

# Media Relations in China

by Emma Huang

China's economy continues its rapid growth, with an average increase in gross domestic product (GDP) of 9.37 percent per year since economic reforms began in 1978. Last year the gross domestic product (GDP) in the world's fastest-growing major economy expanded 11.9 percent—its fifth year of double-digit growth.

In addition, the 2008 World Association of Newspapers (WAN) report "World Press Trends: Newspapers Are a Growth Business" found that China is one of the five largest markets for newspapers, with 107 million copies sold daily, representing 20 percent of world newspaper sales. "One of the things that struck me in China was the number of people who read newspapers," recalls Jeff Smith, former managing director of Hill & Knowlton's China operations. "People crowded around the bus shelters where the newspapers were posted for reading when I lived in Beijing."

The combination of rapid economic growth, and a population of 1.3 billion people, and China, the fourth largest economic entity in the world, is a magnet for business sectors seeking new opportunities. High levels of newspaper readership mean that media relations is still one of the most effective, efficient and credible approaches to reaching the general public in China. It's a tool for multicultural companies to build their image and reputation and raise brand awareness.

**Media reality in China** China has more than 2,200 newspapers, 8,000 magazines, 900 TV stations and 1,363 radio stations. Add to this a plethora of online news and information web sites that cater to every taste and interest.

Just as the U.S. media market is largely regional, China has few national media outlets. There are two main national newspapers—*People's Daily* and *China Daily* (published in English), a couple of trade newspapers, a national TV station (China Central Television—CCTV) and some trade magazines with national circulation. Local media outlets play a major role in local markets.

To date, almost every traditional media outlet has its own web site. TV and radio stations make podcasts available for download. Some newspapers provide free PDFs of their current news pages and newspaper archives for people to read or download. Media outlets create online communities, such

as forums and discussion boards where netizens can chat and share ideas. Traditional media has actively engaged in competition with new media.

**Media reform in China** The media in China is no longer a government department and has become one of the fastest-growing industries in China. A noticeable indicator is that the majority of media outlets are no longer funded by all levels of Chinese government. The main government-funded media outlets are *People's Daily*, China Central Television (CCTV), and Xinhua News Agency. This change took place only a decade ago.

The media industry in China is experiencing fierce competition similar to North America and elsewhere in the world. In its early growth stage, China's media industry follows the rules of a market economy. Media acquisitions and mergers happen occasionally. Giant regional newsgroups are emerging through mergers of various media outlets. For example, more than ten of Shanghai's newspapers, including the two veteran publications, merged into one newsgroup, Wenhui-Xinmin United Press, in 1998. In the meantime, some media outlets have had to close because of the competition.

Media outlets compete with each other on price, advertising, circulation and content. Publishers and producers try their best to offer outstanding audience appeal. Attracting audiences is the key element that journalists, publishers and producers consider, because it is the only way to bring in distribution and audience ratings so as to generate enough advertising, which is their major income source and enables the media to survive.

On the other hand, with burgeoning economic growth and personal interest in investment, a number of business media (TV, newspapers, magazines, and online media) have appeared. Besides this, the regular mass media have increased their business content. This is creating a new battlefield for the Chinese media. Experts predict that competition for business content will only grow.

**Newsworthiness and audience key** Media reform in China has also led to a profound change in content, design and the way journalists collect information.

For instance, Chinese newspapers have become much more colorful and interesting than ever with attention-getting headlines, insightful analysis, detailed background investigation and vivid pictures. Previously, newspaper design was fairly cut-and-dried, and in simple black and white. Moreover, the media industry entered into an age of market segmentation to reach different

target audiences. Take Shanghai's newspapers as an example again. The *Shanghai Morning Post* targets white collar workers, so its content focuses on stories of economy and politics, keeping up with world developments. While the *Xinmin Evenings News*, which used to be a very popular newspaper with every resident in Shanghai, has shifted its focus to middle- to senior-age readers. Likewise, many TV programs have become more entertaining and news-oriented.

All these factors have deeply influenced the way journalists gather information and write news stories. "Before, newspapers and journalists only cared about government considerations," says Ying Ding, senior counsel of Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide (Ogilvy PR) with responsibility for media relations, and a former journalist with a Shanghai TV station.

First of all, like their Western counterparts, Chinese journalists want the most interesting and striking news, "with meat on the bone." Ding gave an example: Whereas 10 years ago public relations practitioners could invite journalists to attend a product launch to get media coverage, you can't do that anymore—journalists will only attend newsworthy events. China's reporters have become more professional. Therefore, higher standards are required of media relations practitioners in China to provide newsworthy information to journalists. It is important for them to think like a journalist and to find what appeals to a media outlet's target audience.

**Engaging Chinese media** Many PR practitioners hesitate to engage the media in China. They only send out hard news releases, such as annual reports, economic reports and product launch stories. However, there are numerous ways to engage the Chinese media. Media outlets welcome ideas that offer interesting, helpful and useful information to their targeted audience when these are provided by their clients—companies who use advertorials.

Ping Wang, a TV editor of a local city news channel, cited a successful example that might give media relations practitioners an idea of how to engage local media outlets. She said that the TV program she works for is cooperating with a bank. As China's economy rises, many people have some extra money that they want to invest. But they aren't knowledgeable about making investments. The news channel and the bank identified this issue and decided to work together to meet this need. The bank sends an investment expert every week to different neighborhoods to lecture on the subject of funds, shares, and so on, and to answer questions. The news channel records these events and turns them into a program for the TV channel. The program is welcome by many audience members. Wang says some other banks want to do similar projects.

"We would like to find win-win-win situation[s]," says Wang. "That is where a TV program can benefit our news channel, our audience members, and the cooperating business." She emphasized that the key is to keep track of the things that the general public cares about. It is vital to identify the needs of the public, which might change in accordance of different political, economic and environment issues. Media relations specialists should be aware of those important issues, and integrate them with their organization's media relations strategies to implement proactive media relations activities.

**CSR is a hot topic** A new topic, corporate social responsibility (CSR), is grabbing the attention of Chinese journalists. This has been one of the hottest topics in recent years in China. The Chinese government supports this activity through tax deductions. Beginning 1 January 2008, China initiated the new Income Tax Law of the People's Republic of China, which increased a company's tax deduction for CSR donations fourfold—from 3 percent to 12 percent of annual profit.

The media watches a company's CSR activities closely, especially those of large corporations. This refers to both local Chinese companies and multinational organizations. The percentage of CSR activities reported in newspapers and on TV news channels is increasing rapidly.

CSR is an effective way for multinational companies to engage the local community. It is a very good opportunity for a company to improve its reputation, image and brand recognition by implementing goodwill programs that are reported by the Chinese media outlets.

A case in point is Estee Lauder, the internationally renowned cosmetic company. With the help of BlueFocus, a local PR agency, the company launched its global pink ribbon campaign for breast cancer prevention and cures in China. The campaign educated Chinese women by raising awareness of the dangers of breast cancer. It partnered with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, a government health care association, and *Cosmo Health* magazine, and gained a great deal of media coverage when many female celebrities volunteered for the campaign.

### **Some tips for successful media relations in China**

Respect China and respect Chinese media and journalists, and do not doubt their professionalism. This is critical to building healthy relationships with Chinese journalists.

Face-to-face and one-on-one communication with journalists is much more

effective than e-mail, phone calls or press conferences. Before or after you send out a press release, make phone calls to make sure the journalists receive the e-mail and remind them of the issue. Like their counterparts in North America and elsewhere in the world, Chinese journalists get tons of e-mails a day and may delete your e-mails by accident.

The standards of newsworthiness in China are very similar to North America. Stories should be timely, relevant and have a human-interest angle. Therefore, before you send your news release to journalists, please consider these key elements and assure that your press release contains them. In other words, try to think as a reporter would.

Keep your knowledge of issues and news trends up to date. If necessary, hire a research institution to do media content analysis for you to figure out what's new in China today, particularly because things can change rapidly and without prediction in China.

Don't only focus on the two world-renowned large cities, Shanghai and Beijing. Try to reach readers and audience members in the second-tier cities, such as Kungming, Chengdu, Hangzhou and Nanjing. These cities have large populations of four to six million people. Their economy is very vigorous, and people are keen to try out new products and ideas.

Do you use local PR agencies or international PR agencies? International firms have a solid international network that can share resources, such as human resources and skills worldwide, mature public relations methodology, and a wealth of experience. Plus, from the language perspective, they will have many English-speaking practitioners in-house, making it easy for foreign companies to communicate. On the other hand, local Chinese firms take advantage of localized recourses including national clients, media, and insight into Chinese culture and public opinion. Many local firm owners have media backgrounds—some are former journalists—which can help them build better relationships with the media than international firms. However, their English ability is not as strong as that of international firms. Therefore, you should balance the pros and cons to choose the best firms that can accomplish your goals of your media relations campaigns.

When a crisis happens, tell the truth and deal with it. Apply the same rules your company uses in the West—do not apply a double standard to China. If you do, the Chinese people will eventually find out it and it will hurt your image, especially in this digital era.

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