

# Listen Up!

The days of pushing your message at the market and then sitting back to reap the rewards are gone. Modern marketing, argue *Wm Patrick Cranley* and *Tina Kanagaratnam*, requires multi-way conversations with consumers in real time.

**T**ELEVISION PERSONALITY RUI Chenggang's blog resulted in Starbucks leaving the Forbidden City, and Barack Obama's Facebook page may well launch a president. Conversational Media – communication that involves multi-party interaction with a story, message or idea – is the new language of marketing. Success requires a firm grasp of its tenets.

Learning this new language is challenging. Marketers have to operate in this new realm in real time, with little opportunity to research and test different strategies. And yes, there are risks. Big ones. Such as losing control of carefully crafted messages, which can be taken in any number of unpredictable directions by any of the participants. And not necessarily in directions intended by the client.

## Medium as Message

Despite the risks, brands cannot stick their heads in the sand and return to the days of one-way communication with consumers. These days, the medium is, in many ways, the message. The way a brand communicates says as much about the brand as what is communicated. To win customers, brands must engage in conversations with such potential customers, and make an emotional connection. Such conversations do not have to be via new-media channels (although this is often the case), but they must be interactive.

## The Chinese Way

Conversational Media is a powerful tool in China. There are already Chinese equivalents to most of the best-known English-language Conversational Media channels, from talk radio to event marketing to YouTube-like video-sharing websites such as Tudou and Youku. The latter company attracts more

than 100 million unique visitors each month, with each user spending an average of five hours on the site per month. Little wonder that Youku has attracted the attention of private equity investors, and recently announced that it has accepted a USD30m investment from a group of experienced venture capitalists.

But there are cultural differences. Chinese netizens are less likely than Americans to start their own blogs, for instance. Perhaps that is seen as too individualistic or conspicuous, or maybe just too much work. Chinese by far prefer participation on electronic bulletin boards, or BBS. On a BBS, you are a participant in a large group discussion, can remain anonymous and can join in or log off at your convenience. In addition, to an online community raised on instant messaging, the immediacy of participation on a BBS is familiar.

The penetration of BBS is staggering, however. The China Internet Network Information Centre says there are 220 million Internet users in China, but there are three billion BBS subscribers, which means that each user subscribes to multiple BBS. Because BBS are so popular, about 80 per cent of Chinese websites contain a BBS within. Obviously, it is not feasible for a brand to monitor half a million BBS, much less participate in them, but sooner rather than later the tools will become available to crawl these BBS and provide information to brands, enabling them to incorporate user opinions in their product and communications planning.

## Conversing with Power

The Chinese government, long the leader in mass communications in this country, is an enthusiastic endorser of Conversational Media. Premier Wen Jiabao has a Facebook

page, and as part of its efforts to popularise its foreign policy positions, the government launched its own bulletin board (called Qiangguo, or 'Powerful Nation') on the website of the People's Daily in 1999, just after the Chinese embassy was bombed in Belgrade.

President Hu Jintao logs on to the Qiangguo BBS and answers questions related to domestic and foreign policy, and even on his personal hobbies, thus presenting himself to the BBS audience as "a regular guy".

Given that social, business and political interaction is occurring more and more online, it only makes sense for companies to include in their insight strategies utilisation of online social-networking platforms like Facebook. By sharing the medium with their target audiences, brands learn something about how their users obtain and process information. Participation in Conversational Media also gives companies the opportunity to build brand reputation, providing easily accessible channels to publicise business achievements, corporate social-responsibility initiatives and engage employees. So what are you waiting for? Join the conversation. **SBR**

*Wm Patrick Cranley is managing director and Tina Kanagaratnam is CEO at AsiaMedia Ltd, a public relations and marketing firm that embraces Conversational Media for clients that range from ESPN's X-Games to the Shanghai International Literary Festival. The authors can be contacted at [wmpatrick.cranley@asiamedia.net](mailto:wmpatrick.cranley@asiamedia.net) or [tmk@asiamedia.net](mailto:tmk@asiamedia.net).*

