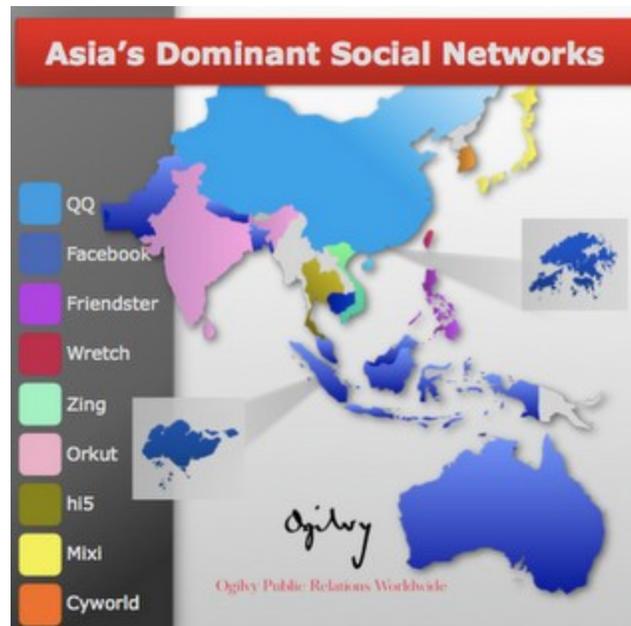


THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2010

Social Media in Asia: Where are the Emerging Opportunities?



Last night, I had the opportunity to attend a [socialmediatoday](http://www.socialmediatoday.com/webcasts/184500) webinar on "Social Media in Asia: Where are the Emerging Opportunities?" (For the webcast and slides, visit: <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/webcasts/184500>) What follows is a re-cap of the highlights, but the key takeaways that came out of the webinar are the following:

- **Culture is hugely important** - In order to succeed in Asia, you must have people on the ground who understand the social media ecosystem for that country and can help you to navigate it.
- **Mobile devices will be the primary source of access** for a lot of people because broadband access is not always available. So compatibility with mobile devices is hugely important.

- Face-to-face interactions are still paramount.

The speakers for the webinar were [Thomas Crampton](#), Asia Pacific Director of 360 Digital Influence for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide, [Peter Auditore](#), head of SAP's Business Influencer Program and a Senior Fellow at the Society for New Communications Research, and [Robin Carey](#), CEO of socialmediatoday. They began with comments from Crampton on scale - he said there are 338 million "netizens" (citizens of the net) in China versus only 62 million in France (as of a report from 2009) and also greater than the population of the United States. However, the top social networks in China are not the familiar ones in the West - Qzone has 183 million users, Xiaonei has 40 million, kaixin001 has 30 million, while Facebook only has 0.4 million. Crampton observed that the government is very savvy in China - [Twitter is blocked](#), but Google Wave is not. He also noted that [Friendster used to rule Asia](#), but now Facebook is "romping across the nation."

Even within Asia though, the digital ecosystems are very diverse. The US may be seen as the home of Web 2.0, but Asians are more involved in using social media in their daily lives in a way that we're not, with Korea leading Asia in terms of actual social media engagement/involvement. Crampton has found that there's no useful distinction anymore between the online and offline worlds in many of these markets. He added that Chinese people have [been using the online space](#) for a long time now, mostly on blackboards.

Carey handed the floor over to Auditore, who talked about some research he recently conducted in terms of the purchasing process in China. He said that they found that customers will have the most influence over the next 12 months, with vendors having the second highest jump in influence. The research also indicated that boards and public relations/media people are losing influence. People will look online in a big way when doing their research on purchases. However, [Michael Pranikoff](#) commented via Twitter that the chart indicated that blogs and microblogs seem to have a low influence in China in regards to channels for purchasing decisions. Auditore added

that the things that are hot in China right now are online events and colleagues/peer networking online.

Carey asked the panel whether China becomes isolated because they ban sites like Facebook and Twitter. Crampton said that as more sites are blocked in China, domestic replicas of these Western tools are being created. China is creating its own ecosystem of social media tools. Crampton added that despite the ban, there are people in China who are still using Twitter, citing a tweetup he had hosted the night before that was only publicized through Twitter and was well-attended.

The discussion then moved to talking about the ways that Asian countries are using social media, and Crampton said that even if Korea is the most wired country in Asia, they are still resistant to using social networks for commercial purposes. In Malaysia, there's more use of it, but it's considered to be a political space, so companies have been pushed out. This was one of the first key indicators of the webinar that culture, and having someone local, are extremely important when attempting to deploy a social media strategy in Asia, so that factors such as these are understood.

At this point in the webinar, Carey introduced a poll so the attendees could vote on which country they were most interested in hearing more about during the session. The attendees agreed they would have liked to have been able to vote for more than one, but the results showed that of those who voted, 45% were interested in China, 30% in Japan and 18% in India. The panel continued to focus on China, but because of the requests from Tweeters, they also included comments on some of the other countries in the region.

With respect to China, the panel commented that they've been able to build a great broadband infrastructure there, and they lead in internet users as a percentage of the population in Asia. India hasn't been able to develop the same level of broadband infrastructure, so the mobile device is becoming the primary way for people to go online. Because this is also true in other countries, social media tools need to be easy

to navigate on mobile devices. In Japan, mobile phones are already a huge part of people's online lives, and it's heading that way in India and Indonesia, because it's the only way to get online there. Crampton mentioned that [Orkut](#) is the largest social network, in terms of visits per month, in India.

Because of the increasing importance of social media around the world, Carey commented that "global corporations need to realize that they're really social media companies." She asked if companies realize this and how it affects their business. Crampton said that the digital diversity in Asia can make it difficult for companies to replicate the social media efforts that they're using elsewhere. He added that in Asia, people are much more willing to pass on brand messages if they find value in it for themselves.

Auditore asked whether government intervention in China will prevent the evolution of social media peer groups. Crampton said no, because the Chinese government is very practical about what they block. They see the internet as a "motor for the economy" and so would be unlikely to block these types of groups. He also mentioned that in Korea, he sees a bursting of the dam in terms of companies using social media, because there's such a high level of involvement there already.

[Amitha Amarasinghe](#) asked from Twitter about the opportunities for entrepreneurs in Asia, specifically in the BPO sector. The panel agreed that BtoB opportunities for entrepreneurs do exist, and used [Alibaba](#) as an example - they're a giant marketplace in China, and are an example of a great use of social media to connect buyers and sellers. [Alibaba beat out eBay in China](#) and Crampton commented that "China is the graveyard of Web 2.0 initiatives from the Western World." In terms of BPO in India, there are also entrepreneurial opportunities, such as for round-the-clock services and mobile application development. Crampton noted that it's essential to understand Asia and the differences, and cited local insight as being key. [Anina Abola](#) agreed on Twitter, saying that "it took a while for culture to come into the conversation. VERY important thing in Asian market."

Carey asked the panel how Western-based companies can use social media to market to Asia. Crampton answered that it's necessary to have people on the ground on both sides, and still meet people face to face. Auditore recommended moving slowly - listen first, build communities where the growth is, and provide value where customers need it. "Sell without selling," he added. Crampton agreed with him and said that culture and context are both extremely important. He emphasized that you "can't execute a social media strategy in Asia remotely." It's important to be agile and able to adjust your strategy, and to understand that the importance of social media in people's lives is different in Asia than it is elsewhere.

If you're interested in learning more, Thomas Crampton said via Twitter that he often posts statistics and trends in the region [on his blog](#).

So what does this mean for law firms? The takeaways from this webinar say it all - local knowledge is essential, and not just that garnered from webinars and research. The ILN has favored that approach since our inception, as we're modeled on the idea of having strong local firms in our Network who understand how to do business in their regions and what their clients want, both culturally and professionally. Law firms interested in developing a social media strategy in Asia should work with their local affiliate firm, if they have one, or a local consultant who can help them to navigate the various digital ecosystems and learn what will be most effective.

Another key piece of advice imparted by the panelists was Auditore's suggestion of taking things slowly. While I'm a proponent of playing around with some of the new social media technology to get used to it and start to understand how best to use and leverage it, it's equally important to listen - both domestically and abroad. Find out what people are talking about and find the right places to connect. In the US, it might be Facebook and Twitter, as well as through blogging, but in India, it's Orkut, and in China, Qzone. Listening also helps to give you an idea of what the social norms might be for that country and social networking platform in particular before you



jump in and start connecting with people.

But for any social media strategy to be effective, it's important to take it offline. As I mentioned following the Legal Marketing Association conference, [relationships are key](#). We've heard time and time again from our member firms in Asia that face-to-face meetings are very important to them, with one of our Chinese attorneys going so far as to say that he wouldn't refer business to someone that he hadn't met in person. So any social media strategy for business must take that into account - for a great post on how to build a rapport with your clients, see Heather Milligan's [most recent post](#). Social media technologies are not just tools to build a database of casual acquaintances - they're a jumping-off point for developing meaningful professional and personal relationships that can lead to new business when leveraged correctly.