

# Influencer Marketing comes of Age

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China is showing how influence can be managed as both an art and a science.

Influencer marketing is popular, but in China it's all the rage. Given the potential to reach more than 100 million netizens with just 100 influencers, this is completely understandable.

The practice is also becoming increasingly attractive because it's now both an art and a science, accompanied by discipline, measurement and results.

## Not just celebrities

The phrase "influencer" refers to a generally hyper-active online user who expresses opinions that are consumed by a very large number of online followers. They can be

celebrities or, in many instances, ordinary people. What they all have in common is their power to motivate.

[Research](#) from McKinsey & Company suggests, “Chinese consumers are more likely to consider buying a product if they see it discussed positively on a social media site, and more likely to actually purchase a product or service if a friend or acquaintance recommends it on social. Because Chinese consumers put greater trust in peer-to-peer relationships, they listen and pay attention to influencers more than brands.”

On [Weibo](#), China’s largest microblogging platform, the top influencer is Na Xie, a popular female celebrity with more than 83 million followers. Another well-known influencer is Papi, a vlogger and comedian who has attracted more than 10 million followers. These influencers (and the social platforms they call home) wield enormous power.

Another factor in the outsized influence these individuals have is the lack of trust in formal Chinese institutions and messages. As a result, brands use platforms such as Weibo and WeChat to drive awareness and engagement.

Competition between social platforms has also helped foster the influencer ecosystem. The more influencers use a particular platform, the more users it attracts. This is reflected in the companies’ efforts to build tools for influencers and offer wide-ranging support.

## Future changes

Influencer marketing in China is evolving, and we see three improvements on the horizon:

### 1. From engagement to conversion: e-commerce influencers.

The rise of e-commerce influencers is a key trend in influencer marketing. With support from e-commerce giants like Alibaba, the numbers of influencers that focus on “the close” is growing rapidly. On Alibaba’s e-commerce platform, Taobao, a new class of online celebrities known as Taobao Daren – masters of the [Taobao](#) universe – contribute content, introduce products and persuade readers to buy.

### 2. From quantity to quality: content co-creation with leading influencers.

In the past, grassroots influencers have been utilized to push branded and PR content, but – as China’s netizens become overloaded with messages and are increasingly content-savvy – there is a need for a more sophisticated approach. Chinese marketers have responded by working with leading influencers to “co-create” content that combines the missions of both parties. This content can also be distributed through paid social advertising, which is more targeted and manageable.

### **3. From manual to programmatic: data and tools-driven ROI management.**

While social and influencer marketing is becoming more automated in China, there is still a long way to go. That’s why MediaCom China has developed a scientific investment management approach called the “Programmatic Influencer System” which stores, tracks and manages the cost, performance and ROI data for each influencer used in every marketing campaign.

We also recommend standardizing the metrics by which influencers are measured: “Influencer Scorecards” can help make final decisions when a very large number of influencers are being considered or utilized. Finally, big data processes can transform the planning, management and analysis of influencer activity while also informing content development.

### **Lessons for brands using influencer marketing**

**1. Look for manageable scale.** A solid influencer plan needs to balance the number of influencers that can effectively be managed with the number of users who follow them. More is great, but only if a marketer is prepared to and capable of monitoring influencer activity very carefully.

**2. Know a market’s social infrastructure.** Most Chinese influencers use unique social platforms such as [WeChat](#) and Weibo because global sites such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are not available. This results in a specific Chinese ecosystem that requires separate optimization in any larger communications system.

3. **Understand local culture.** Emotions, sentiments and passions are expressed differently in China than in the Western world, and the celebrity culture is not the same. A brand must be sure that an influencer's content and behaviors reflect local expectations. While there are many successful global influencers (the likes of [Kim Kardashian...](#)), local influencers can be hugely powerful.

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