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Chinese Net stars tapped by brands
Web fame leads to endorsement deals

By [✉ Normandy Madden](#)



Back Dorm Boys appear in Pepsi Max spot by BBDO, Shanghai

SHANGHAI--China's fascination with the internet has sparked yet another commercial trend as its most popular bloggers and podcasters, or "net stars," are turning into brand champions for marketers like PepsiCo, Sony Ericsson, Motorola Corp. and the semiconductor company, Advanced Micro Devices.

Net stars "allow advertisers to attach their brands to some star power at a fraction of the price of mainstream celebrities," said Jeremy Goldkorn, co-director of Standards Group, an independent ad agency in Beijing and a veteran of China's media industry. "We will see more of this, especially in China where mainstream media tends to be very boring and not very good at discovering new talent."

Brands that can associate themselves with distinctive and popular web personalities, agreed Tom Doctoroff, JWT's area director, Northeast Asia & CEO, China in Shanghai, "can kill two birds with one stone. They can project more extreme, Western-style modern individualism while, at the same time, ensuring peer endorsement."

With more than 77 million broadband users, China's bloggers are doing more than posting comments to online bulletin boards (BBS). They are uploading video and audio content that can turn them into celebrities overnight.

That's exactly what happened to Huang Yixin and Wei Wei, two sculpture students at the Guangzhou College of Fine Arts in southwestern China, after they uploaded scratchy home movies of themselves lip-synching songs from the Backstreet Boys like "As Long

As You Love Me," while a third roommate, whose face is seldom seen, plays the popular game "Counter Strike" on his computer. (To view the "As Long As You Love Me" video, click on this www.youtube.com link.)

The satirical videos of the talented young men, called the "Back Dorm Boys," are both hilarious and impressive, and have created a huge following in China that has led to sponsorship deals with brands like Motorola and Pepsi.

The U.S. handset maker tracked the pair down to help market their mp3-enabled phones and mobile music platform in China with a lip-synched video of "Radio In My Head" by Pu Shu, a mainland pop star, that shows the men using its phones. In a co-promotion with Tom.com, a Hong Kong-owned web portal in mainland China, the Motorola campaign, created by Ogilvy & Mather, Beijing, invited consumers to submit their own lip-synch efforts to Tom.com, generating millions of responses.

Pepsi also teamed up with the Back Dorm Boys by hosting the pair's webcam videos on its Chinese web site (www.pepsi.com.cn) and featuring their lip-synching talents in a Pepsi Max TV spot created by BBDO, Shanghai.

The Back Dorm Boys also "spoofed our football campaign theme song 'DaDaDa' [and] acted out some scripts for the Pepsi Creative Challenge," said Chris Pan, Shanghai-based marketing director, interactive & new initiatives at Pepsi's beverages business unit in China. (See [Pepsi contest puts consumers in charge](#), *AdAgeChina*, May 18, 2006.)

"Pepsi is always looking for individuals and properties that represent the brand's 'Dare for More' spirit. If some internet stars' talent and image--cool, hip, entertaining, innovative--fits our brand, then we may choose to work with them in a way that fits the net star's style and Pepsi's equity," Mr. Pan said.

The Back Dorm Boys' success, and the fast growth of China's blogging community, has spawned marketers' interest in hiring net stars for a range of brands.

In a country with vast geographic and cultural differences, web surfers "believe the internet brings them closer to people who are interested in the same things. It echoes the popularity of reality TV. Young Chinese are now accustomed to deciding things, they know what they want and want to choose their own stars. Marketers want to be a part of this environment," said Michael Darragh, digital influence strategist for China at Ogilvy PR, Shanghai.

Sony Ericsson, for instance, has signed up Tianxian MeiMei, a famous blogger on Tom.com and Tianya.com bulletin board sites, who has gained wide appeal as a sweet, rural young woman from Sichuan province.

AMD hired a movie star, Xu Jing Lei, to appear in a TV spot, but the ad used blog-specific language that recognized her status as China's most influential blogger rather than her fame as a popular actress. ((To view the AMD ad, click on this www.youtube.com link.)

"The whole premise of the commercial is based on the idea that with the AMD processor, you can post blog comments faster. This is represented by the Chinese social media term, 'grabbing the sofa,' the term used to describe the effort to place the first comment on a blog or BBS post, a point of pride for many," said Sam Flemming, CEO of the Chinese BBS monitoring service CIC Data in Shanghai.

Adidas Group made a series of films that were only released online and featured a duo similar to the Back Dorm Boys performing madcap stunts. They also turned up at games played by the Chinese men's and women's national volleyball teams, which are sponsored by Adidas. And Wm. Wrigley Jr. Co. enlisted four hip brand ambassadors--a pair of fashion designers, a comic book artist and a graffiti expert--who are well-known in their respective circles to inspire Chinese teens to submit their own work in an online fashion-design contest. (See [Wrigley gives Juicy Fruit an edgier image](#), *AdAgeChina*, July 12, 2006.)

Part of the appeal of these net stars is "basic context," said P.T. Black, a partner at the youth marketing consultancy Jigsaw in Shanghai. "The internet is a thoroughly integrated part of young Chinese life. They use it for everything, and it is their preferred destination for everything from entertainment to information and even socializing. So it is a place where kids are accustomed to look for new things."

Mainland China had 123 million internet users at the end of June 2006, up 19.4% from the same period in 2005, according to China Internet Network Information Center; 28 million of them frequently visit blog sites. China has 788,400 web sites. Of that total, 90,000 were added in the first half of 2006.

But Mr. Darragh said the really incredible number is how much time they are spending online: "200 billion hours online each week in China, compared to 129 million hours in the U.S.."

About 35% of online Chinese are aged 18-24, and 19% are between 25 and 30. They tend to be urban, college-educated and relatively affluent, but the exposure of net stars in China far exceeds the web community.

"Net stars are much more mainstream in China than the West. Ask the average white-collar worker in the U.S. if they know the [American blogger] Star Wars Kid, they probably won't. Ask a Chinese white-collar worker if they know Back Dorm Boys or [early Chinese net star] Fu Rong Jie Jie, they most likely will," said Mr. Flemming. They are also some of the most popular online searches. Many "are even more popular than Chairman Mao Zedong."

The popularity of net stars has even influenced mainstream media. The "Garfield 2" film, for example, was panned by mainland critics but became a cult hit through savvy dubbing. Instead of using two actors to

voice Garfield and his British sidekick, it used one actor who differentiated the two cats by making one talk in "netspeak" that resonated with young Chinese.

The 10 most-searched people on Chinese search engine Baidu.com:

1. Yu Wang Nu Shen* (Nicknamed the "Goddess of desire," is being positioned as a new competitor for Er Yue Ya Tou)
 2. Er Yue Ya Tou* (The hot "net calendar girl" in recent months)
 3. Huang Jianxiang
 4. Furong Jie Jie* (An early net star, she's still popular, but has never achieved commercial success)
 5. Guo Jingming* (No. 11 blogger on Sina.com, and well-known Chinese author recently accused of plagiarism)
 6. Cong Fei
 7. Han Han* (No. 5 blogger on Sina.com)
 8. Gao Ying Ying
 9. Mao Zedong
 10. Zhang Yimou
- *Denotes net star

Source: CIC Data (July 17, 2006)

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