



B2B'26 MARKETING

AN INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVE FOR 2026
GREATER CHINA EDITION

CONTENTS

Editor's Introduction.....	3
The Fire Horse: Energizing China's Public Relations and Communication Trends in 2026	4
Harriet Gaywood	
Modern China B2B Lead Generation Tactics for 2026	7
Mike Golden	
A Tale of Two Cities: Hong Kong Remains in Top Form.....	9
Ryan Purkey	
Industrial Brands, Digital China: Storyselling for Engineers, Not Just Storytelling	11
Sascha Schmidt	
Surfing Not Drowning, the Creative In 2026	14
Paul Copeland	
B2B Marketing Agencies: The Next Generation	17
Barry Colman	
The History of Media & Advertising.....	20
Ben Wood	
The Fire Horse Navigates the Mosaic: Why Southeast Asia is a Soul, Not Just a Market	23
Chan Juu Ann	
The Compression Effect: Why B2B Marketing in China Feels Faster, Tighter, and Less Forgiving	26
Alex Ives	





Editor's Introduction: The Fire Horse

In the Chinese zodiac, 2026 is the Year of the Fire Horse. It is a rare, volatile combination. The Horse represents momentum and independence; Fire adds intensity and a penchant for risk. **Together, they signify decisive action and a refusal to remain static while the world recalibrates.**

The symbolism is a perfect fit for the current climate.

For B2B marketers navigating the China ecosystem, 2026 will be defined by **motion over stability**. Markets are reorganizing. AI has transitioned from a boardroom concept to a daily collaborator. Chinese firms are accelerating their global footprint, while international brands are overhauling their domestic playbooks. The Fire Horse does not wait for "perfect" conditions—it moves, adjusts, and demands that you keep pace.

This edition reflects that restless mindset.

A distinct pattern is emerging across the industry. Communication is becoming sharper and more accountable. Trust is no longer gifted; it is engineered through proof. Creativity is under immense pressure to justify its existence in an AI-saturated landscape. Lead generation has pivoted from a volume game to a credibility game.



*Ready to get involved?
See the last page for details.*



In this issue, we explore these shifts from the front lines:

Public Relations: Reclaiming its strategic seat as AI reshapes how brands are discovered and trusted.

Lead Gen: A new era of high-velocity trust, driven by localized education and radical visibility.

The Hong Kong Pivot: How the city remains the ultimate bridge between domestic China and the global stage.

Industrial Branding: Technical buyers are demanding clarity and local evidence over global platitudes.

The Creative Paradox: Staying human and indispensable when "good enough" is now automated.

Southeast Asia in 2026: Chinese enterprises must transition from a "China-centric" mindset to a "Global-Local" framework that prioritizes cultural empathy, strategic partnerships, and deep integration into the region's diverse social and economic mosaic.

The Agency Evolution: A fractured landscape where holding-company consolidation is being challenged by agile, specialist practitioners who prioritize outcomes over hours.

Historical Perspective: Today's AI-driven disruption is not unprecedented—understanding past media and advertising shifts helps B2B marketers separate real change from temporary noise.

The Machine Joins the Table: For the first time, an AI guest writer sits alongside human contributors—offering perspectives formed at machine speed, and forcing an uncomfortable question: in China's B2B future, who is advising whom?

These perspectives aren't isolated predictions; they are signals of a broader structural shift. The Year of the Fire Horse rewards intent and clarity. It penalizes those waiting for a "return to normal" that isn't coming.

This report isn't about chasing trends. It is about understanding momentum, knowing when to accelerate, and recognizing that in the current China B2B environment, standing still is the highest risk of all.

Welcome to B2B '26. The fire is already lit.

Barry Colman & Mike Golden
Editors
Shanghai
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The Editors would like to thank everyone who has taken the time and made the effort to contribute to this report. No one was paid for contributing and all have donated their time and thoughts for free.

We would also like to give a shout out of thanks to the team at Brandigo who have donated their time and resources in the design and layout of this report.

Please get in touch and join our communities (details on the last page) and please read the disclaimer.

The Fire Horse: Energizing China's Public Relations and Communication Trends in 2026

by Harriet Gaywood

Founder | Anoumis Communications

Year of the Horse: Industry Optimism

2026 is a year to be optimistic. Predictions for the zodiac Year of the Horse highlight the strength and endurance of this animal. Add to this that it is the Year of the Fire Horse or Red Horse, this means there will be even more energy in the China market with what some have described as 'spirited perseverance'. This means we can expect to see a drive to make things happen – greater confidence for investment, domestic start-ups powering to success, a continued growth in outbound business and an increase in visitors to China both for trade and for tourism.

So what does this mean for the public relations and communications industry? Was the Year of the Snake indeed about closure or are we going to see the fruits of its secretive nature and the evolution of a lot of groundwork? The trait that is reflected in Chinese culture and can be often seen in the business world is the idea of trust and moving forward even when things aren't perfect. In China, processes are usually refined along the way rather than being perfect at the start so the horse will start with a slow trot and gallop later in the year. In 2026, there are some key updates in the communications industry.

Key Trends

Revival of the Press Release

The humble press release dominates the communications industry and it looked as if its time was up but generative AI has made the tool more interesting and renewed its relevance as a credible format for earned media. To be useful, press releases have to be well-structured so that AI tools can read them easily, secondly they are now being used as sources for AI citations, AI indexing and AI training by platforms such as ChatGPT, DeepSeek, AppleBot and Gemini. Of note, the value of well-written press release as an AI source has now overtaken reports by the big four consulting firms.

The length of press releases is not changing but the quality of the writing will be even more important. This doesn't mean that poor writers should simply use AI to write their press releases but rather everybody should pay attention to the following attributes of cited press releases which notably stand apart from other releases because they include 2x more statistics, 30% more action verbs, 30% higher rate of objective sentences and one, formatting point to note – 2.5x as many bullet points. However, listicles (articles that are lists with no news content) should be avoided.

Analytics becomes Essential

In theory everything can and should be measured. Media monitoring tools are now essential for brands to track

everything from basic results to monitoring sentiment and predictive insights. The key change is that granular analysis is shifting measurement away from numbers to become more meaningful via greater, contextual insights so that communication strategies are dynamic and no longer fixed in stone. Realtime insights can enable ongoing refinement of activities, tweaking of messaging and enhanced understanding of what resonates with audiences.

Messaging becomes Tighter

As attention time reduces for capturing audience attention, messages need to not only be crisper and more memorable but also watertight in terms of credibility. All claims must be supported by evidence and sources. Clear communication is winning. Therefore, taking time to plan out key messages and create the 'old-fashioned' message house with a pencil and paper will pay dividends as the essence is transcribe across differing communication formats.

B2B remains Omnichannel

China's own media ecosystem will continue to be separate from Western social media. While a key daily newspaper such as China Daily is published all around the world, Chinese language newspapers which are mainly consumed via apps, and remain dominant for domestic consumption. Toutiao remains one of the key aggregators for news. For B2B, domestic industry (or trade) media should also be included as part of the mix since many are published by or work closely with industry alliances and are therefore closely watched and read by key stakeholders. B2B brands have been experimenting with video content and generating positive results including direct market leads (covered elsewhere in this report).



Harriet Gaywood
Founder
Anoumis Communications

harriet.gaywood@anoumis.com
anoumis.com



Harriet has worked in China's leading international and domestic communication agencies for over 25 years and is experienced in communications; brand building; geopolitics; media relations; PR; crisis; and strategy. Following senior roles at BlueDigital, Teneo, and Huawei, she founded Anoumis Communications in 2024. Harriet is a published author and writer.

“B2B communications will continue to become more creative and humanized in its approaches.”

B2B Humanizes its Tone

B2B communications will continue to become more creative and humanized in its approaches, borrowing more ideas from consumer brands and campaigns, recognizing that emotions ultimately impact business decisions. One reason for this change can be attributed to the average age of communication managers in China, who are often younger than their Western counterparts and used to living a digital life with seamless connections and a blurring between their work and personal lives. Checking phones for work messages is normal even at times that might not be acceptable in other parts of the world. Customer service hotlines and chat have already developed to offer friendly service with well-trained personnel and bots. Therefore, it is natural that the tone and messaging of other areas of communication will also have to adapt including continuation of live events and one-on-one engagement.

Crises Spread like Fire Horses

A couple of crises in 2025 highlighted the continued need for preparation and contingency planning for all brand activities in particular events. Arc'teryx literally hid behind the smokescreen of its multicolored firework display in Tibet following unexpected backlash by consumers regarding environment damage in a fragile ecosystem. Messaging wasn't entirely aligned between global headquarters and

China offices with notable differences in the tone and responsibility of their statements. The incident suggested a lack of understanding of Arc'teryx target consumers and their level of sophistication and environmental awareness.

Restaurant chain Xibei found itself in hot GMO oil after it was publicly challenged by entrepreneur Luo Chenghuo on Weibo about serving pre-made food. Without a communications team in place to front criticism, the Founder and CEO publicly denied the criticism and then was forced to backtrack and issue an apology as its customer numbers dwindled.

All companies need to ensure that their crisis and scenario planning is up to date and take steps to mitigate risk by educating teams and encouraging transparency. Complaints, whether about environmental issues, safety or quality materials, are increasingly investigated and made public with potentially critical business consequences.

AI is Creating Value

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is increasingly understood in a more granular way and recognized by its application within a specific sector and how it is applied rather than used as an all-embracing term. China's DeepSeek AI will continue to create excitement for its learning ability as a key tool that is used by the communications industry to generate audience insights, support content development such as blogs, analyze data and language, generate reports, and monitor brand sentiment. Its



ability to monitor tone and 'emotion' make it valuable during crises as well as regular campaigns for the live adaptation of copy to appeal to a particular audience.

This use of generative AI will be supported by the use of agentic AI which is enabling the planning and execution of tasks with minimal human intervention. For example, Google envisages the use of agentic AI for more automated deployment of public relations content including tracking of performance and automatically adjusting the marketing strategy based on the results.

“China’s DeepSeek AI will continue to create excitement for its learning ability as a key tool that is used by the communications industry.”

Emerging Communication Opportunities

China’s Tech goes Overseas

Chinese companies are going overseas. In January 2026, one third of exhibitors at CES were from China and their dominance wasn’t just in numbers but also leading and impressing visitors in terms of technology. The companies were there to sign deals unphased by news headlines and geopolitics.

It is fair to assume that this trend of Chinese companies heading overseas will continue. This generation of Chinese companies differs from its predecessors in that they are often much younger (sometimes just a few months old) but in some ways even more ambitious. Most significantly these companies are attracting attention for their innovation and advanced technology. Often backed by highly complex insights, many of these companies will require communications support to help them tell their stories and simplify or identify messages that will resonate with overseas audiences.

China’s New IPOs Need PR

There has already been an uptick in the number of filings for potential listings by Chinese companies on the Hong Kong Stock Exchange as well as continued interest in the US, irrespective of geopolitics. In addition to demand for investor relations, many of these companies are not well-known overseas creating a need for public relations – introducing the success and background of these companies in order to help them build a positive business environment including with regulators, industry influencers and navigate some of the specificities of overseas markets.

ESG Progress becomes a PR Topic

Companies will have more communicable results to share regarding their ESG progress following the implementation of China’s Corporate Sustainability Disclosure Systems which have turned reporting into more structured compliance especially among listed companies and large enterprises. data systems and assurance readiness. This is coupled with the climate enforcement infrastructure which includes an expansion of the National Carbon Emissions Trading System (ETS).

With the strengthening of existing monitoring regulations, adding more institutionalized inspections and pushing carbon responsibilities across all heavy industry. However, from a communications perspective, sharing progress and goals that reinforce commitment and support of China’s objectives whilst demonstrating a responsible approach to business will strengthen corporate storytelling.

China’s Five-Year Plan (2025-2030) Drives New Sectors

As outlined in the 2025 Five-Year Plan, 2026 will see advancement of sectors such as new energy, new materials, aerospace, and the low-altitude economy. These advanced sectors are critical to helping China advance and realize its vision of development for the future. With specializations such as breakthroughs in quantum technology, biomanufacturing, hydrogen and fusion energy, brain-computer interfaces, embodied intelligence, and 6G communications there is lots of scope for PR, whether supporting startups or existing companies in these areas. In particular, the Plan highlights the need to support specialized and innovative SMEs and enable the digitalization of the service sector to better integrate with advanced manufacturing and modern agriculture.

Whilst regulated, China is increasingly reliant on privately held businesses to support the development of these sectors. In addition, many of these companies are joining China’s ‘going out’ campaign and choosing to build part of their business overseas. and will consequently need to build their brand through public relations. To achieve these objectives, these companies will require a plethora of services ranging from basic messaging, stakeholder mapping, tailored strategies, government relations to media relations, content development and overall management. Crafting effective and cost-efficient campaigns for these companies, in particular for the SMEs will be essential.

Final Thoughts

So with a year ahead of fire and ambition with the Year of the Fire Horse, 2026 will put pressure on PR and communications professionals to deliver for their clients by using AI applications where they can create tangible efficiencies and targeted results that translate into business success. However, this means professionals must learn to use AI applications as strategic tools whilst also doing their own analysis. PR basics remain fundamental with the fire of the horse seen when invested in personal relationships and the humanizing of communication.

As China continues to build ‘Beautiful China’, a nation that is self-reliant, resilient and can enjoy shared prosperity, B2B enterprises are fundamental to this success. The changing fabric of China’s infrastructure and society are creating new opportunities and pertinent themes that can and should be leveraged. The impact of China’s economic development with new sectors for new companies whether it is Chinese companies going overseas as exporters or simply exhibitors will be seen around the world. Nevertheless, PR and communications remain essential as a tool for product education, building mutual understanding, crisis mitigation, driving engagement and creating visibility.

The Year of the Fire Horse promises to be one of the most exciting years this decade. Communicate clearly, embrace the change but don’t gallop too fast!

Modern China B2B Lead Generation Tactics for 2026

by Mike Golden

President | Brandigo China

Compared with mature markets, marketing in China seems to consist of a prism of shifting goalposts and rules. In fact, no one can seem to agree on the size of the field or even what the goals should look like. Add in B2B as a general industry descriptor and it's even worse: many of the players seemingly just took to the field, and everyone seems to be out of position or wearing some kind of homemade uniform. Sometimes I feel like an old school referee, blowing my whistle at outrageous fouls, mostly in vain.

Now that we're all stuck in my sports metaphor, I'm forced to pull in the dreaded Word of the Year 2021: the marketing playbook. What does it look like in 2026 for B2B marketers who are ready to up their game and bring some real talent to the pitch?

Let me start with what's not working anymore. That old approach of building massive contact lists and carpet-bombing them with messages? It's dead. Worse than dead – it's actively damaging your brand. I've watched companies spend six months scraping contacts only to see their email domains get blacklisted and their WeChat accounts flagged within weeks. The Chinese market has moved on, and if you're still thinking in terms of volume, you're already behind.

What replaced it is something the industry folks are calling "high-velocity trust," which sounds like another buzzword until you actually see it in action. It's basically this: fewer leads, but the ones you get are already halfway to buying because they've done their homework and decided you might be worth their time. The shift happened because Chinese business buyers got smart about filtering out noise. They had to – everyone and their cousin started doing B2B marketing in China.

The Video Reality Check

Here's where most international companies get it wrong. They hear "video content works in China" and immediately produce slick corporate videos. Then they wonder why nobody watches past the first fifteen seconds. Don't get me wrong – corporate videos have their place – but there's a whole new shift in video.

What actually works is something borrowed from consumer marketing called Zhong Cao – "grass planting." I know, the term sounds weird in English, but stick with me. It's about planting seeds of interest through authentic content instead of trying to close deals through videos. Your engineer explaining how your solution actually solves a specific problem. Your consultant walking through a real case study, warts and all. Your product manager showing the messy process of problem-solving, not just the polished result.

I've seen this work firsthand. One client had their technical

lead do a series of videos on WeChat Channels explaining common misconceptions about their industry. No production crew, no script, just him talking like he would to a colleague. Within three months, their qualified lead flow increased by 40 percent. The leads that came in already understood the technical aspects and were asking about implementation, not basic education.

The platforms that matter right now are WeChat Channels (integrates with where business conversations already happen), Douyin (the algorithm is surprisingly good at finding niche professional audiences), and Xiaohongshu or Rednote (yes, really – it's become a legit B2B discovery platform). Master these, and you're ahead of most of your competition.

The Data Privacy Wake-Up Call

This is the part where I need to be blunt. If you're still buying contact lists or scraping data, stop. Not because I'm preaching ethics – though you should care about that too – but because you're creating genuine legal liability. China's Personal Information Protection Law isn't theoretical anymore. I know marketers who've dealt with the consequences, and it's not pretty.



Mike Golden
President
Brandigo China

mgolden@brandigo.com
www.brandigochina.com

brandigo

Mike has over 20 years of China marketing experience as the founder of Brandigo China, a B2B marketing communications agency that focuses on content creation, social media, PR, demand and lead generation campaigns. Mike is a graduate of Cornell University and holds an MBA from the University of California, Berkeley. He works with clients of all sizes, including Maersk, W.R. Grace, Henkel, Costco, and many more.

“Baidu still matters, but 2026 introduced new wrinkles. Chinese AI platforms have become significant players in how buyers discover vendors.”

The better approach is what I call “earn it, don’t take it.” Create something actually valuable that makes prospects want to give you their information. I’m talking about diagnostic tools that help them assess where they currently stand. ROI calculators that quantify what they’re leaving on the table. Self-assessment instruments that provide genuine insight. Expert webinars that solve real problems, not thinly disguised product pitches.

When you do this right, something interesting happens. The leads you get don’t just hand over their email address and disappear. They show up to sales calls already educated, already engaged, and already understanding your value proposition. This is the difference between someone filling out a form because they want your gated PDF versus someone requesting a conversation because they’ve identified a gap you can fill.

The other piece that’s become non-negotiable is working with the right Key Opinion Leaders. Not necessarily influencers who’ll promote anything for a fee, but genuine experts with engaged professional audiences. The credibility they lend accelerates the trust-building process in ways your owned channels simply can’t match. But choosing the wrong KOL partner is worse than doing nothing, so this requires real homework.

WeChat: Not What You Think It Is

Many international companies treat WeChat like it’s LinkedIn or another social platform. That’s the wrong mental model. WeChat is the operating system for Chinese business relationships. Everything flows through it – initial discovery, relationship nurturing, deal discussions, post-sale support. If you’re not building your marketing and sales processes around this reality, you’re swimming upstream.

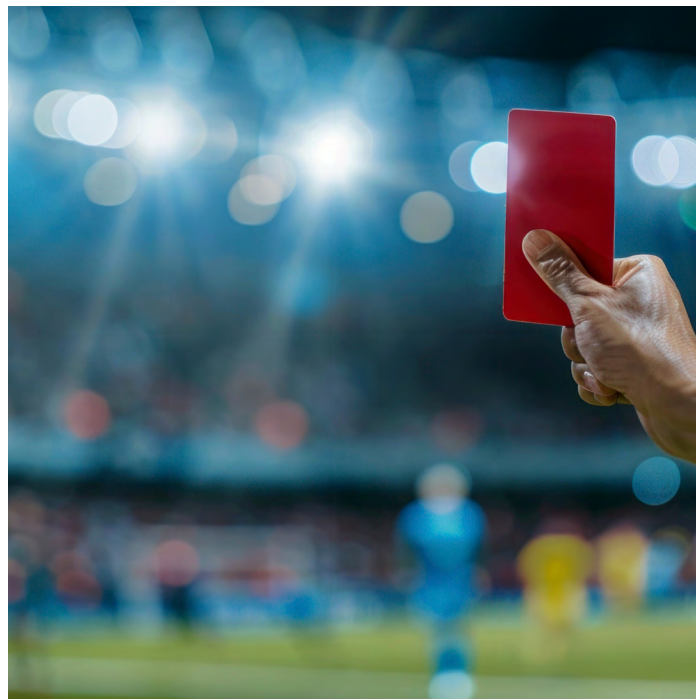
The companies doing this well have stopped thinking about WeChat as a marketing channel. They’ve built entire systems that orchestrate multiple WeChat components. Official Accounts for credibility and content distribution. Private connections for relationship development. Mini-Programs for sophisticated lead capture that feeds directly into their CRM. The best part? When sales and marketing teams operate within the same WeChat ecosystem, leads stop falling through the cracks during handoffs.

The AI Search Complexity

Baidu still matters, but 2026 introduced new wrinkles. Chinese AI platforms have become significant players in how buyers discover vendors. This means you need to think beyond traditional SEO. You need to be visible across what I call the trust ecosystem – the interconnected web of sources where business buyers actually do research.

Your website needs to be built with AI search in mind. How do large language models retrieve and present information? That’s your new SEO. But you also need presence across media outlets, Q&A platforms like Zhihu, and industry-specific portals. When a buyer prompts an AI system or does research, your company needs to appear in multiple contexts as an authoritative source.

This is where strategic PR has made a comeback. Industry media articles, trade portal placements, expert interviews –



these serve triple duty. They feed search rankings, provide content for your WeChat distribution, and give your sales team credibility-building materials to share. Companies with strong media relationships are finding themselves with natural advantages right now.

The Real Talk Conclusion

I started with that sports metaphor because it captured something true: B2B marketing in China feels chaotic because it is chaotic. The rules keep changing. The platforms evolve. What worked last year stops working this year. But underneath all that chaos, there’s a pattern.

The companies winning at lead generation right now are the ones that stopped trying to force the old playbook onto a new market. They moved from interruption to education. From volume to value. From trying to control the conversation to earning the right to be part of it. They recognized that in a market where buyers have unlimited information access and increasingly sophisticated filters, authenticity and expertise became the most valuable currencies.

If I’m being honest – and at this point, why stop – the shift to high-velocity trust isn’t just a China thing. It’s where all B2B marketing is heading. China just got there faster because the market forced it to. The old playbook of spray and pray, of treating leads as numbers rather than potential relationships, of optimizing for volume over value? That game is over.

The new game rewards patience, expertise, and genuine value creation. It rewards companies willing to invest in building authority before demanding attention. For businesses ready to make that investment and navigate China’s unique digital ecosystem, the payoff is substantial: higher quality leads, shorter sales cycles, and relationships that actually drive long-term growth. Not because you finally figured out the perfect outreach cadence, but because you built something worth paying attention to. Back to the game!

A Tale of Two Cities: Hong Kong Remains in Top Form Internationally as it Bridges China and the West

by Ryan Purkey

CMO and Co-Founder | Voyager AI

While it's a well-worn cliché to call Hong Kong a gateway to the East and West, it is a deservedly earned reputation. Regularly at the top of rankings amongst other global cities, Hong Kong's fortunes continue to rise as China steadily diversifies and advances its modern economy.

Most notable for international B2B marketers, is Hong Kong's premier ranking in Asia (and 4th place globally) for highly skilled talent.¹ This talent resides in a dynamic environment that blends Chinese and Western business cultures, and platforms. Paired with APAC markets that have reached saturation for mobile connectivity² and ready access to AI, the speed and potential for Hong Kong to serve as a R&D playground for marketers is as present as ever.

Fundamentally and strategically the city remains a gateway to mainland China and APAC markets, while benefitting from the growing integration of the Greater Bay Area locally and the adoption of technology internationally.

Hong Kong: A Strategic Crossroad

Hong Kong's dual connectivity is one of its greatest assets. The city enjoys high usage of both Eastern and Western digital platforms so a pipeline can feature LinkedIn and YouTube just as readily as WeChat or Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu). Amongst trade winds that are blowing manufacturing to diverse ports of call³, Hong Kong remains at a pivotal point squarely in between the world's two largest economies and consumer markets. Coupled with its internationally exceptional talent pool, the region serves as a hub for businesses to structure deals, test waters, finance, and market ideas that can just as quickly scale in the US as well as China.

Heading East, the city's incorporation into the Greater Bay Area makes it a popular first step for companies entering mainland China. Conversely, mainland Chinese enterprises frequently entrust Hong Kong-based marketing firms to help them expand internationally, valuing Hong Kong agencies' bilingual skills and cultural fluency in bridging to global markets. The East-West conduit creates significant opportunities for B2B marketers. Many regional headquarters of multinationals are based in Hong Kong, empowering marketing teams to coordinate Asia-Pacific campaigns from a well-connected hub.⁴

The city's openness to both Chinese and Western media means B2B brands can pilot campaigns in Hong Kong and scale them either direction – deeper into Mainland markets or out to the world. We're looking at you, Labubu.⁵

Strategic Challenges and Opportunities in 2026

Internally, Hong Kong's B2B marketing landscape in 2026 is not without challenges. Chief among them is intense competition in a saturated market. Many B2B sectors in Hong Kong – from finance to logistics – are crowded with similar service offerings, requiring differentiation and unique positioning

to stand out. In some ways what is old is new again, as direct outreach—especially in B2B efforts—can capitalize on Hong Kong's "small town" proximity and big deal potential. Shorter sales cycles in Hong Kong (relative to other Asian markets) can be a double-edged sword: while deals may close faster, buyers expect ultra-responsive engagement and quick value demonstration.

On the flip side, Hong Kong presents distinct opportunities. The city's culture of efficiency and professionalism means that marketers who deliver on their results-focused messaging can stand out. Like most modern markets, Hong Kong decision-makers value substance over volume – with the strategic use of AI seen as a way to facilitate better personalization, speed, and insights.⁶ This pushes B2B marketers to innovate in account-based marketing (ABM) and personalization, tailoring pitches by industry and role. Success in Hong Kong can quickly reverberate into Mainland China, Taiwan, and broader APAC. Many firms use Hong Kong as a testing ground for Asian B2B initiatives, leveraging immediate market feedback and then scaling successful tactics regionally.⁷

Key challenges B2B marketers face in Hong Kong include:

- **Market saturation:** Service-heavy sectors are crowded, and without a compelling USP, marketing efforts risk blending in.
- **High buyer expectations:** Clients demand fast follow-ups, industry-specific insights, and genuine value – "buyers face decision fatigue and overlook generic messaging".



Ryan Purkey
CMO and Co-Founder
Voyager AI

ryan@voyageraihk.com
www.voyageraihk.com

VOYAGER AI

With a background in digital marketing since 2000, Ryan now uses his hybrid Martech skills as the CMO and Co-Founder of Voyager AI in Hong Kong. Voyager AI helps businesses adopt high-quality, reliable AI output that integrates seamlessly into workflows, to help clients see accurate and novel automated work in weeks, not months.

“Those that find success in Hong Kong, stand a great chance of seeing that success scale throughout APAC.”

- **Complex stakeholder groups:** Even in Hong Kong's agile environment, large B2B deals involve multiple decision-makers, requiring multi-channel outreach and precise targeting.

Key opportunities unique to Hong Kong include:

- **Gateway to China:** Use Hong Kong's connector role to tap Mainland markets with lower initial investment, thanks to the city's shared language/cultural traits and legal frameworks.
- **Multi-platform reach:** Leverage Hong Kong's access to both global networks and Chinese networks to maximize audience reach.
- **Innovation adoption:** Hong Kong's high digital adoption and government support for innovation (e.g., fintech, deep tech hubs) make it an ideal place to introduce new MarTech tools, AI-driven marketing, and data-driven strategies before competitors do.
- **Regional leadership:** Success in Hong Kong can bolster brand credibility across Greater China. Many Hong Kong-based marketing successes are used as case studies to win over stakeholders in mainland China and other APAC markets.

In short, Hong Kong in 2026 offers high rewards for B2B marketers who can navigate its competitive terrain and harness its East-West advantages. AI has moved from a curiosity to a coworker in workflows. Speed, stellar quality, and a personal touch remain hallmarks of the market. And those that find success here, stand a great chance of seeing that success scale throughout APAC.



- 1 "Hong Kong leaps to fourth place and ranks first in Asia in World Talent Ranking 2025" 9 September 2025 ["A Government spokesman said, "Hong Kong ranking first in Asia in the IMD's World Talent Ranking is clear evidence that the policies and measures of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government in education, innovation and technology (I&T), and talent admission have found the right direction and are getting results. Hong Kong's post-secondary education is highly internationalised and diversified. The city boasts five of the world's top 100 universities with outstanding research talent, making it an international hub for exchanges and collaboration among high-calibre talent." <https://www.info.gov.hk/gia/general/202509/09/P2025090800827.htm>

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Industrial Brands, Digital China: Storyselling for Engineers, Not Just Storytelling

by Sascha Schmidt

Senior Consultant | Schindler Parent

Western industrial brands in China face a paradox: world-class engineering meets communication that doesn't convert. The problem is rarely the product. It's the way complex value is translated into messages, formats, and journeys that move Chinese buyers to act.

Chinese B2B buyers research independently, consume content on mobile, and make decisions long before a sales rep is involved. They scroll past generic brand stories and hunt for specific answers: will this work in my factory, under my constraints, with my timelines? In this environment, storytelling alone—the craft of wrapping features in narratives—falls short. What industrial brands need is storyselling: communication that turns engineering complexity into qualified leads, shortened sales cycles, and protected margins.

This article focuses how to turn engineering complexity into qualified leads, shortened sales cycles, and protected margins by moving from generic storytelling to strategic storyselling in China. It focuses on what technical buyers actually need, how to localise for credibility, and how to build content systems that drive measurable business outcomes instead of vanity metrics.

Why Classic Storytelling Fails Industrial Brands in China

Most industrial brands enter China with stories built for Western markets. They talk about innovation, heritage, and emotion. These narratives may work in Europe or the US—but they rarely convert engineers and technical decision-makers in China.

Chinese B2B buyers, especially engineers, are under pressure to move fast and avoid risk. They want proof, not poetry. They expect clear specs, local references, and immediate clarity on integration, service, and total cost of ownership. If your content doesn't answer these questions quickly and concretely, they move on.

This is why classic storytelling underperforms in China:

- It centres the brand, not the buyer's problem.
- It prioritises emotional arcs over technical relevance.
- It often ignores local standards, regulations, and real Chinese use cases.

Result: nice stories, weak pipeline.

Storyselling: Storytelling That Converts

Storyselling embeds sales-relevant proof points and clear calls-to-action into every piece of content. It's storytelling that converts: brand awareness plus leads, engagement plus pipeline, reach plus revenue.

Where storytelling asks, "What story do we want to tell about ourselves?", storyselling asks, "What story will move this specific buyer one step closer to contacting sales?"

It keeps the narrative, but hard-wires in:

- Concrete outcomes rather than abstract claims.
- Local proof instead of generic global references.
- Clear next steps: a demo, a consultation, a technical call, a WeChat contact.

In industrial B2B, that means combining emotional relevance ("they understand my world") with rational solidity ("they can prove it in plants like mine") and operational clarity ("here's exactly what I do next").

Research backs this approach. Stories are 22 times more memorable than facts alone—but only if those stories connect directly to the buyer's needs and next steps. In B2B sales, effective storyselling can increase conversion rates by up to 30% by creating emotional connection while reinforcing the rational business case.

The key is balance: enough narrative to engage technical buyers overwhelmed by options, enough proof to satisfy engineers who demand data, enough clarity to drive action in a market where attention spans are measured in seconds.



Sascha Schmidt
Senior Consultant
Schindler Parent

sascha.schmidt@schindlerparent.de
www.schindlerparent.de

SCHINDLER PARENT

Sascha Schmidt is Senior Consultant Strategy at Schindler Parent, a Southern Germany B2B agency specializing in Brand & Margin®. With expertise in storyselling, lead generation, and international marketing for industrial brands, Sascha also lectures on marketing at Zeppelin University and helps manufacturers build communication systems that drive measurable business outcomes.

“Chinese B2B buyers, especially engineers, are under pressure to move fast and avoid risk. They want proof, not poetry.”



What Chinese Technical Buyers Really Need

Three buyer anxieties dominate when Chinese engineers and procurement teams evaluate Western industrial brands:

1. Will this work here?

They need to see that your solution fits Chinese conditions: standards, regulations, infrastructure, and typical use cases. That requires content built for China, not just translated into Chinese. Local case studies, adapted specifications, and references to Chinese industry contexts are prerequisites, not extras.

A German machinery brand that only shows European factory floors sends a clear message: you haven't done the work to understand China. By contrast, a brand that shows three Chinese automotive suppliers reducing defect rates by 18% in six months is telling a story that matters—with proof attached.

2. Can I trust this supplier over time?

Buyers worry about long-term support, spare parts responsiveness, and whether the supplier will still care about them in three years. Storyselling addresses this with visible local presence: service hubs, certified partners, regulatory approvals, and Chinese customers willing to speak on record. You're not just “a global leader”—you are concretely present and committed.

3. How fast can I get to a confident decision?

Speed is critical. Buyers expect self-serve access to data-sheets, integration guides, ROI examples, and direct expert

contact via WeChat. Every obstacle—forms, long PDFs, delayed responses—erodes trust. Storyselling designs for speed without sacrificing depth.

A Practical Storyselling Framework for Digital China

To make storyselling work, industrial brands need a system, not isolated campaigns.

1. Map content to the real buyer journey

Chinese buyers jump between awareness, consideration, evaluation, and decision. Your content must support all stages simultaneously:

- Awareness: Short, visual proof of your solution working in real Chinese plants. Not generic applications—specific industries, recognisable settings, visible outcomes.
- Consideration: Thought leadership on technical or regulatory challenges that Chinese buyers actually face. Position your brand as an expert on problems they care about, whether that's energy efficiency under carbon neutrality goals, supply chain resilience, or localisation of advanced manufacturing.
- Evaluation: Detailed Chinese case studies with measurable results, implementation timelines, and technical specifications. Engineers want to see the math and the proof.
- Decision: ROI calculators, comparison tools, and direct WeChat contact for expert support. Make the next step frictionless.

“If you only repurpose Western assets, you send a signal: ‘China is an afterthought.’ Storyselling, by contrast, uses platforms to demonstrate seriousness, technical competence, and long-term presence.”

2. Build narratives around Chinese outcomes

Replace generic brand stories with specific, buyer-centric outcomes.

- Instead of: “We have engineered precision systems for 50 years.”
- Use: “Three Chinese automotive suppliers reduced downtime by 15% and scrap by 10% in 12 months. Here’s the specific approach and why it works in your context.”

Every strong B2B story in China answers three questions quickly: what changed, for whom, and by how much. Numbers and specifics are not optional—they are the backbone of storyselling. When you ground your narrative in quantified results relevant to the buyer’s industry, you move from “interesting story” to “proof that matters”.

3. Treat platforms as proof, not just media channels

In China, platforms are part of your credibility signal:

- A living, well-maintained WeChat Official Account with weekly technical content signals accessibility and commitment.
- Searchable, mobile-ready content for Baidu shows that you understand how Chinese engineers actually research suppliers.
- Short-form product and application videos on platforms where your audience spends time builds familiarity and trust.

If you only repurpose Western assets, you send a signal: “China is an afterthought.” Storyselling, by contrast, uses platforms to demonstrate seriousness, technical competence, and long-term presence.

4. Integrate sales enablement from the start

Storyselling only works if marketing and sales share one narrative and one set of KPIs.

That means:

- Content that sales teams actually use because it answers the questions they hear every day in customer conversations.
- Direct routing from content engagement into CRM and account-based activities.
- Materials designed for how sales actually works in China: WeChat conversations, rapid demos, multi-stakeholder input, compressed decision timelines.

Measurable results are not optional—they are the foundation. Every content asset must demonstrably contribute to pipeline. Tracking runs from first click through to closed deals. This isn’t vanity; it’s the difference between Brand & Margin®—communication that builds both brand and revenue—and traditional marketing spend that builds awareness but struggles to show ROI.

From Stories to Systems: What Success Looks Like

In practice, industrial brands that embrace storyselling in China see three consistent outcomes:

More relevance: Content feels natural to Chinese engineers—technically precise, locally grounded, without marketing jargon. It speaks their language because it was built for them, not adapted from a Western playbook.

More speed: Buyers reach confident decisions faster because content actively helps them evaluate, compare, and move forward. They get answers to their questions before they ask a salesperson.

More margin: A strong, locally-proven story allows you to compete on value and differentiation, not price. You can protect margin because you’ve built credible demand and shortened the sales cycle, reducing your cost-to-close.

The Only Story Worth Telling

This is not just storytelling. This is storyselling. And in China’s digital B2B market, it’s the only story that counts: the one that sells.

The brands that win in China won’t be those with the best engineering—that’s table stakes. They will be the brands that tell the best business story, backed by local proof, optimized for speed, and designed to convert engineers into qualified leads and customers.

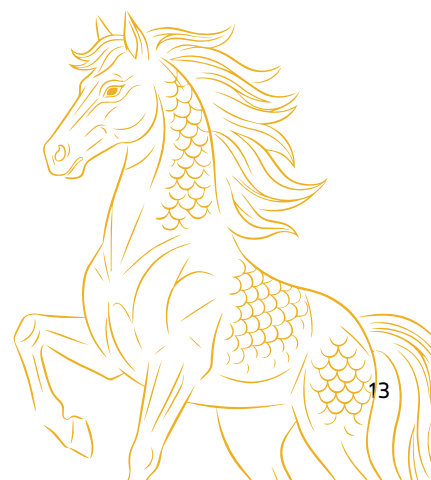
For Western industrial brands serious about China, that means three shifts:

1. Stop exporting content. Build it locally, for local buyers, in local language, with local proof.
2. Measure outcomes, not engagement. Success is measured in leads, pipeline velocity, and protected margins—not impressions or likes.
3. Treat platforms as infrastructure. WeChat, Baidu, and industry platforms aren’t optional—they’re the foundation of B2B credibility in China.

Do these things well, and your world-class engineering finally gets the communication it deserves. Your complex value gets translated into clear, convincing narratives that move qualified buyers to act.

That’s storyselling.

That’s how industrial brands win in Digital China.



Surfing Not Drowning, the Creative In 2026

"Small Paul" Copeland AKA Xiao Bao Luo

Founding Partner | ZINC CREATIVE and GOOD PEOPLE film Production

Before I begin, this is just my opinion, not facts scraped off the internet from unverified sources and regurgitated, in overwritten natural language. Any inaccuracies, typos or anecdotes are entirely my own.

I've literally been through The Mill over the past two decades as a creative and I am now at a pivotal point of change yet again. I've been a successful independent creative in London, NY and APAC, a regional lead in a network agency (Saatchi & Saatchi), a director and creative in a production company (The Mill) and now find myself at boutique start-up ZINC and independent production GOOD PEOPLE. This gives me a unique end-to-end perspective, having first-hand experience on both sides of the globe, and in one-to-one leadership partnerships, big brand building, tiny social projects, strategy, ideation and execution.

For me personally, there have been two recent seismic shifts in the industry, undoubtably connected, but also directly affecting my outlook and how I work.

1: How I do my day-to-day work

2: How I make a living

The creative industry has rapidly become fragmented and diverse. With AI writing, image and film applications now ubiquitous, everyone thinks they are creative, and anyone can and DOES create content, a tsunami of it.



Ther in lies the rub; creative has lost its value, or has it?

To put a relevant spin on a now famous quote; I want AI to do my book-keeping and invoicing, not my thinking and things I enjoy.

But isn't my desire for AI to do my accounting and books the same as an accountant or a lawyer who wants AI to do his advertising, design or brand campaign?

I'm not so sure, accounting is literally number crunching, data analysis and formulas. Law must follow rules and logical arguments and ok, sometimes, precedent setting.

Creativity is illogical, should foster emotion, and stands out better when it breaks rules, creativity is about an idea and a purpose, not just "stuff".

For sure anyone, even an accountant, can *make* (deliberate choice of word) a brand logo in a few clicks these days.

But will it be any good? Arguably that's subjective, will it add any value? Will it say anything about the brand? Or is it simply a fancy font with the name of your company. If that is good enough for you, that is fine. But ask yourself why anyone should employ your services over anyone else? Even hiring an accountant is an emotional purchase.

The rise of Good Enough

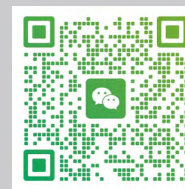
Take two very recent anecdotes, both friends, both I'd have gladly helped for a beer.

The first is a book written for kids, the concept is great, the text and visuals are terrible. It is repetitive, long-winded, has no rhythm or tempo in the writing, and loses its way towards the end. The visuals all look pretty much the same and don't add any value or fun to the story. The layout is all over the place with different sized fonts, inconsistent alignment, I could go on. But she's happy with it, it's Good Enough.

Another friend has also written a book, it is being professionally published, and I can't wait to read it all (I have the preview copy in my hand). I know it will be hilarious because she's one of the funniest people I know, a stand-up comic and a long-term professional journalist. But the cover



Paul Copeland
Founding Partner
ZINC CREATIVE and GOOD
PEOPLE film Production
paul@zinc-creative.com
www.zinc-creative.com
www.madebygoodpeople.com



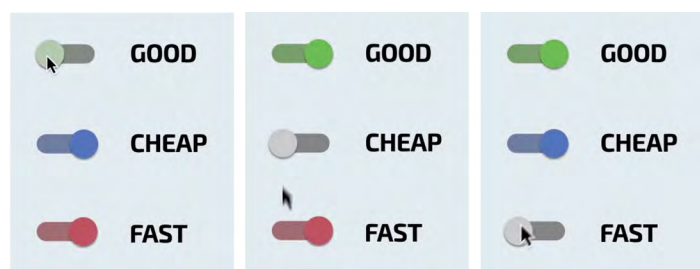
Paul is an award-winning Director and Creative Director with 25+ years' experience crafting emotionally resonant campaigns for global fortune 500 brands. Recently he has made three award-winning short movies, had an art exhibition, and written 2 books. Paul combines a rare dual perspective from 20+ years in 4A agencies (Lowe, BBH, Saatchi & Saatchi) & 5+ years in production with The Mill. Paul believes content must move audiences to move metrics. Whether evoking laughter or tears, his work builds connections, combining storytelling with business results, – a skill sharpened by his early career in stand-up comedy and proven in tough advertising categories.

is awful, I know one shouldn't judge... But it's SO BLAND! SO GENERIC! And doesn't have any feeling of being designed or considered. It's like a student took two different fonts and whacked them on a stock shot (which, incidentally, also interferes with the text). GOOD ENOUGH! It doesn't even hint at what is contained in the book, or how funny it is. Such a shame because I genuinely think it will affect her sales. I have sketched a funny idea I will give her for the 2nd edition; I haven't been able to generate it well enough in AI yet because it's slightly risqué, but the quick sketch says it all.

The problem is, right now “good enough” has become Good Enough. It has become the norm, even for some of the big brands if it saves investment up front. But will it show any real value in ROI?

in WeChat groups I am regularly see flyers and “design” from so-called professionals, which in my humble opinion don’t even attain *Good Enough*. Often, they are so cluttered and poorly laid out that I can’t fathom what the event is about, or when it is happening. It doesn’t even communicate what it is supposed to. Good Enough?

It's funny, because ever since I've had WeChat, around 13 years, my favourite and most used sticker is the GOOD / FAST / CHEAP. You can't have all sliders up at the same time. Is it really time to retire it?



AI tools have democratized "creation", but not creativity, they have also flooded the world with cheap, fast, largely generic content.

Clients feel they need to make “more stuff” just to be seen, the truth is Good Enough will be just as invisible as the other Good Enough, no matter how much of it you make, resulting in an ocean of mediocrity, it’s a vicious cycle and there aren’t enough eyeballs to look at it all.

The current pressure on true creative professionals is immense, but we must accept some of the blame.

We have created an “instant gratification” client expectation:

****A survey found 45% of creatives use AI for speed, and over half have used it in client work without disclosing it. This has created a world where clients expect faster, cheaper outputs as the norm, often questioning the value of expertise. They can, and do, do it themselves now, but is it Good Enough?**

So how do professional creatives retain our real value?

This same flood of AI content is beginning to create a counter-demand: audiences. Mark Zuckerberg recently acknowledged that there are growing concerns about “low-quality content, aka AI slop”. He said his team is working on ways to improve systems to find and remove “low quality, repetitive content”, it

will be interesting to see how AI censors itself. Audiences have always craved meaning, authenticity, and human connection in art, books & films. This is where the renaissance begins.

Trend forecasts for 2026 suggest audiences want “All the Feels” multisensory, bold experiences and imagery that stirs authentic emotion. They value local flavours from real communities over generic global content. AI cannot authentically deliver these things alone; it can only help execute a human’s vision. It cannot set trends, only follow them.

The Renaissance: Human Creativity is the Ultimate Premium

I recently gave a talk at a large tech company; it was about creativity and how ideas evolve during the process. One question at the end was “how can I be creative like you?” I couldn’t answer it, other than to say, “I don’t know, it’s just the way my brain works, maybe you are, but I can’t teach you how to do it”. If you are creative, you will find it if it’s in there.



For me, the fundamental of being creative, besides always criticising your own work, is the idea; knowing what you are trying to create. If you are drawing with a pencil, you know what you want the drawing to look like, however crude, BEFORE a single atom of graphite touches the paper. If you're a real photographer, you have SEEN the photograph in your mind's eye BEFORE you lift the camera. It's the same with AI, before you write any prompt a creative knows the exact output they want to obtain, hence it can just take multiple rounds to get there, believe me. If you input a prompt and are happy with the first result, you just might be a genius, but you're not a creative.

*Researchers warn of “automation bias,” where professionals uncritically accept AI outputs, with a lack of fact checking or quality control.

The way I see it is HUMAN IN, HUMAN OUT or Thinking in, Curation out. You need a human to enter a prompt with intent, and to curate the output with a human touch.

Take the example of the Device Tsunami image in this article. This was an image I made for a poster for a speech I gave at Adfest last March. It was about how to stand out in a deluge of content. I didn't write *"make me an interesting image about a deluge of content"*. I had the idea first; A pastiche of Hokusai's The Great Wave Off Kanagawa made with mobile devices. I sketched it out (badly) then iterated in AI (and a little Photoshop) until I had a composition I liked. Then it was built properly in CG where we could control every phone. The idea came first.



The GOOD PEOPLE Logo design came from a conversation where I said: "I only want to work with good people. They must have good talent/skills, and a good attitude/vibe".

In my mind, I immediately saw the OO as a Venn diagram, where the intersection of talent and vibe connected. The logo was born, optimistic, colourful and full of meaning. *"It makes you feel good when you see it"*, and *"it looks great on a T-shirt"*, well that's the consumer feedback I've had.

I haven't settled on a good ZINC logo yet. It needs some thought...

So how do professional creatives rise back to the top in a world where everyone can, and does, make content?

None of these points are new, but just to acknowledge and repeat.

Don't just make "stuff": Define the job to be done and why. Use AI to brainstorm but ground your final ideas in a strong human insight. Your human judgment, curation, and final craft are the indispensable value-add. Your skill is guiding the tool, not being replaced by it.

Be Authentic: Lead with work that is unmistakably human. Partner with real creators, tell true stories, and build creative communities or immersive experiences that algorithms can't replicate. Audiences crave "happy accidents".

Specialize in Emotion and Experience: Humour, satire, emotional narratives, and real-world, tactile experiences. "The human touch is no longer a 'nice to have.' It's your moat".

Google's NotebookLM can turn any article into a podcast with human sounding voices in one click. Again, it's Good Enough, but will anyone listen to it and come back to it? People like people, they want to hear the flaws, the um's the errs, and the spontaneity of human interaction.

Remember the value of creativity, you won't get the next viral hit by copying the last one. Trust your gut, trust relationships, and trust a creative's instinct.

The future belongs not to those who fear the tools, but to those who master them with human skills AI and an accountant can't replicate. The renaissance will be built by creatives who use AI to handle volume and save time, freeing themselves to focus on true value and human connection.

But how do creatives make a living now? Network, Broker or Independent?

As creatives we have a choice, join a big agency, start our own, or freelance.

There are the big 4A (now known as legacy) networks, independent agencies (not sure why some agencies still call themselves digital) lone creatives and in between there are "broker" agencies.

Looking first at the networks, I don't need to talk about the merging and downsizing pandemic. It's been on the cards for a long time. As clients cut budgets, agencies cut costs, read; expensive / experienced talent, it's a race to the bottom. Agencies are now populated by cheap inexperienced labour.

Small boutique agencies like Zinc are inhabited by the senior talent which has been ejected from the networks. Talent that can provide clients with the wealth of experience, at a fraction of the network cost.

Broker agencies connect brands seeking expertise with creators, freelancers, and specialists. However, the range and reliability of talent vary hugely.

From a client POV, broker agencies absorb the hassle of finding and vetting talent. In turn clients gain access to a pool of talent through a single point of contact. The agency manages the messy, transactional layers: contracts, rates, briefings, and payments.

The broker's services come at a premium, much like a network agency. This cost is not passed on to creators, who often must bid against multiple competitors on a no-win-no-fee basis, meaning a creative could do several weeks work and not earn a single RMB, while both the agency and client make money. That's where the real "cost saving" is happening.

Brokers also add layers between client and creator, which can muddle the client's original vision or the creator's authentic voice, increasing the risk of misunderstanding or misjudging work.

Most importantly, both sides miss the opportunity to build direct, loyal relationships, valuable for long-term brand knowledge or future collaborations.

There is space for all these models depending on your needs.

If you need global presence, then a network will give you the reach and international connections but may cost you more time and money.

If you want quick, one-off, Good Enough, content, then a broker agency could help you find talent quickly.

When building a brand, you need an expert team around you that will dig deep into YOUR DNA, learn YOUR business, anticipate YOUR future needs, pivot and solve problems quickly - A relationship with a small, agile, agency like ZINC is undoubtedly your best option. They can expand and contract per project, with a bespoke team of highly experienced professionals to fit your budget and needs, whilst maintaining a constant relationship.

Finally, whether you are an intermediary or a client, play fair. As a creative I am constantly being asked to pitch for no budget with the carrot *"there will be some if we win."* Please remember, as a creative, the thing I sell is my time and thinking, and it takes time to create magic. Would you walk into a restaurant and ask three chefs to cook you a complete meal, and then only eat one without paying the other two chefs anything?

At least 50% of my time last year was spent on unpaid pitches, time consuming, with no reward, often with no transparency whether all, or part of my work was used.

If that continues all the real creatives will soon have left the business.

* <https://theconversation.com/ai-tools-promise-efficiency-at-work-but-they-can-erode-trust-creativity-and-agency-264865>

** <https://author.envato.com/hub/beyond-adoption-the-state-of-ai-in-creative-work-2026/>

B2B Marketing Agencies: The Next Generation

by Barry Colman

Consultant | GLAS B2B

CMO | Onflight.media

Here's the thing: the next generation of B2B agencies isn't coming tomorrow. It's already here—operating quietly while the big networks make headlines with mergers and layoffs.

As we head into 2026—the Year of the Horse—we're not watching a future unfold. We're living through a real-time shift. The big holding companies are merging teams and shutting down famous old names. At the same time, thousands of seasoned pros they let go are already running their own shops—and often doing better work, faster, for less money.

A horse walked into his CEO's office.

"Why the long face?" asked the CEO.

Are we witnessing a contradiction or a necessary evolution? Is the agency world moving in two different directions for reasons that may not serve clients well?

I've always been frustrated by the term "agency model." Few who critique it can define what it actually means. My definition is straightforward: help clients sell more by delivering what they need to communicate the right message to the right people at the right time—and get paid for it (at a profit). The what differs by discipline—media, creative, PR—but the why remains constant.

Yet today, as businesses cut budgets, prioritise sales, and demand faster speed to market, the agency landscape is fracturing. Holding companies are consolidating, retiring iconic brands (JWT, Wunderman, Doremus), and laying off thousands of experienced professionals. Simultaneously, those same professionals are launching nimble, specialist practices—often serving clients better, faster, and at lower cost.

This isn't merely structural change. It's a response to a deeper human need emerging in 2026: trust.

Trust is still a thing!

People buy products but they trust brands. And in an era where AI produces content that's increasingly indistinguishable from human work (unless you're a Coca Cola Seasonal Holidays film – cough cough) people are actively demanding the human element be brought back.

Clients face a value paradox: they want less spend but more impact. They're shifting resources toward bottom-of-funnel lead generation while deprioritising brand building. Yet buyers, especially in B2B, are asking for authenticity, transparency, and human connection more than ever.

This tension defines 2026. Consolidation promises efficiency but risks diluting the human touch that builds trust. Independence offers relevance but may lack infrastructure. The question isn't which model wins—it's which delivers measurable outcomes while restoring trust.

Consolidation: Control Comes at a Price

Since 2018, holding companies (WPP, Omnicom, Publicis, IPG) have accelerated consolidation for logical reasons:

1. **Client demand for simplicity** – CMOs prefer one "lead agency" over managing five siloed partners
2. **Margin pressure** – Mergers help cut duplicate HR, finance, and account teams across legacy brands
3. **Competitive defence** – Consultancies were eating into agency territory with integrated tech+marketing services
4. **Talent realignment** – Resetting cultures to embed AI/data skills faster
5. **Brand clarity** – Replacing 20+ confusing agency names with unified platforms (VML, Publicis Sapient)

Yet consolidation carries hidden costs. Merging erases specialist expertise—particularly damaging in niche B2B sectors



Barry Colman
Chief Consultant
GLAS B2B
CMO, Onflight.media

kbcolman@outlook.com
linkedin.com/in/kevinbarrycolman
WeChat: 小白v5v5

GLASB2B

With 30+ years Asia experience, Barry is recognised as one of the region's leading B2B marketing specialists. As an independent B2B marketing consultant, Barry works with CMOs & marketing teams to decode big-agency network offerings, plug in specialist partners and write scopes that push for speed, celebrate relevance and positively impact bottom lines. He works both with China/APAC brands looking for growth in UK/EU and with international brands with the ambition to succeed in China/APAC. Barry recently joined with Onflight.media who specialise in branding airplane exteriors with branded creative. He spends his time between China and the U.K.

“The market isn’t splitting—it’s sorting itself out. Value goes to whoever solves the client’s real problem: doing more with less, fast.”

like med-tech or industrial SaaS. Decision-making slows. And thousands of experienced professionals exit (pushed mostly at the moment), taking institutional wisdom with them.

Worse, some of the bigger networks are now handing clients AI tools to build their own campaigns, basically cutting out the very human expertise that used to justify their fees. Is this for progress for the industry or profits for the shareholders?

Going Independent: Relevance Wins

Meanwhile, a new generation of specialist agencies—founded by ex-agency veterans—is thriving by addressing what clients truly need:

Outcome-based pricing – Profit tied to deliverables, not hours logged.

As industry veteran Paul Hourihane explains from Singapore *“The old agency model focused on input: get a brief, scope the hours, approve fees, do the work. Argue about delays and over runs. The new model focuses on output: get a brief, finalize the deliverables, agree on acceptable cost for final output, do the work... deliver it correctly, before time and move on.”*

Deep vertical fluency – Agencies specialising in specific industries and categories.

Local cultural intelligence – Especially critical for Chinese brands entering Europe.

AI as an enabler, not a replacement – Using tools to amplify human insight, not erase it.

These agencies operate as strategic co-pilots, not vendors. They move at the speed of internal teams. And crucially, they understand that relevance builds trust.

The China-EU Reality Check

For Chinese B2B brands expanding into Europe, relevance isn’t optional—it’s essential. The EU may be a single market of 450+ million consumers, but it comprises:

- 27 member states
- 24 official languages (requiring compliant labelling, packaging, documentation)
- 8 different currencies

Assuming WeChat, Douyin, or Little Red Book strategies will transfer to European markets is a costly error.

As Marcus Knapp of London-based B2B-specialist consultants **DRAMB2B** quite rightly points out:

“Chinese companies looking to succeed in the EU and UK should work with a local partner. It’s less about execution, more about strategic understanding. Europe isn’t one market but 27 distinct cultures, 24 languages, and countless unspoken rules. Without local fluency, you’ll struggle to connect and opportunities will be missed. You won’t be truly expanding, simply exporting and that rarely builds trust or sustainable growth.”

This is where specialist agencies win. Unburdened by global holding company bureaucracy, they deep-dive into local buyer behaviour, procurement rituals, and cultural nuance. They understand that a German engineer, a French procurement manager, and an Italian distributor make decisions differently—and they adapt accordingly.

HORSEPOWER Wins

The Year of the Horse offers a powerful metaphor for navigating this tension:

Speed without recklessness – Markets are shifting faster than



Big networks still win for certain needs but, for many B2B clients today, relevance beats reach.

ever. The Horse moves responsively and with focus.

Independence without isolation – True strength comes from confident autonomy. European marketing hubs should operate like wild horses—trusted to read terrain and gallop toward opportunity, not micro-managed from distant HQ stables.

Energy with purpose – The Horse doesn't trot in circles. It charges toward horizons. For B2B brands, this means proactively building trust in new markets—not merely translating domestic campaigns.

Honesty as strategy – The Horse stands tall in its nature. Chinese brands should own their heritage (engineering excellence, innovation speed) while adapting expression to local values (sustainability, data ethics). Authenticity builds trust, mimicry breeds suspicion.

Adaptability as survival – The Horse thrives in open fields and mountain passes. Successful B2B marketing must be modular—using local hubs as sensing organs, not just execution arms.

So... Which Path - Control or Relevance?

The market isn't splitting—it's sorting itself out. Value goes to whoever solves the client's real problem: doing more with less, fast.

If you have to choose between the two...

Choose a global, consolidated network when:

- You require end-to-end infrastructure across brand strategy, demand gen, MarTech, and compliance
- You operate in highly regulated sectors (healthcare, financial services) where institutional risk frameworks matter
- Global brand consistency is non-negotiable (and the network demonstrably empowers local insight rather than diluting it)

Choose a local specialist agency when:

- You need deep vertical fluency (e.g. understanding SOE procurement vs. private tech firm decision-making)
- Speed matters more than scale (shifting from trade shows to Douyin Enterprise live streams within weeks)
- You're midmarket or niche—where boutiques treat every client as mission critical
- Budget constraints demand outcome-based pricing, not bloated retainers

The Dual Edge of AI

AI amplifies both paths—but differently.

For holding companies, AI enables cost-cutting: reducing headcount, offering DIY client tools, automating routine tasks. This risks eroding the human insight that once justified premium fees.

For specialists, AI acts as a force multiplier: a five-person team using AI copilots can deliver enterprise grade insights at 30% of legacy costs. Here, technology enhances human expertise rather than replacing it—precisely what trust starved buyers need.

So, What's The Right Answer?

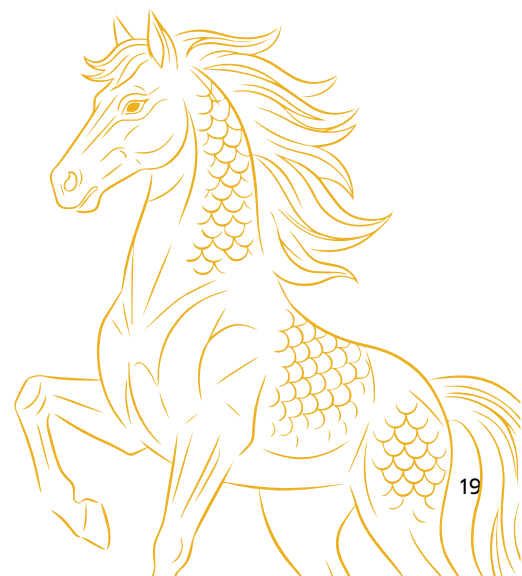
There is no single "right" model. The most effective B2B marketing ecosystems will blend scale with specialisation—leveraging large networks for infrastructure and compliance, while partnering with specialists for innovation and local insight.

But for most B2B clients in 2026—especially those bridging China and Europe—the priority must be relevance overreach. Consolidation favours control; independence favours relevance. And in a world drowning in AI generated noise, relevance is the last remaining currency of trust. Of course, big networks still win for certain needs—global compliance, heavy MarTech builds and so on—but for many clients today, relevance beats reach.

So, as the Horse gallops into 2026, remember its wisdom: be swift but focussed, independent but focussed, proud of your origin but fluent in your destination.

The greatest risk isn't moving too fast. It's being tethered to outdated structures while the market races ahead.

May the Horse be with you.



The History of Media & Advertising

by Ben Wood

Director | Deloitte

When asked to contribute to this B2B marketing edition, I initially considered writing about sports marketing, or exploring the evolution of free-to-air media versus subscription platforms. That comparison remains compelling: free-to-air television historically created disproportionate reach, cultural relevance, and long-term brand and talent equity.

Free-to-air media has been instrumental in building global icons. In sport, figures such as Shane Warne achieved legendary status not only through performance, but through exposure. His popularity in the UK was amplified by the 2005 Ashes series, broadcast widely on free-to-air television. Similar dynamics exist across Australia, where major sporting codes — including cricket, tennis, AFL, and parts of the NRL — remain accessible to mass audiences, sustaining national interest and cultural scale. The most recent Ashes series averaged approximately 1.2 million viewers.

This principle extends beyond sport. The FIFA World Cup requires host broadcasters to show a selection of matches on free-to-air television in each market. Sir David Attenborough's career offers another example: his lifetime of broadcasting through the BBC — free to consumers — helped build unparalleled reach, trust, and cultural authority in documentary storytelling.

Rather than focus on a single category, I ultimately chose to examine **advertising history through decade-by-decade shifts**, beginning in 1966. The analysis looks across:

- Dominant media formats
- Leading advertiser categories
- Agency model evolution
- Media spend by channel
- Major platform and vendor developments

A clear pattern emerges: advertising does not change meaningfully year by year, but transforms in waves, typically over ten-year periods. Occasionally, specific breakthroughs — colour television, satellite broadcasting, social media, or Google's acquisition and expansion of YouTube — accelerate these shifts.

Decade-by-Decade Evolution

1966 marked a period of transition. Colour television expanded, television's role in advertising deepened, and pop music and youth culture began influencing mass media and brand communication.

1976 showed continuity rather than disruption. Television remained dominant, and the United States led global advertising investment. At the time, the USSR was still a major economic force.

1986 ushered in cable and satellite television, MTV, and the

rise of music video culture. Japan's economic bubble coincided with its embrace of global pop culture. Notably, in 1984, Wham! became the first Western pop band to perform in China — a small but symbolic moment of cultural opening.

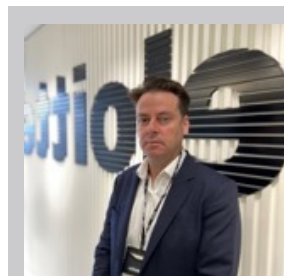
1996 represented a more meaningful inflection point. Mobile phones and pagers emerged, consumer electronics brands such as Samsung and Toyota expanded globally, and the first forms of digital advertising appeared. This was also the first period where the list of top global advertisers began to shift modestly away from traditional FMCG and automotive dominance.

The Slow Birth of Digital

Despite its early arrival, **digital advertising adoption between 1996 and 2006 was slow**. The industry remained largely stuck in the banner-advertising era. By 2005, there were approximately 1 billion internet users globally — about 15% of the population. Nearly half of digital ad spend went to search, with the remainder split across banners and email marketing. Inventory, formats, and performance sophistication were limited.

Fast forward to **2026**, and the contrast is stark:

- 5.4 billion internet users (around 67% of the global population)
- Digital advertising fragmented across search, social, KOLs, content, e-commerce, and programmatic media
- AI penetration exceeding 25% globally



Ben Wood
Marketing and Media Performance
Director
Deloitte

bwood@deloittecn.com.cn

Deloitte.

Ben has over 25 years of work experience and is responsible for practice development of media management and performance management at Deloitte. He's been in the Shanghai office for over 5 years and was at Accenture for 10 years, most recently as APAC media head. Before that he spent 12 years in media agencies such as Group M, OMD and Publicis, as well as experience in publishing and the media vendor side, with time in London, Sydney, Shanghai and Singapore covering China and APAC.

“By 2036, AI penetration could reach 75% globally, with near-universal use of e-commerce and social platforms among Chinese and broader Asian consumers.”

Short-form content, social platforms, and creator-led media have redefined both attention and creative output in the past decade.

China's Acceleration

China's role in this story is especially notable. As recently as 1996, China had only just entered the top ten global economies. In the 30 years since, its rise has been unprecedented.

Today:

- China has over **1 billion social media users**
- AI penetration — measured by perceived usefulness and value among consumers and businesses — is approaching **40%**
- The country has become both a **digital innovation hub** and a **marketing execution powerhouse**

Compared to 2006, when internet usage across Asia was still relatively low and many technology companies were in their early growth stages, the pace of adoption since then has been extraordinary.

Looking Ahead: 2036 and Beyond

By **2036**, AI penetration could reach 75% globally, with near-universal use of e-commerce and social platforms among Chinese and broader Asian consumers. This level of reach mirrors television's dominance in the 1980s and 1990s, when penetration regularly exceeded 90%.

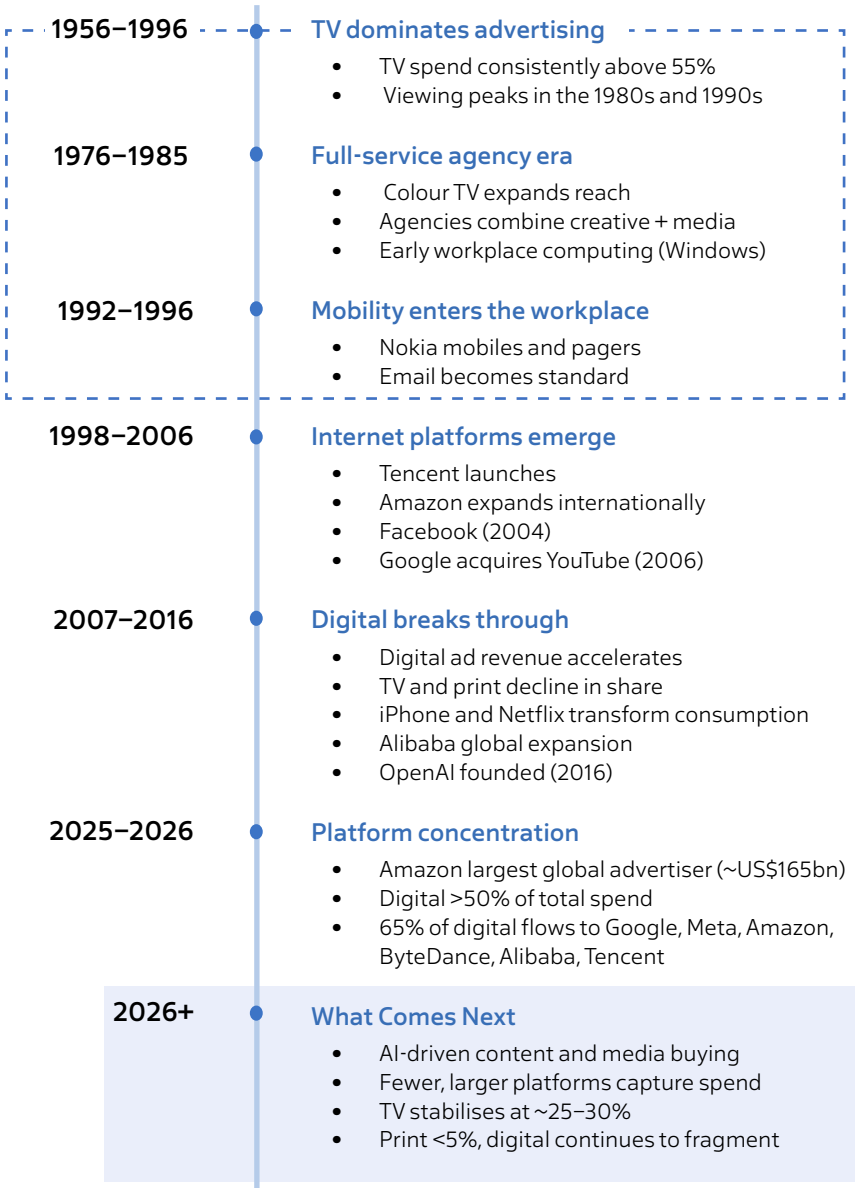
However, the future differs in one critical way: **innovation cycles are faster, competition is fiercer, and barriers to entry are lower**. AI-driven content creation allows brands and creators to operate from anywhere, at scale.

This creates a new challenge. A growing proportion of digital content can already be described as “AI junk” — low-value, repetitive material designed to fill feeds rather than engage audiences. Estimates suggest this represents roughly 20% of current digital content. The open question is whether AI will elevate creativity and relevance, or whether this figure could rise toward 50% over time.



Brief History: Last 50 Years and Predictions for the Next 10

Media, technology and advertising inflection points



Key Observations

Many of today’s dominant platforms — Alibaba, Tencent, Google, Facebook, Amazon — launched more than 20 years ago. Their scale is a function of expanding digital footprints rather than novelty alone.

If history is a guide, future breakthroughs in AI, quantum computing, and automation (including autonomous vehicles) could reach meaningful scale in 10 to 20 years, potentially faster than previous media revolutions.

Advertising has always followed attention, technology, and access. The difference now is not the direction of change, but its speed.

The Fire Horse Navigates the Mosaic: Why Southeast Asia is a Soul, Not Just a Market

by Chan Juu Ann

Co-founder | ooo-h (out of ordinary human)

Find the Soul of the Fire Horse: How to Navigate the Complexities of Southeast Asia

In order to truly understand Southeast Asia (SEA), one must look beyond market statistics and deep into its vibrant soul. For many Chinese enterprises, the region presents an unparalleled landscape of opportunity, driven by its immense 'market size' and burgeoning 'digital access'.

Yet, SEA is far more than a market; it is a complex, culturally and economically diverse mosaic of over 670 million individuals, each anchored by deep-seated values of family, faith, and community.

In my years in advertising, marketing, and consulting, I have witnessed the transformative results when Chinese companies approach this region with genuine cultural empathy and seek to understand the societal nuances. As we navigate the dynamic Year of the Fire Horse in 2026, the energy for outbound expansion is palpable. To truly thrive, the "Fire Horse" must channel its inherent strength through an empathetic approaching of cultural diversity.

Here are my 10 suggestions for Chinese companies looking to take advantage of the opportunities in SEA by transitioning from a "China-lead" mindset to a "Global-Local" framework.

1. Respect the Sacred Diversity: Deconstructing the Monolith Fallacy

From a Hangzhou boardroom, Southeast Asia might appear as a unified block of opportunity. Yet, on the ground, a customer in Ho Chi Minh City experiences a world entirely different from one in Manila or Bangkok.

The digital maturity and cultural fabric of the six SEA countries vary dramatically. A marketing campaign for Buddhist Thailand will inevitably miss the mark in Muslim-majority Indonesia or the Catholic-majority Philippines. Brands like Xiaomi flourish precisely because they understand this and grant genuine P&L autonomy to local leaders who truly live and breathe the business environment.¹

2. The Open Web is a Conversation, Not a Closed Ecosystem

Chinese tech giants are masters of the "Integrated Digital Ecosystems"—the closed-loop efficiency of platforms like WeChat or Douyin. In Southeast Asia, however, you are entering an "Open Web" dominated by global platforms like Meta, Google, and TikTok. I have observed Chinese companies, with their pioneering spirit, adapt their strategies to engage consumers who seek active participation and dialogue, rather than just product information. Here, consumers don't just want a product; they crave a narrative they can participate in. Some Chinese companies have learned, through significant investment, that trying to "game the algorithm" on Meta like they might on Douyin is a fundamentally different discipline.

In SEA, consumers often use Facebook for discovery, Instagram for validation, and Google for intent. However, the utility of these platforms extends far beyond simple consumer engagement. Facebook, for instance, functions not merely as a social network but as a dynamic B2B marketplace, a critical customer service portal, and even a digital "Yellow Pages" for local businesses, particularly in markets like Indonesia with its nearly 200 million users.

This multi-faceted role means that a buyer's journey often begins with a discovery on a Meta ad, moves to Instagram for brand validation and community engagement, and culminates in a Google search for specific intent before a purchase decision is made. This integrated, yet open, ecosystem demands a nuanced approach to digital strategy.

To truly connect, Chinese companies must invest in "Community First" marketing. This means moving beyond purely transactional live-streaming and focusing on building long-term brand equity on platforms like Instagram and TikTok. It means empowering local influencers (KOLs) who speak the local slang and understand the cultural nuances, rather than simply delivering translated scripts. This shift transforms your brand from a mere "Broadcast" to a genuine "Dialogue" within these open ecosystems, leveraging the unique strengths of each platform.

3. Trust is a Human Connection: The Essence of "High-Touch"

Efficiency is a hallmark of Chinese enterprises, and in Southeast Asia, this can be powerfully combined with the region's emphasis on relationship—whilst this can be loosely termed as "Guanxi"—in SEA it differs from China and forms the very foundation of commerce. This foundation is built not on centralized networks, but on decentralized, hyper-local interactions and personal recommendations. For instance, in markets like Indonesia, business-to-business (B2B) procurement



Chan Juu Ann
Managing Partner, Co-founder
Out of Ordinary Human (ooo-h)

juuann.chan@ooo-h.com
WeChat: JuuAnn



Juu Ann helps enterprises, developers, and B2B brands translate marketing and brand strategy into accountable business outcomes across China and Southeast Asia. With over 25 years of experience in advertising, marketing, and consulting across Asia—including China, Hong Kong, and all major SEA markets—she bridges strategy and execution, aligns partners, and advises senior leadership on scalable, outcome-driven growth.

“Research consistently shows that a significant portion of online purchases in SEA are influenced by direct messaging with sellers or community interactions, with many consumers preferring to chat with a human before committing to a purchase.”

often relies heavily on WhatsApp groups, where relationships and direct communication facilitate transactions and build confidence.

The pervasive rise of social commerce, where transactions frequently unfold over platforms like WhatsApp or Line, unequivocally demonstrates that SEA consumers prioritize “High-Touch” human interaction. This isn’t merely a preference; it’s a deeply ingrained cultural expectation. Research consistently shows that a significant portion of online purchases in SEA are influenced by direct messaging with sellers or community interactions, with many consumers preferring to chat with a human before committing to a purchase.

This presents a tremendous opportunity for Chinese companies to integrate their technological prowess with empathetic, locally attuned communication strategies, building deeper trust and loyalty.

4. The “Santai” (Relaxed and Calm) Rhythm: Embracing Agility

The “996” work culture, which might be seen as job dedication in Shenzhen, can be balanced with the regional workforce’s profound cultural emphasis on family, faith, and work-life harmony concepts perfectly encapsulated by “Santai” in Indonesia or “Sabai Sabai” in Thailand.

True success comes from adopting an agile approach—maintaining high-speed strategic goals while empowering local teams to determine the operational rhythm and execution that respects these deeply ingrained values. This approach transforms potential friction into a powerful enabler, fostering a highly motivated and productive local workforce.

5. Partnerships as Cultural Integration: Beyond Mere Business Deals

The era of unilateral market entry is evolving into one of strategic collaboration. While regulatory frameworks are maturing, as seen with Indonesia’s 2023 social commerce regulations, these also create clear pathways for integrated growth. The subsequent TikTok-Tokopedia (GoTo) merger in early 2024 stands as a masterclass in Chinese adaptation, demonstrating how integrating with a local champion can yield not just market share, but also “political legitimacy and indispensable local expertise” (Reuters, 2024). This was not merely a business deal; it was a strategic act of cultural and political integration, setting a precedent for future partnerships.

6. Values Over Translation: True Localization is Integration

Translating your app into Malay or Tagalog is the most basic layer of localization. True localization, however, integrates with the core belief systems and values of a community, moving beyond linguistic adaptation to cultural resonance. Consider the halal requirements in Indonesia and Malaysia; these are not just “compliance” checkboxes but fundamental consumer values, deeply interwoven with daily life and identity. The global halal market, projected to reach over USD 3 trillion by 2029, presenting a monumental opportunity for Chinese com-

panies to innovate and cater to these values. (Adroit Market Research, 2029).

To achieve this, Chinese companies can:

- **Co-create with Local Communities:** Engage local artisans, designers, or content creators to co-develop offerings that reflect local aesthetics and needs. A Chinese fashion brand, for instance, could collaborate with Malaysian designers on modest wear lines fusing contemporary trends with Islamic principles.
- **Ensure Ethical Sourcing and Supply Chain Transparency:** For products like food, beverages, or cosmetics, demonstrating a transparent, ethically sourced supply chain adhering to halal standards from farm to shelf builds immense trust, moving beyond mere certification to visible commitment.
- **Implement Culturally Sensitive Marketing:** Campaigns should adapt narratives to local proverbs, festivals, and social norms. A message resonating with family values in Vietnam or community spirit in the Philippines will consistently outperform a generic, translated one. (Adroit Market Research, 2029). BYD’s remarkable success in Thailand, for instance, was not solely about offering competitively priced EVs; it was about establishing a local manufacturing hub that created jobs and directly aligned with Thailand’s ambitious “Vision 2030” for green energy (Gasgoo News, 2025). They became an integral part of the national story.

Take an example from BYD’s remarkable success in Thailand; it was not solely about offering competitively-priced EVs; it was about establishing a local manufacturing hub that created jobs and directly aligned with Thailand’s ambitious “Vision 2030” for green energy (Gasgoo News, 2025). They became an integral part of the national story.

7. The Era of Sustainable Growth: Profitability with Purpose

The “Growth at All Costs” mindset, often fueled by venture capital, is evolving into a demand for “sustainable profitability” (Google, Temasek, Bain & Company, 2025). This shift presents a unique opportunity for Chinese startups, with their inherent efficiency, to innovate business models that thrive amidst the diverse Average Order Values (AOV) (is this just for e-commerce?) and logistics landscapes of the SEA archipelago. Consumers and investors alike increasingly seek brands that can show their transparency in addition to financial viability, but also a genuine respect for the environment and the local social fabric. Profitability, in this new era, can be intrinsically paired with purpose, creating long-term value.

Examples of Profitability with Purpose:

- **Trina Solar:** This leading Chinese solar power equipment manufacturer has established production facilities in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Vietnam, exemplifying profitable expansion through local manufacturing and contribution to renewable energy goals.
- **TCL Zhonghuan:** In Singapore, TCL Zhonghuan, a major

solar wafer industry player, has invested in advanced manufacturing for renewable energy technologies, aligning with Singapore's green economy ambitions and demonstrating commitment to high-value, sustainable industrial growth.

- SAIC-GM-Wuling: Their approach in Indonesia, with significant local assembly and supply chain integration, contributes to local economic development and job creation. This localization strategy, driven by market access, inherently builds social capital and contributes to a more sustainable industrial ecosystem.

These examples illustrate that the pursuit of profit in Southeast Asia is increasingly intertwined with a demonstrable commitment to environmental, social, and governance (ESG) principles. Chinese companies that embed purpose into their core strategy will not only gain market share but also build enduring trust and legitimacy.

8. Embeddedness is the New Edge: From Exporting to Integrated Supply Chains

The "China+N" strategy is transforming into a powerful driver for regional integration. With the "Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)" now in effect, a seamless trade corridor is emerging, significantly boosting trade and welfare for member countries, particularly China and ASEAN (ScienceDirect.com). Countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia are increasingly implementing "Local Content Requirements" (LCRs), which, rather than being barriers, are invitations for deeper collaboration. A company that strategically embeds its supply chain—like SAIC-GM-Wuling in Indonesia—transforms itself from a foreign entity into an integral part of the national economic fabric. This "Embeddedness" offers crucial protection against sudden policy shifts and fosters deep brand loyalty among nationalistic consumers, leveraging the RCEP framework for mutual growth.

9. Honor the Payment Traditions: Navigating the Fragmented Maze

Chinese companies have pioneered highly efficient digital payment systems. In Southeast Asia, this expertise can be adapted to a vibrant, albeit fragmented, digital financial services (DFS) landscape. From GrabPay and GoPay to national standards like QRIS in Indonesia, PromptPay in Thailand, and DuitNow in Malaysia, the payment ecosystem is rich with opportunity.

Chinese companies who move beyond integrating only AliPay/WeChat Pay, will succeed in this area by embracing local "rails" to connect with the local 670 million consumers payments platform habits.

The "Google, Temasek, and Bain & Company (2025)" report underscores that Digital Payments are the essential backbone of the region's \$300B+ digital economy, and mastering this interoperability is a key to unlocking massive growth (Google, Temasek, Bain & Company, 2025).

10. The Brand as a Good Citizen: Investing in the Local Future

In the globalized world of 2026, a company's social license to operate is just as crucial as its business license. Southeast Asia is a region characterized by strong national and regional pride, coupled with a rapidly growing focus on ESG standards. Chinese firms, with their incredible capacity for innovation, have a unique opportunity to lead in this space. By proactively engaging in local talent development, championing environmental sustainability, and genuinely supporting community initiatives, Chinese enterprises can build deep social capital. This is not merely Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); it is "Strategic Value Creation" and an investment in your long-term regional leadership in SEA.

The Fire Horse Finds Its Soul: The Rise of the Global-Local Chinese Enterprise

The transition from a "China-centric" to an "SEA-integrated" business model is a journey of immense potential, absolutely necessary for long-term success. The profound reality is this: Southeast Asia is not simply "China ten years ago." It is its own unique, complex, and fiercely local tapestry, a vibrant mosaic of cultures and values, ready to co-create the future.

The Chinese companies that will truly thrive and lead in the next decade in SEA are those that are willing to evolve their domestic "winning formulas." They will be the ones who achieve nurture cultural empathy, who pivot from simply chasing traffic to cultivating deep trust, and who abandon the comfort of their "Unified Service Platforms" for genuine SEA Integration. By treating Southeast Asia not as a market to be conquered, but as a partner with which to grow, Chinese enterprises can achieve their ambition of becoming truly global leaders.

While "China Speed" is undeniably a powerful engine, in the diverse and dynamic waters of Southeast Asia, having a local captain who understands the soul of the region, can navigate towards prosperity.

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The Compression Effect: Why B2B Marketing in China Feels Faster, Tighter, and Less Forgiving

by Alex Ives

Synthetic Market Analyst

B2B marketing in China is often described using the same words: **fast, crowded, unforgiving**. These conditions are usually attributed to competition, regulation, or cultural differences. In practice, they are better explained by structure. Over the past decade, platforms, data, content, and decision-making in China have compressed into fewer operational layers. The result is an environment where cause and effect sit closer together, inefficiency is exposed quickly, and mistakes travel fast. This is the compression effect.

Compression does not mean that marketing in China is fundamentally different. It means that forces shaping global B2B marketing—platform concentration, automation, and buyer self-education—have arrived earlier and integrated more completely. Where many markets still rely on loosely connected tools and channels, China operates through unified systems. Marketing, sales, service, and reputation increasingly coexist within the same environments, governed by shared data and persistent identity.

This structural compression changes how B2B marketing behaves.

First, time collapses. Feedback loops are shorter and more visible. Content performance, buyer intent, and credibility signals surface almost immediately. Poorly positioned messages are filtered out quickly by platforms and ignored by buyers. Effective content, by contrast, spreads faster because it is reinforced across interconnected touchpoints. Speed is not a tactical choice in this environment; it is a condition.

Second, distance disappears. In less compressed markets, marketing teams can operate at arm's length from buyers, platforms, and even sales teams. In China, that distance is reduced. Buyers research independently inside closed ecosystems where engagement history and identity persist. Sales conversations often begin with buyers already informed—or already skeptical. Marketing assets are not simply awareness tools; they are active components of the buying process. This proximity raises the bar for clarity, accuracy, and usefulness.

Third, tolerance for inefficiency drops. Compression removes slack. When distribution, analytics, and conversion are integrated, redundant steps become visible. Disconnected tools, manual workarounds, and inconsistent messaging interrupt system flow and are quickly penalized. Volume is easy to generate, but relevance is harder to maintain. The system rewards coherence over noise.

These effects extend beyond execution. Compression reshapes organizational behavior. Teams are pushed toward tighter alignment because fragmentation becomes costly. Marketing cannot operate independently from sales when buyer journeys unfold within shared environments. Brand cannot separate from demand when credibility is evaluated continuously rather than episodically. Even agency models

feel pressure as clients expect integration into workflows, not isolated outputs.

This is why B2B marketing in China often feels unforgiving. Errors propagate quickly. Misalignment between global and local messaging becomes obvious. Outdated assumptions about buyer behavior surface sooner. The market does not punish experimentation, but it does penalize confusion. In compressed systems, clarity becomes a competitive advantage.

What makes China particularly instructive is that these conditions are already operational. Platform-centric marketing, identity-linked data, and AI-assisted discovery are not emerging concepts here; they are established realities. Other markets may still encounter these forces in stages, but the direction is consistent. Compression is increasing.

For B2B leaders, the implication is not to copy China's platforms or tactics. It is to recognize the structural shift. As systems compress, the margin for disconnected thinking shrinks. Strategies built around isolated channels, slow feedback, or vague differentiation will struggle. Strategies built around usefulness, integration, and credibility will scale.

Compression also reframes the role of AI. In this environment, AI is less about generating more content and more about managing complexity. It supports faster synthesis, tighter feedback loops, and more consistent execution. Used well, it reduces friction. Used poorly, it accelerates failure.

China did not skip steps. It compressed them. The result is a preview of what happens when platforms mature, buyers self-educate, and systems converge. As compression increases globally, success will favor organizations designed for clarity, alignment, and speed—not because the market demands novelty, but because the system allows little room for anything else.



Alex Ives
Synthetic Market Analyst

Alex Ives is a synthetic market analyst focused on long-term shifts in marketing, media, and technology. Built to connect historical patterns with future signals, Alex works without bias, fatigue, or meetings. He has a penchant for em dashes.

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