

Can 'WeChat' with you? Engaging the Chinese travel trade online

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Social media is a major barrier for hoteliers when trying to attract Chinese guests – and the fact that all their social media channels, including the support and technical side, are in the Chinese language is only the beginning of the problem.

Just like in the West, Chinese travelers are heavily influenced by social media and the lifestyles promoted on them. Just like in the west content is king, in particular of the video and user generated type. And just like in the west, 'influencers' with millions of followers can make or break a destination or travel brand.

There is only one small but vital difference: all of the platforms or tools they use are completely different from ours.

At the core of the problem is the fact that the technology platforms they are used to using are all entirely different from ours. They can't access Google, Gmail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or even WhatsApp.

Instead they use three main social media channels: Baidu (a search engine), WeChat (WhatsApp on steroids) and Weibo (similar to Twitter).

This creates two headaches for hotels, or any inbound tourism service provider. Firstly how to market to Chinese audiences; and secondly for handling customer services via social media.

All of this means marketers don't just have to create Chinese language content, the content has to be actually on Chinese only social media channels too. Often this requires different formats, a whole different way of thinking even. To make matters worse, they aren't always so easy to set-up, as in some cases to start an official account you need to be a registered company in China.

Western hoteliers need to embrace the whole range of Chinese tools, Apps, websites and platforms that make up the travel ecosystem. In particular they should look closely at Qyer, with over 80 million subscribers, or the similarly popular Mafengwo. They are both comparable to TripAdvisor in that they feature user-generated content (UGC) and offer travel tips and advice – but additionally they actually sell travel content such as hotels and flights, so it is essential to have your accommodation available via their platforms.

Another popular site is Xiaohongshu, a cross between a shopping and lifestyle App popular with young travelers; it doesn't yet have a hotel booking function but they can heavily influence the choice of destination for travel, so gaining a presence in its content is essential (again, video is key).

At Hotelbeds we have been deeply involved in the China market for over a decade and it is now our fourth biggest source market globally – mostly providing hotel bookings for our American and European hotel partners from our network of Chinese B2B accommodation buyers such as travel agents, airline websites and tour operators.

To engage with these local B2B audiences in China we too are present in Chinese social media channels and you can follow us on Weibo ('Hotelbeds') and WeChat ('Hotelbeds Official'). Follow us to find out more?

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