

Following a PublicAffairsAsia roundtable in Beijing, held in conjunction with Bite Communications, CRAIG HOY examines how fragmenting channels are impacting comms in mainland China

MANY VOICES one message



Gather together 25 senior communications and public affairs practitioners to discuss the increasingly complex and fragmented nature of corporate messaging and you are likely to encounter some big issues. Do so in China – and add in some public affairs and government relations practitioners – and the experience is even more bewildering.

China is grappling with the same rapid changes to the communications and public affairs landscape as the rest of the globe. But it is also one of the few parts of the world where the economy is transforming at an equally rapid pace. This means that not only is the media landscape changing quickly, it is growing quickly too – both in the traditional and new media arenas. There is, quite simply, more media popping up everyday, presenting corporate communicators with a complex matrix of local, national and international media at all stages of the

industry's development – and media ethics – curve.

This was the backdrop against which PublicAffairsAsia and Bite Communications convened an interactive roundtable at The Capital Club in Beijing. Among the participants were representatives from corporations, the media, trade groups and the NGO sector. Companies and groups represented included PepsiCo, internet giant Baidu, payments facilitator SWIFT and J&J's China joint venture Xi'an-Janssen. Other groups represented included AmCham-China, Action Aid International, Nestlé, Mars, BASF and Double A Paper.

Central to the discussions were the findings of the Bite Communications' report "Many Voices – One Message Shaping Valuable Conversations in Fragmenting Channels". The report concluded that communications is a growing strategic concern, with a company's reputation and brand identity being increasingly defined by

social media activity compared to traditional media buys. As Bite's Asia Pacific president, David Ketchum, said: "The traditional media is still a powerful force in China, with commercially-successful trade and business publications carving out a niche alongside the state-owned media. The range of choices makes it harder to deploy one-size – fits-all mass media campaigns, but that's not what today's consumer expects anyway, so the enhanced targeting and relevance of fragmented media outweighs the extra effort required to plan and deploy campaigns."

The Bite report found that the growth in social media has resulted in the need for greater clarity in both shaping corporate messaging and then knowing how to handle how these messages evolve online. Companies, it said, must respond to this evolving media landscape by encouraging their corporate communicators to develop digital skills sets, not to replace traditional skills but to complement the existing ones. Indeed the need for internal communications functions to embrace the changing landscape has put pressure on some of the traditional divisions between communications functions, the report found.

It is generally accepted that China is a difficult territory for Western corporations to develop their strategies, and a market which throws up challenges. However, some central observations at the Beijing event highlighted significant similarities between the communications challenges in the West and what is often considered the new frontier. Said one participant: "It is easy to be distracted by the bloggers and the bulletin boards. However we identify the journalists which matter to our business and we work closely with them. This gives us the headlines we want and those headlines feed other headlines elsewhere. We have tight control of our press relations."

General consensus, allied to research



BELOW: David Ketchum (left) and second image Michael Cheung, Head of North Asia, at SWIFT, another roundtable attendee



conducted by PublicAffairsAsia, however, suggests that the rapid expansion of China's online community is underlining the importance of responding with one credible message even when using many voices across multiple media. And the same is true in public affairs and government relations – even though the PA practitioners gathered appear reluctant to embrace social media as an integral part of their toolkit.

Said one attendee: “Governmental agencies or institutions – whether Chinese ministries, provincial or municipal governments, or departments, or embassies or consulates representing foreign governments – face substantial challenges when they venture into the social media space.”

Addressing the issue

The groups were asked to assess three statements: that traditional media was being replaced by social media, that social media is impossible to control, and that in an age of activist employees your staff are your most important stakeholder. In Western circles a credible case may have been made for all three statements. Looked at through the prism of China, however,

the complexity of the local situation started to crowd in.

On the fundamental question of whether the rapidly advancing army of netizens were about to overtake traditional print and broadcast media, the practitioners gathered had some pretty bold projections. More media, they stressed, did not sound the death-knell on the traditional media; which far from declining in China is mirroring the country's economy and expanding apace.

Kaiser Kuo, the international media chief at China's burgeoning internet giant Baidu, said: “It's easy, in the rush to embrace digital media and social media in particular, to overlook the continuing – indeed, expanding – importance of traditional media in the China market. We focus on the fact that China has at last count some 485 million internet users, but we overlook the fact that this still only represents about 37 per cent penetration.”

Kuo hit the nail squarely on the head when he urged the group to focus on the message and not the medium. He concluded: “This is not to downplay the importance of the internet and of social media; indeed, the Internet is absolutely indispensable now to a vital segment of China's population. But it's just important to recognise that it's not the perfect media for marketing communications for every brand, product, or service.”

Matthew Wisla, vice president of communications at AmCham China, highlighted how the chamber was taking clear, but cautious, steps into the social media zone.

“As communicators, our objective is to tell our brand and positioning stories through the available media channels. The evolving landscape requires careful navigation, but as communications professionals it is up to us to make the best use of every opportunity to reach our target audiences,” he said.

“Our major strides have been towards enhancing our multimedia and digital footprints, and reorganising our team and the approach we take to communications, so we are practicing content management across our array of channels rather than managing the website, Weibo platform, magazine, and so on, in silos.”

Rounding up on the social media dimension, PublicAffairsAsia's vice president Mark O'Brien concluded: “Social media gives different communicators another very wide-reaching platform to reach the public be they citizens, consumers or stakeholders. As a marketing tool social media's reach and influence is without question. As a PR tool it is clearly advancing fast. Corporate communicators have begun to actively engage and even government relations specialists are recognizing that maybe they need to move on from just simply passively monitoring the social media environment.”

And Bite's David Ketchum added: “Smart companies are both creating messages that are credible and compelling that are equally appropriate for internal and external consumption, and they are empowering their employees to take responsibility for what they say both as individuals and representatives of the company they work for. In practice this approach is not at all straightforward and can create many issues, particularly in highly regulated industries and where company confidential information or IP is concerned, but ultimately defending the silos will not work.”

The participants agreed that given the ever-proliferating number of mediums, corporate communicators are not short of platforms – especially in China. But if the Bite/PublicAffairsAsia roundtable reflects media reality, it is reassuring to conclude that the focus should still be on the message, even if there are many more voices to contend with. □

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