class that has the choice to eat at street stalls, or stop at elegant cafes and have a coffee and cake. McDonald's has redesigned its outlets with a cafe feel, allowing Chinese to experience beef (versus more traditional pork and poultry dishes) in an upscale environment.

The new advertising campaign targets the middle class above 20 who spend free time shopping and tend to have a meal mid-afternoon. The tone is sensual, the message invites the senses and elicits associations.

A huge burger is featured on each side of a subway door in Guangzhou, with the headline 'It is always McDonald's, whether the mouth is open or closed'. When the door opens and shuts it conveys the feeling of a burger being fed into a giant mouth.

To introduce the Premium Quarter Pounder, the outdoor campaign says 'Flirt with your senses, experience beef to the utmost'. In some executions, the visual features a woman's half-opened glossy lips, while others show a woman sliding her hand over a man's biceps. The campaigns are backed by PR to emphasise that the taste of the American Premium Quarter Pounder had been tested with 16 flavour combinations to ensure that it is tailored for locals' taste buds - for example, Chinese pickles and sweet chilli sauce.

Some critics commented about the audacious connotation between beef and sex, yet there has been full local acceptance.

2. Be specific

Be specific on how the brand can directly benefit the audience via figures or scientific research. For example, in the banking sector, foreign banks favour branding campaigns over product campaigns. Local banks usually take the opposite approach of conveying specific solutions for different situations or investment goals.

In a two-minute TV ad for Industrial & Commercial Bank of China broadcast in Shanghai, a customer realises there is an interest rate increase, and discusses the most appropriate savings plan with his banking advisor.

As 70% of Chinese savings are held in the big-four local banks (*Wall Street Journal*, Chinese Edition), Western banks entering China after the joining of the WTO should consider integrating this approach of being more specific, to reach locals' hearts and cheque books more efficiently.

Similarly, P&G's advertising communicates concrete experiments and research, and always illustrates how its products can directly benefit the audience.

For instance, a TV demo for Pampers carries the super 'Even if your baby wets the bed 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 times, it will feel fresh and sleep through the night'. A Pantene commercial for the deep-conditioning series also relies on figures: 'Prevents splitting, frizzy hair; becomes 70% smoother'. P&G's ads provide scientific, rational and objective reasons for Chinese locals to consume, while other advertising for brands in the same categories tends to be seen as unreliable, due to lack of rational supporting arguments.

3. However, do not lie

Consumers and the government are very active in checking the reliability of advertising claims: false facts when found out are seen as insulting and can be extremely damaging to a brand's reputation.

4. Do get 'cheesy'

Some Chinese commercials, when shown to Western audiences, make people cringe and express amazement at the Chinese level of acceptance of 'cheesiness'.

A Toyota Corolla ad shows a couple head to head in front of the Eiffel Tower. The girl lifts her foot 90 degrees (a typical girly gesture seen in animations), and the headline proudly proclaims 'When the world's heart is moved'. Another Corolla headline says 'We all look forward to finding true love...'.

This may seem overt and cliché but such claims are felt to be emotional and epic by Chinese people. Why? Because advertising is often viewed during family hours, and TV can be seen as an extra 'dish' shared during family dinners every night. The feeling around the Chinese table is always joyful, loud and warm; a time when family members talk about the day, and show appreciation and respect for the food on the table. Ads broadcast during these hours (prime airtime) are most effective when they fit with family dinner settings, i.e. positive, harmonious, emotionally moving and easy to understand.

The 'cheesy' rule also applies to outdoor ads generally seen on Sundays. Sunday is the 'official' family day out for shopping and dim sum. Understanding that family plays a very important, significant role in Chinese society is key: do not disrupt this precious time, just enhance it.

5. But do not twist the meaning of love

A cosmetic advertisement aired on Central China TV Channel 6, featuring well-known Chinese actress Jiang Wenli and a toddler boy playing her son, led to strong criticism among Chinese locals:

Son: Mom, when I grow up, I want to marry you.

Mom: Uh, what? What about dad?

Son: When I am an adult, dad will be old (they hug each other happily). Mom will never get old! (Voiceover: Brand X cosmetics will keep mom forever young).

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The ad caused a stir as many viewers felt it twisted the 'sacred' mother - son relationship in an unacceptable way.

6. Choose the right time

Dinner is the prime time for ads due to the importance of the meal, so brands need to consider if their messages are appropriate to be aired to the whole nation at this consensual moment.

A Chinese cup noodles ad shows very popular Taiwanese star Jay Chou munching cup noodles, leaving residue and soup around his mouth. A crazy female fan jumps in front of him, wipes the residue with her fingers and feeds herself greedily. Another, for a Chinese medicated toothpaste, features a thin man brushing his teeth vigorously, followed by a shot of his gums bleeding, and a shot of another man, fat this time, doing the same thing. When aired at prime family time, the reaction round the table will invariably be 'We're having dinner, at least respect our food!'

7. Use local associations

Local chocolate brand Le Conte's rapidly-rising sales threaten foreign chocolate brands in China. This is partly achieved by Le Conte's advertising, which focuses on local associations of chocolate: it's a gift of love (while foreign brands focus on texture and quality).

The Chinese gift culture is huge, and gifts are given out all year round: during annual festivals, family or friends' gatherings, etc. Chocolate, alcohol and cookies are the most popular choices. It is a polite gesture to show respect to others and enjoy the happiness and warmth of giving and receiving. Le Conte's advertising captures this perfectly.

According to research, 90% of local consumers' first association of chocolate is with Valentine's Day or a present for their lover (source: EMKT.COM.CN).

8. Take advantage of government policy

Since taking over as president and party leader, Hu Jintao has declared that the country must pursue 'scientific development', taking environmental and

social concerns into account as the economy grows (*Washington Post*, Foreign Service). Advertisers can use this officially sanctioned context to their advantage, take the nation's primary goal and integrate it into campaigns. Environmental issues, endangered species, shortage of power, heritage preservation, social morale and self-improvement are open topics that can be freely developed into inspirational advertisements. These messages go beyond regional or audience barriers and can be unifying for a widely diverse mass audience in all parts of the country.

Instead of communicating product benefits, Chinese alcohol brand Wang Baohe sets forth three positive cultural principles in their campaign: 1. Reach out and communicate; 2. Treasure our traditional environments and heritage; 3. Exquisite perfection creates harmony.

9. Make use of Chinese festivities

Each Chinese festival has its own specialty; brands can relate their products to any of them accordingly.

The Chinese New Year is similar and comparable to Christmas in Western countries. It is the biggest celebration of the year: all about eating, dressing up, playing, presents, spending, entertainment. It sometimes seems like there is a need and desire to purchase everything, thus the level of acceptance of advertisements is higher at this time (with the challenge that brands need to stand out from the clutter).

The Chong Yang Festival is based on the myth of a hero who saved villagers by telling them to climb the mountain and avoid the monster of a transmitted disease. This could effectively be associated to children and certain medical products. As this festival falls on 9 September in the Chinese calendar (double 9) it has the connotation of eternity, perpetuity and longevity, and has become a day for paying tribute to the elderly. This could be associated with healthy food, drinks, gifts, as well as typical autumn items related to hiking, picnics, jackets, energy drinks, fruits, outdoor sports and equipment.

10. Grasp the Chinese essence

Chinese ideogram characters are the root of the Chinese essence. When creating headlines and copy, advertisers need to understand that, unlike Western languages, Chinese characters are not only about how good they sound when put together in a phrase. Each character itself has visual connotations that affect tone and style. Coca-Cola was initially adapted to a name meaning 'bite the wax tadpole' in China, later replaced by the perfect name that has the nearest phonetic equivalent 'ke-ko-ke-le', which also means tasty, palatable and happiness.

11. Be unique when going local

China favours traditional ethics and attitudes towards life, and a number of brands use this to their advantage.

A Crest campaign based on 'Health and confidence, spreading smiles around China' features different special places and people around China. In the TV ad, the camera captures them in a range of attitudes: smiling shyly, covering their mouth, smiling confidently while showing teeth. The last shot portrays a girl wearing a traditional ethnic costume with healthy tanned skin and pearly-white teeth set in the Qingzhang highlands. Unlike other brands that always deliver high-tech and scientific tooth-conditioning messages, Crest's 15-second spot differentiates itself by showing innocent faces and regional music. Words become unnecessary, healthy smiles convey the message. For brands as mature as Crest in China, uniqueness in campaigns is the key to standout.

Local relevance is increasingly the key to advertising success in China. Use of local celebrations, official priorities and family values can be powerful levers to engage with consumers. In some cases, local brand repositioning may be required to take into account market differences.

Of course, China is evolving very quickly, and what is effective today may be outdated tomorrow. Stay tuned! •