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Tongue-tied ad trend with trilingual taglines

By Sarah Mishkin

Feedback?



Only in places as international as Hong Kong would trilingual advertisements with wordplay in two alphabets be anything but a linguist's pipe dream.

Sina Weibo, China's leading microblog, wants to expand its audience in Hong Kong but it faces competition from Facebook, which is banned on the mainland.

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Not only that but the Mandarin site must win over the local Cantonese-speaking population, who write Chinese differently and sometimes mix in a little English for added "cool" factor.

The answer: boldly coloured wraparound ads on 150 buses that shout out "Wei!" ("Hey!") in pixelated roman letters.

Weibo means "microblog" in Mandarin, but "wei" also happens to be Cantonese slang for "hello".

The ad's tagline - "Come to Weibo and share your enjoyment" - is equally punny. Rather than write out in full the Chinese characters for "share your enjoyment" (pronounced funheung in Cantonese), the first syllable, "fun", is written in English, followed by the Chinese character for enjoyment.

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For the ad's bilingual target audience, the wordplay intends to emphasise the fun aspects of personal blogging and gives the mainland Sina brand a jolt of Anglo-Hong Kong hipness.

Weibo's ad might seem unusual for using three languages to connect with a Cantonese-speaking audience. But Hong Kong is no city for language purists. "It's so hard to have a conversation [in Chinese] without any English words," says Sandy Chan, Hong Kong executive creative director at Ogilvy & Mather, the advertising agency behind the campaign.

It is a classic example of the challenges for brands seeking growth in foreign markets. Deciding how to make ads appeal to local audiences goes far beyond hiring a translator who specialises in particular languages.

And it is not just Hong Kong that has a history of muddled languages and cultures that poses a challenge for advertisers.

Given that the Arab spring started in Tunisia, advertisers are trying to play on Tunisians' pride in their national identity. French and Arabic are widely spoken in the former French colony, while English is increasingly prevalent and trendy. For local brands, connecting with the local market requires mimicking closely the uniquely Tunisian melange of those languages.

An ad for local drink Boga Cidre that started running last week uses the catchphrase "Think Tounsi" with taglines that mix colloquial Arabic and French (Tounsi is Arabic for Tunisian). "The whole point of the campaign was that people here are mixed between the oriental world and the occidental world," says Nicolas Courant, the creative director in Tunis for Mamac Ogilvy, which devised the ad.

One image in the campaign shows a young woman in a strappy white tank top and giant hoop earrings walking down a local street. The tagline reads "I always look trendy but I buy my clothes at the *fripe*", using Arabic for all but *fripe* – French for a second-hand market.

The choice to use French, English and Arabic is not meant to be "the core idea of the creative stuff", says Mr Courant. "It's just the way people speak."

But then there are ads that use the audience's presumed familiarity with foreign cultures to just have some fun. One for Berlitz language school in Israel designed by Grey Group spelt out the word "yes" in English, French and Hebrew against a red, white and blue background: "Yes Oui Ken". (It ran in late 2008.)

Multilingual marketing tomfoolery is unlikely to sell mass-market products to non-immigrant locals in the UK or US, but in places such as Hong Kong or the Middle East, where the normal medley of languages is a bit more complex, the strategy just might work.

C'est compliqué indeed.

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