



YINTONG TALKS WITH...

Dr. Kevin Lin OBE



FROM time to time, I am asked by companies to 'translate' their company name into Chinese to enable them to market their brand in China. I always explain the reasons why this can't be treated as a simple task, and emphasise the importance of researching the market thoroughly to minimise any cultural confusion. Who better to discuss this subject with than Dr. Kevin Lin – author, university lecturer and owner of KL Communications, whom I met recently?

Dr Lin has a PhD in Linguistics and has often interpreted for Prime Ministers – and even the Queen – during high profile visits to China and when receiving their Chinese counterparts back in the UK. In my opinion, he's the best interpreter around. Clearly others share my admiration, as Kevin was recently awarded an OBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours List for his services to UK-China relations. Knowing how modest Dr Lin is, I don't think he whispered his request

to the Queen when he was accompanying her to China!

Dr Lin shares my frustration about the tendency of companies to over-simplify the process of branding themselves in China. One frequent approach, he told me, is: we use the same brand name everywhere else in the world, why should China be any different?

"Well, China is different" Dr Lin asserts. "To start with, it is the second largest economy in the world and with its size, huge population and such great business potential, there is no market on a similar scale. And, as its global position continues to strengthen, more and more trade and investment opportunities will arise. Having brand names converted into culturally acceptable, linguistically appealing characters becomes a commercial imperative that no company can afford to ignore."

"Secondly, the Chinese language works very differently from any languages that use Roman letters" Dr Lin added.

Distinctively, you don't 'spell' Chinese words and there is no link between how a word is spoken and how it is written. Each Chinese character has a meaning, but put them together and the meaning of the phrase can be transformed. Furthermore there are four different tones to each sound and each sound can be written down in different characters. Together with the other innate issues with a language such as colloquialism, innuendo, connotation and euphemism, this seemingly simple issue becomes even more complex. Clearly, the process of naming in China should not be undertaken lightly.

Dr Lin and I also agreed on some of the best examples of Chinese names. 'Coca Cola' is a shining example of best practice. In Chinese it is pronounced 'Ker Kou Ker Ler', which means: 'delicious for the mouth and pleasurable'. To combine a very similar sound to a set of relevant, if not perfect meanings like this, together with Chinese characters which are shaped in a similar style of font to the English logo, this brand has become an exemplar for brand naming in the industry. Other successes include: B&Q (Bai An Ju, meaning 'hundred, comfort, living'); Mercedes Benz (Ben Chi, 'galloping like a horse'); and Ikea (Yi Jia, 'cosy homes').

It is not always possible to convert a brand name into the Chinese characters that embody both the sound and meaning perfectly. However, whichever name is chosen, it should be linguistically appealing and strike a chord with the target

market. A good Chinese brand name can transfer the original brand equity into the Chinese market, whilst at the same time adding a valuable local dimension.

Of course, a company's marketing strategy should also enhance their brand names. Dr Lin suggests that trademark registration should be carried out as early as possible, protecting the brand name and logo from other competitors. But, he says, the name issue is only the start of a company's strategy to engage with a Chinese audience.

So what would Dr Lin and I recommend to Western decision-makers who do not speak Chinese?

Work with a marketing expert with specific expertise in marketing to China. Ensure your partners fully appreciate and understand your company's philosophy and your brand objectives

Research thoroughly. Before and after the brand name is created, research the market including the perceptions of all potential stakeholders, consumers and suppliers

Seek legal assistance on trademark registration and other legal implications of use of names and brands.

And remember, a good brand name may not determine the success of a business but in today's commercial world it cannot be taken anything other than seriously.

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"Cosy homes."



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