



SNAPSHOT

BY JUSTIN CHAN

All Blogged Down

In China's booming internet culture, weblogs and forums have already given voice to over 80 million netizens. As bloggers freely express their opinions online, companies are listening and learning about their target market – sometimes the hard way.

Xu Jinglei, age 32, is a Chinese movie star and award-winning director. She also writes the world's most popular weblog (or "blog"), which has amassed over 50 million clicks since it launched on Sina.com one year ago, transforming her public identity from film star to blog queen. Her clever and well-written posts are styled as daily journal entries, offering readers an inside look at her everyday musings and experiences.

It wasn't just star-struck fans that had their eyes on her site; multinational companies (MNCs) soon began logging on as a way to tap into China's web users. A recent commercial on Chinese television by U.S. microprocessor producer AMD featured not Xu the movie star, but Xu the blog star, to promote its Turion processor to local consumers. The ad focused on the new cultural phenomenon of competing to post the first comment on a blog (which the Chinese call "grabbing the sofa"). "We chose Xu for her linkage to our business," says Rose Wang, AMD's Greater China director of corporate marketing and branding. "Blogs are popular and becoming a part of daily life, soon almost everyone will have one."

Simply put, blogging is now more important to segments of Chinese consumers than other media. Of China's 123 million internet users, 53 million actively use discussion forums (also known as BBS or bulletin board system), and 29 million regularly post to blogs, according to a July 2006 report issued by the state-run China Internet Network Information Center.

Mass appeal, mass implications

To China's citizens, forums and blogs present a welcome alternative to traditional media such as TV and publications, which tend to be directly or indirectly state-controlled. "Blogs and forums offer people an unprecedented means of self-expression,



and in China, this is particularly exciting," says Jeremy Goldkorn, Beijing-based publisher of Danwei.org, a website covering media and advertising in China.

While Chinese netizens primarily use blogs and forums for personal entertainment, savvy web users are quickly discovering the business value of monitoring blogs to gauge public opinion about companies and brands. A quick visit to online communities such as Baidu Tieba (百度贴吧) reveals thousands of forums, including industry-specific ones and some designed to exclusively discuss brands including Motorola, Pepsi, Intel and Chery. Discussions range from brand headlines and product news to user experiences and help guides.

In Western markets such as the United States, blogs are generally frequented by techno-enthusiasts or hobbyists. But in China, cyber-forums are quickly becoming entrenched in mainstream culture. The growing buzz of internet-based talk has huge potential consequences for multinational companies.

"You need to be listening, because people are talking," says William Moss, a manager at Burson-Marsteller's technology practice in Beijing. "Blogs and forums can amplify an issue and mobilize public opinion on a large scale very quickly, with consequences that can reverberate around the world."

In China, users have demonstrated that they are not afraid to band together and voice their discontent. In an outcry against Dell this summer, angry Chinese customers united to voice complaints via blogs and forums over receiving Inspiron notebooks that were wrongly equipped with Intel T2300E processors instead of T2300. Their reaction even garnered

coverage on national CCTV news. Dell apologized, attributing the error to outdated marketing materials, and offered full refunds on returns, although a class-action lawsuit is still pending in Xiamen, where 19 unsatisfied customers accuse Dell of violating the PRC contract and consumer protection laws. Goldkorn cites this case as the latest example of an MNC in China seeing internet activism amplify a small incident into negative press coverage nationwide.

"There's a feeling in China that the service and products were so bad for so long," says Sam Flemming, founder and CEO of CIC Data, a Shanghai-based internet research company. "Now with all these multinational brands coming in, the expectations [among Chinese consumers] are very high, and frustration is caused if those expectations are not met."

Flemming warns client companies to develop an action plan complete with legal and public relations teams in case of an online attack. "[Blogs and forums] have greater reach and greater velocity than traditional media," he notes. Timing is critical, as negative situations can be exacerbated by slow responses. Waiting for directives from headquarters before responding often takes too long.

Speed is important, but Goldkorn warns that responses must also be thought through carefully. "[Chinese] internet users are particularly suspicious of spin and will ruthlessly hunt down examples of a company not being true to its word."

Other blog experts such as Moss stress that tone is critical. The worst responses, he says, are cold and "corporate." Polished official responses edited by a PR team and filtered by lawyers rarely succeed in winning over Chinese bloggers. Instead, Moss advises companies to write in a "conversation" style that uses a "human voice." For some companies, especially large corporations, he recommends having "employee ambassadors" blog on behalf of the company to give it a human face. "It is far better to make a modest but genuine showing of engaging customers and soliciting their input and comment."

Net gains


While blogs and forums often facilitate the creation of PR headaches, they also represent an excellent market

research tool for multinational companies in China, offering an open window into consumer preferences and reactions to campaigns and product launches.

For example, this past spring, KFC launched a TV ad in which hardworking student Xiaodong is helping two friends study for the university entrance exam in a KFC restaurant. Xiaodong fails the exam while his two less diligent friends pass. Consumers furiously criticized the commercial on Tianya Club (天涯社区) forums for failing to recognize the hard-held cultural ethic of industriousness. After monitoring this feedback, KFC pulled the ad within one week and aired a new version with an altered ending within days. Furthermore, they solicited input from Tianya Club members, seeking script submissions from forum users for different commercial endings. "They turned some negative PR into positive PR," says Flemming.

Meanwhile, on mobile phone discussion forum younet.com, detailed reviews (in Chinese) of new phones can be found within days of their release. Users rate features, share tips, troubleshoot and comment on their overall experience. Such feedback can be invaluable to companies in gauging market acceptance and collecting ideas for future products.

Flemming also recommends establishing relationships with "influencers," people that drive conversations on blogs and forums. "They write so much because they have absolute passion for your product or industry," he says. Keeping the most knowledgeable bloggers and forum administrators informed can pay off when they are sought out by other consumers online or offline for information and opinions.

Although blogs and forums usually only grab headlines for magnifying PR problems, "it's not all doom and gloom," Flemming says. Companies have the unique opportunity to listen to what consumers are saying about their products, their competitors and their industry. Goldkorn concludes, "Companies that learn how to hear and use these conversations will have many opportunities to connect their brands to their customers." 

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China's Top Blogs

For more info on China's social media phenomenon, and to sample China's most popular blogs, check out these sites:



East South West North
www.zonaeuropa.com/weblog.htm

Talk Talk China
www.talktalkchina.com/

Imagethief
news.imagethief.com/blogs/china/

China Word of Mouth Blog
www.samflemming.com

Peking Duck
www.pekingduck.org

Danwei
www.danwei.org

China Herald
www.chinaherald.net

Xu Jing Lei (徐静蕾)
blog.sina.com.cn/m/xujinglei

Fu Rong Jie Jie (芙蓉姐姐)
furongjiejie.bokee.com/

Guo Jing Ming (郭敬明)
blog.sina.com.cn/m/guojingming