



# **UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM AND B2B ONLINE AUDIENCES**





Digital marketing in China is difficult.  
We make it easy.

## Who is Sinorbis?

[Sinorbis](#) is a multi-award-winning software company on a mission to bring marketing and selling to Chinese business buyers within reach for organisations around the globe by removing common market entry barriers through technology.

We provide businesses with the world's first integrated marketing platform to create, measure and optimise their Chinese digital presence, all the while offering:



**Accelerated speed to market** — launch your digital presence within weeks without having to jump the usual administrative hurdles.



**Reduced cost** — set up and manage digital marketing initiatives at a fraction of the investment previously required.



**Increased control** — get an integrated view of all digital initiatives in China.

Want to learn more? Contact us today!  
[www.sinorbis.com/contact](http://www.sinorbis.com/contact)

Proudly serving  
B2B organisations  
around the world







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# INTRODUCTION

When expanding into a new market, it's imperative to develop a deep understanding of local nuances and cultural particularities to inform your digital marketing strategy.

China is no exception.

As one of the largest markets in the world, China has a massive, engaged community of netizens. However, Chinese internet regulation has resulted in a unique digital ecosystem. Channels customarily integrated into a Western digital marketing strategy are unavailable or heavily restricted. This has huge implications if you are looking to establish or strengthen your organisation's digital footprint and build B2B online audiences.

In the past, on-the-ground brand-building through traditional offline sales and marketing activity, tradeshow and via Chinese partner organisations were key aspects of a China marketing and business development strategy.

To some degree, these marketing strategies remain important, but 2020/2021's global pandemic continues to limit international movement, rendering much of this type of marketing impossible, at least in the short-term. And, more importantly for B2B marketers, the preferences and behaviours of Chinese decision-makers have changed significantly in response to the pandemic.

According to a [McKinsey study](#), when selling to both SMBs and large enterprises, digital self-service and remote rep interactions are likely to become the dominant elements of the B2B go-to-market model. What's more, 90% of B2B decision makers expect the remote and digital model to stick around long-term.

This means that while once a digital strategy for B2B companies in China was more a 'nice-to-have' than a 'must', it is now critical for success in this market.

Understanding China's digital ecosystem is crucial to the effective formulation of this strategy.



## 1

## UNDERSTANDING THE CHINESE DIGITAL ECOSYSTEM

China is a leading global investor in key digital technologies. The size of China's digital economy surged from 15% of GDP in 2008 to 36.2% in 2019, with estimates it will be the primary driver of economic growth as soon as 2027. Driving this growth is a population of 'netizens' who eagerly embrace digital tech and are much more active on social networks and digital platforms than their Western counterparts.



## 1.1 How the ecosystem evolved

China's government initially played a crucial role in supporting R&D in China's digital ecosystem. This was partially a response to China's desire to create alternatives to the 'FAANGs'-dominated (Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix and Google) Western global digital ecosystem that would operate under the constraints of Chinese internet regulation.

As authorities allowed the evolution of government-sanctioned free enterprise, the 'BATs' — Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent — emerged. The BATs built profitable enterprises primarily around digital development and tech innovation. Key to their ongoing success was building ancillary digital businesses around their core business, with a focus on investing in tech startups and unicorns. Domestic alternatives developed by the BATs became the underlying foundation of China's digital ecosystem.

So, rather than Google, there's Baidu, Sogou and Shenma; rather than Facebook, there's WeChat; rather than Twitter, there's Weibo, leading to an ecosystem of 'walled gardens' providing end-to-end user services.

To successfully build a B2B brand and engage with Chinese business decision-makers, organisations wanting to penetrate the Chinese market must understand and utilise this finely integrated web of digital products and services.



## 1.2 Chinese digital channels and their role in the buyer journey

The global pandemic reinforced the importance of digital strategies as essential to ride out the disruption that came with being unable to market in traditional ways.

But even prior to 2020, organisations wanting to remain relevant, visible and competitive in China's burgeoning B2B market were already coming to understand that being across the nuances of China's digital ecosystem was crucial to engage prospective buyers.

This is not to say that having an on-the-ground strategy — attending trade shows, having local sales reps on the ground and building partnerships — has become irrelevant, particularly as we come out of the pandemic and international travel resumes.

However, to remain competitive in China's B2B market, these standard business development and marketing techniques need to be underpinned by a comprehensive digital strategy.

# The decision-making journey

Key to building this strategy is understanding the decision-making journey of Chinese B2B buyers and the digital channels and content types that are the most effective at each stage.

The table below maps the three stages of the decision-making journey with the relevant digital channels and content.

	Awareness	Consideration	Decision
Definition of stage	Buyer is aware of the pain point or problem but does not have a clear understanding of how to resolve it.	Buyer has understanding of the available solutions to overcome their pain point or problem.	Buyer is aware of solution providers and assessing best fit to meet their business needs.
Digital channel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Organic search</li><li>WeChat</li><li>Zhihu</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Organic search</li><li>Paid search</li><li>Remarketing</li><li>Zhihu</li><li>WeChat</li><li>Live chat on website</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Organic search</li><li>Email</li><li>WeChat group chat &amp; one-on-one chat with sales rep</li><li>Video meetings</li></ul>
Content type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Problem-focussed content (e.g. guides and how-to's) optimised for longtail keyword searches</li><li>Answering typical pain point questions</li><li>Webinars</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Solution-focussed content (e.g. product pages with clear benefit statements) optimised for solution keywords</li><li>Case studies proving effectiveness of solution in relevant industries</li><li>Product demo videos</li><li>Webinars</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Decision-focused content (e.g. comparative guides) optimised for brand keywords</li><li>Live product demo</li><li>Pricing page/proposals</li><li>Customer testimonials</li></ul>

As the decision-making journey shows, there are two platforms that are critical foundational elements to cover the digital B2B buyer journey in its entirety: a Chinese website and an official WeChat account. The content hosted on these channels provides important brand touch-points with buyers at every stage.



# Website

An optimised, well-thought-out website:



Establishes a powerful presence on Chinese search engines across the entire decision-making journey.



Cultivates trust.



Supports any offline activity in the market, such as tradeshow and networking events.



Establishes the foundations for other digital marketing activities, such as paid media campaigns.



Directly engages prospective buyers.



Can be integrated with your official WeChat account.

However, while having a website as the foundation of your digital marketing strategy may seem obvious, the devil is in the detail.

Crucial considerations when setting up this digital channel are:

- ✓ **Localising the site for the needs of Chinese buyers rather than just offering a translated version in Simplified Chinese;**
- ✓ **Optimising the site for Chinese search engines; and**
- ✓ **Ensuring load time is as fast as possible.**

## Sinorbis — a new solution for fast load time in China

For a long time, businesses that didn't already have a Chinese legal entity had to rely on the expertise of Chinese digital agencies to create and manage a website that can be accessed behind the Great Firewall. Unfortunately, for many businesses this often meant that owning a website designed to attract, engage with and sell to Chinese buyers was not financially viable.

Or, if they could afford to set up a website, a lack of transparency and language barriers meant they didn't feel they were in complete control of their brand.

Sinorbis is the first integrated digital marketing platform designed for Western businesses looking to market to Chinese audiences. Our hosting environment and coding are optimised to guarantee fast website load time in mainland China without the need for an ICP filing, while remaining compliant with Chinese and international laws and regulations.





## WeChat

Having an official WeChat account when doing any kind of business with China is as essential as a standalone website. WeChat's array of cloud-based sub-applications means it is no mere social media platform, and while rival platform Weibo may be trying to play catch-up, it has some way to go to match the ubiquitous nature of WeChat amongst Chinese netizens.

Some simple stats illustrate WeChat's importance:



In terms of set-up, creating a domestic WeChat account managed and owned by a digital marketing agency in China may at first glance seem like the simplest, most cost-effective solution.

However, this approach comes with challenges and risks. The agency-run domestic account means ceding autonomy to a third party to manage your WeChat activity. What's more, if you choose to take your WeChat account management in-house at a later stage, the agency you have employed legally owns the followers you have accumulated. This means that you may have to start the slow process of growing your WeChat followers again from scratch should you decide to go it alone.

Having a universal/official WeChat account removes these challenges but does take a little longer to set up and get verified. However, given how crucial WeChat is for engagement with prospective buyers, the effort required is proportionate to the potential benefits.

B2B marketing on WeChat comprises an entire subject in and of itself, which is why we created a comprehensive best-practice [guide to WeChat management here](#). We encourage you to download it if you're looking for a deep-dive on different WeChat functions and how to incorporate them into your China digital marketing strategy.



### Applying for a WeChat official account

As a preferred Tencent partner, Sinorbis can assist organisations with their application for a universal WeChat account.

Once the application has been approved, you can leverage our China digital marketing platform to publish your WeChat content, manage your followers, and analyse your performance through an intuitive English interface with built-in translation functions.





## 1.3 Common pitfalls organisations face when setting up Chinese digital channels

Given the intricacies of the Chinese digital ecosystem, there are an array of pitfalls to be aware of and avoid when establishing and then maintaining your Chinese digital channels.

**The eight most common pitfalls are:**

1. No dedicated website for China
2. Having a dedicated Chinese website not optimised for China
3. Your Chinese website is hosted under another entity's ICP filing
4. Having a personal WeChat account
5. Using another entity's official WeChat account
6. Reduced flexibility to make changes when a local China agency manages a website
7. Limitations in measuring Chinese digital marketing performance
8. Website structure and content is not optimised for Chinese search engines

### 1. No dedicated website for China

As previously noted, merely creating a translated version of your organisation's website limits its effectiveness in building brand and generating leads. This is primarily because China's regulated internet means frequently used Western platforms integrated into a standard website cause aspects of the site to be dysfunctional, affecting load speed.

### 2. Having a dedicated Chinese website not optimised for China

Chinese online browsing behaviour differs from the West. This means getting simple aspects of your site right, such as colour palette, navigation and connected social media platforms is essential. It's also important to note that not having a business licence in China or obtaining an ICP filing will render it impossible to host a website in China, leading to patchy load speed.

### 3. Your Chinese website is hosted under another entity's ICP filing

Hosting under another entity's ICP filing is illegal. This puts you at serious risk of your Chinese digital operations being discontinued, specifically via your website being blocked, which can be a very difficult and lengthy process to undo. There is also the potential for a negative impact on brand perception as a consequence of being blocked.

### 4. Having a personal WeChat account

The importance of having a WeChat presence cannot be understated, but setting up a personal account to reduce cost and avoid the red-tape of setting up an official account is a critical error. Such limits the functionality of your WeChat account and how it integrates with your website, ultimately impeding your broader digital marketing strategy.





## 5. Using another entity's official WeChat account

While using a local Chinese entity to act as a third party to manage your WeChat account is another way of getting around red tape, it also comes at a cost. Because the account is owned by a Chinese legal entity, if a dispute arises between you and the other party, the domestic entity holds all the bargaining chips as the legal owner of the account. And even if relations between the parties remain healthy, one of the main strengths of WeChat as a platform — its immediacy — is also impeded or foregone altogether with the loss of autonomy that another party managing your account brings.

## 6. Reduced flexibility to make changes when a local China agency manages a website

Enlisting an agency to set up a Chinese version of your website effectively means the agency retains full control of it. This loss of autonomy to make adjustments to your site has a range of repercussions. Look no further than 2020's global pandemic as an example of how important it is to be in complete control of digital channels, so you can quickly and regularly change information flowing through them.

## 7. Limitations measuring Chinese digital marketing performance

Without access to localised analytics, measuring digital-asset and campaign performance becomes impossible. This is particularly problematic when resources are poured into paid media campaigns that require detailed analysis to forward plan.

## 8. Website structure and content is not optimised for Chinese search engines

A high organic search engine ranking is one of the best and most cost-effective ways to reach Chinese buyers, so websites not optimised for Chinese search engines face becoming near-invisible in China's digital ecosystem.



# 2 BE CLEAR ABOUT YOUR CHINA B2B ONLINE AUDIENCE

Understanding the needs of your target audience is critical for effective B2B marketing.

And, despite the challenges thrown up by China's unique digital ecosystem, having this same understanding when it comes to B2B marketing in China is of equal importance.

Learning as much as possible about your ideal buyer, the challenges and objections of decision-makers, as well as the typical makeup of your buying committee, will not only help you come up with content ideas for your Chinese website and WeChat official account, it will also ensure your messaging is on point.



## 2.1 How to narrow down your target audience

To maximise both results and return from digital marketing investment in China, we recommend that organisations spend time clearly defining their target market. Even if there is no budget for in-depth market research, there are a range of indicators that may help in this process.

### 1. Insights about your existing Chinese customers

Any data you have on your current Chinese customers or prospects is a great starting point to help you narrow down your ideal target audience in China. Thoroughly investigate how they first learned about your organisation, and what products or services they are buying. If you don't keep this level of information in your CRM, consider running an incentivised survey or customer interviews to better guide your targeting approach.

### 2. Analyse the marketing activity of your partners and competitors in China

No matter whether you are still in the early stages of your organisation's expansion into China or if you have been working in the market for decades, it's likely that you will be able to gain useful insights about your target audience by investigating the marketing activity of your partners and competitors in China.

#### Key information to gather includes:

- What roles are your competitors targeting?
- How have they adapted their messaging to meet the needs of the audience?
- What digital channels are they leveraging to reach and engage with their target audience?
- Do they always have a booth at a particular trade show?

Answering these questions will give you useful insights about the behaviour of your target audience and should be considered in your marketing strategy.

#### Pro tip:

Sinorbis' digital marketing platform gives you access to built-in search marketing analytics tools. This allows you to track and compare your company's search performance with up to five competitor websites for up to 500 keywords. It's a great way to not only understand how sophisticated your competitors are when it comes to digital marketing in China but also to get the insights you need to outrank them.

### 3. Existing partnerships between your region/city and provinces/cities in China

Even if you don't have any business partnerships in China (yet), your region or city may have partnerships or affiliations with provinces in China to facilitate trade, investment and cultural exchange. You may be able to leverage these to your advantage by targeting businesses in these regions if they are a good match for your product or service.



## 2.2 Addressing all stakeholders in the decision-making process

B2B marketing is traditionally very focused on targeting messages and initiatives directly at the decision-maker. However, B2B buying decisions are far more complex and often involve the input of a number of different roles in the business.

For your digital marketing channels in China, this means you need to develop content that effectively addresses the needs of all of your different stakeholders.

On the next page, we have outlined five roles that are typically part of a B2B buying process, including characteristics to help identify them and content requirements that will alleviate concerns and objections in the sales process.



Buying role	Characteristics	Content requirements
<b>Champion</b>	<p>Wants to drive innovation in the organisation — and be recognised for it (e.g. through a promotion).</p> <p>Can be a good internal ally to get the deal across the line.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Case studies</li> <li>• Testimonials</li> <li>• Product reviews</li> <li>• Industry insights</li> <li>• Blog posts on leading edge innovation in the sector</li> </ul>
<b>Decision-maker</b>	<p>Risk-averse — also likely to be the budget holder. Responsible for bringing all stakeholders in on the decision.</p> <p>Wants to see results from investment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget/ROI calculator</li> <li>• Case studies showing measurable results</li> <li>• Overview to help understand what they can expect from your organisation's sales process and who will need to be involved</li> </ul>
<b>End User</b>	<p>The person who will be using your product/ be your main point of contact for project management in service delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demo videos</li> <li>• Training &amp; user groups</li> <li>• High-quality technical documentation</li> <li>• Blog content with tips and ideas to maximise results from new tech/service</li> </ul>
<b>Executive Sponsor</b>	<p>Senior leadership with a vision for international collaboration and partnership that will advance the goals of the organisation.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry thought leadership content</li> <li>• Independent industry insights</li> <li>• Awards, certifications and accolades that demonstrate your organisation's expertise</li> </ul>
<b>Legal &amp; Compliance</b>	<p>Can be an IT or legal role. Responsible for 'dotting the i's and crossing the t's', but also wants to add value to the process.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Internal FAQ document to make it easier for your sales team in China to answer technical/ legal questions</li> </ul>



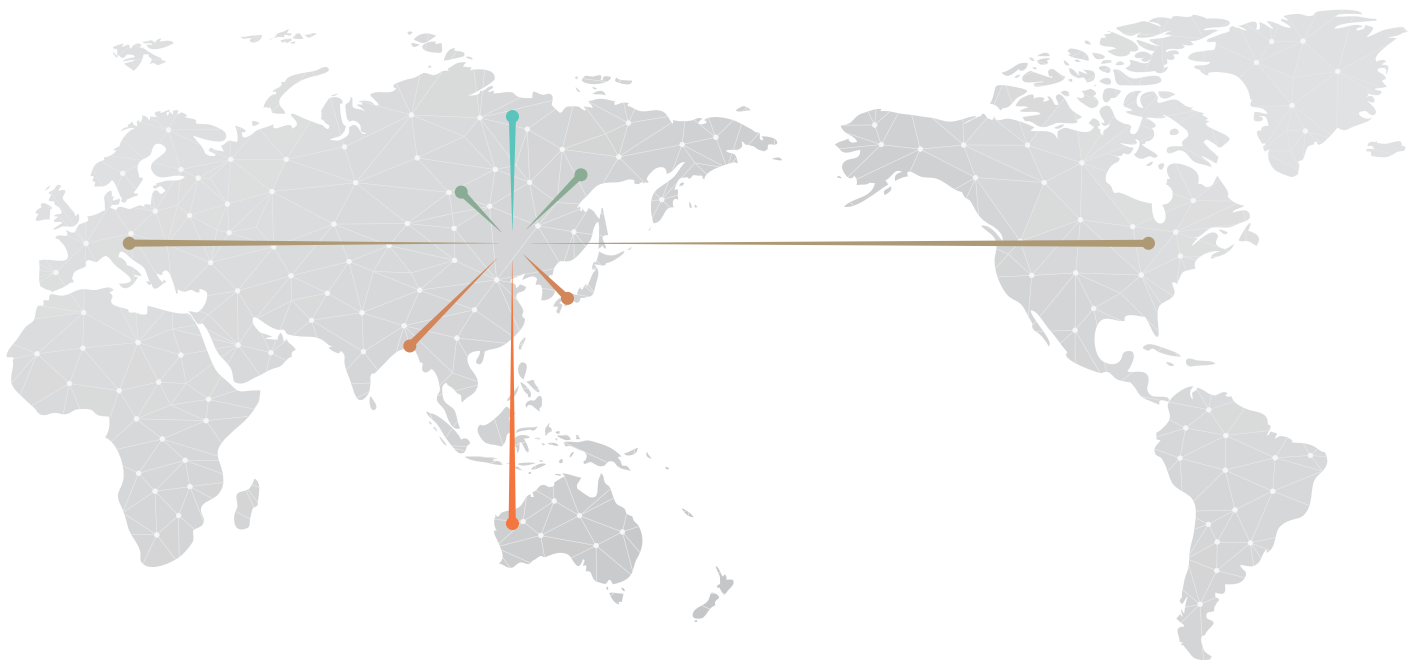
## SUMMARY

In summary, understanding Chinese internet regulation, and learning how to reach out to and engage with your B2B target audience in a completely different digital ecosystem, means that setting up a digital presence in China can be overwhelming.

However, developing a comprehensive China digital strategy around this unique ecosystem and understanding of China's B2B online audiences increases the chance of success, while also helping set realistic internal organisational expectations.

The ability to drive results depends on making a 2–3 year minimum commitment underpinned by concrete goals, with a strategic, well-thought-out plan on how to achieve these goals based on optimising digital assets and how they interact with the Chinese digital ecosystem.





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