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Chinese Culture and Generation Gap: What the West Is Missing



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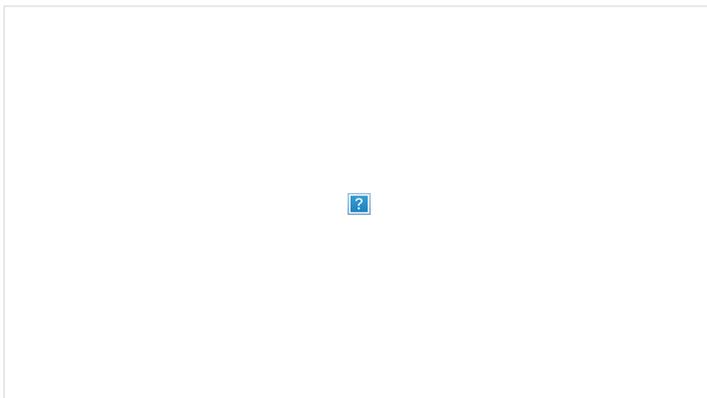
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Mary Bergstrom|Author, "All Eyes East"
Friday, 13 Apr 2012 | 11:02 AM ET

GUEST AUTHOR BLOG by Mary Bergstrom author of "All Eyes East: Lessons from the Front Lines of Marketing to China's Youth."

It is easy to be overwhelmed by China's massive numbers; its size and pace are unparalleled. China is expected to have a population of almost **500 million people** under age 30 by 2015; it claims about **46 cities** with more than two million inhabitants and went from 33.7 million **Internet users** to 513 million in one decade.

These numbers make jaws drop, eyes glaze over, and cause companies to look East for a life vest as demand stagnates and dips in the West. "If we could only get 1% ..." they plot.



Source: Amazon.com

All Eyes East: Lessons from the Front Lines of Marketing to China's Youth

But the math is deceiving. A combination of increasingly sophisticated consumers and intensifying competition (both domestic and foreign) requires a serious, targeted approach.

To have a chance at connecting, companies must understand who their consumers are, what is important to them, and how brands can help audiences achieve both tangible – and intangible – goals.

Brands are often teased into believing in a trans-border vocabulary of cool.

Trend-conscious youth in every corner of the world recognize and buy

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into international symbols of the tribe like Apple and Nike .

This compartmentalization is useful to a point but it does not take into account that culture influences people's motivation, processes, and meaning. Expecting young consumers in China to believe and behave like cohorts abroad is asking for an exercise in disappointment.

Failing to acknowledge a culture gap partly explains why some brand messages are not well received and integrated in China. Why do local retail teams seemingly refuse to project the globally-prescribed image and language? Why are there such significant gaps between target and actual consumer profiles? Why are consumers not using products the way they were intended?

These are all less than subtle cues, opportunities to recognize the need to take a step back and re-evaluate. If a brand wants to differentiate (which it absolutely must), it needs to stand for something specific, and understand what that value means for its consumers.

To find a resonant translation, companies need to account for cultural exceptions to the conversation. **Youth in China are unique for their unprecedented opportunity and expectation.** Born into an open economy under the one child policy, young Chinese have been swaddled with more income and access both vertically and horizontally in China or abroad. They are positioned at a historic crux, expected to share their privileged experiences in their communities and pioneer definitions of modern Chineseness.

In China, consumerism is not the dirty word it is in the West; it is a powerful symbol of modernity. Chinese understand consumption choices to be a standard part of building a reputation; the act of purchasing a well-known premium brand signifies that a consumer has not been left behind.

Unlike in politics, at school or at home, youth's opinions as consumers hold weight. Here, they are encouraged to develop expertise in flexing their personality and analytical skills. Supported by six family members and their own incomes, youth act as consumer pioneers scouting out new brands and passing on reviews to accrue social capital.

"In China, consumerism is not the dirty word it is in the West; it is a powerful symbol of modernity."

-Author, "All Eyes East", Mary Bergstrom

In the last few years, companies have recognized and projected forward complexities in the market. While brands used to lift and shift strategies from overseas, they are now recognizing the value of localization. The past few years have brought enormous shifts in how youth in China see themselves, their relationships, and their place in the world.

As companies recognize and even contribute to the conversation, opportunities for mutual benefit emerge. How can brands help the first wave of single men – and women – ease the burden of challenging tradition to aspire to a new ideal? How can a company help a young person feel their power to positively affect social change? And how can a brand encourage and even embody the spirit of entrepreneurship and flexibility required to succeed in an ever-changing China?

These opportunities for reflection and re-evaluation are not limited to the borders of mainland China; people and companies around the

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world are embarking on a journey of disruption and change. Lessons of flexibility, translation, and empathy earned on the front lines of China's dynamic youth market will find their way into all of our futures.

Mary Bergstrom is founder of *The Bergstrom Group*, an insights consultancy helping brands understand and connect with Chinese consumers. Her latest book is, "*All Eyes East: Lessons from the Front Lines of Marketing to China's Youth.*"

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