

The New Zealand Asia Institute (NZAI) undertakes research focusing on engagement with Asia, provides a forum for informed debates, and offers a bridge to Asia-related expertise and research within the University of Auckland.

Leveraging celebrity endorsement in collaborative online marketing in China

Specialist tourist websites like TripAdvisor are well known, but we know less about other social media marketing strategies targeting Chinese markets. A recent study sheds light on the strategy of governments and tourist businesses collaboratively marketing destinations like New Zealand to China by celebrity endorsement on Chinese social media.** The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews to investigate such an initiative by Tourism New Zealand (TNZ), with the aim of determining how local New Zealand tourist businesses could best leverage these campaigns.

In 2011 TNZ first recruited actress and philanthropist Yao Chen – sometimes dubbed “China’s answer to Angelina Jolie” – to visit New Zealand and blog about it on leading social media site Sina Weibo. Chinese tourists tend to distrust formal marketing institutions, and TNZ’s target was that market’s even harder-to-reach young, affluent “free and independent travellers” (FITs) segment. FITs matched the profile of Chen’s 12 million followers.

Coordinating with New Zealand tourism businesses, TNZ organised a tightly scheduled visit by Yao Chen, while also carefully accommodating the celebrity’s wishes. Serendipitously, Ms Chen later became engaged. This led to a second campaign in 2012 following her wedding, which she had chosen to hold in Queenstown, so positive was her first experience.

TNZ conducted an integrated virtual campaign in China, posting images and messages including itineraries and links to tourist operators and purchasable packages. Chen’s blog could not be controlled, but there was a cultural understanding that she would speak well of her visits as a gracious and grateful guest. She did. Her scores of posts, the reposts by other prominent Weibo users, and 390,000 comments from her followers afforded a reach that TNZ “could never afford to buy in a market like China”. Some 477,000 people visited its dedicated microsite.

The study contributes to the literatures on celebrity endorsement and collaborative marketing. Its results favour choosing a foreign celebrity the target market identifies with, rather than one from the destination, even though TNZ had first to explain to local collaborators just who Chen was.

The businesses that most successfully leveraged the campaign – whether official collaborators or not – captured themes emerging on the star’s network and worked these into their offerings or brand stories. An example was rapidly releasing honeymoon packages identical to Chen’s. Reportedly, travellers stuck closely to her experiences as their “script”. Crucial to success was closely monitoring Chen’s blog – in Chinese. Some businesses hired Chinese-speaking local graduates for the purpose.

Conversely, even campaign collaborators failed to reap rewards if they lacked linguistic and cultural capabilities. One implication of this research is the need for campaign-complementing initiatives like seminars and workshops to build such capabilities. Another is for government organisers to incorporate experiences in the celebrity’s itinerary that scale and yield multiple adjacent opportunities. Both imply government help to leverage opportunities; fortunately, in tourism, private and public interests often align.

**The full study results are available in an article co-authored by Benjamin Fath, Antje Fiedler, Zixuan Li and Hugh Whittaker: “Collective Destination Marketing in China: Leveraging Social Media Celebrity Endorsement”, *Tourism Analysis* 22: 377–387 (2017).

