



Isobar China Group is Runner-Up for 2016 International Agency of the Year

Globally, Isobar puts a focus on what it calls "brand commerce" – essentially, that means moving campaigns closer to the point of transaction. With the growth of digital and e-commerce, the thinking goes, there's less time between the moment customers are exposed to a brand's message and the moment they buy its product.



That concept has extra resonance in China, where e-commerce has exploded, new brands flood online sales channels and consumers often make impulse purchases based on what's online.

So how is Isobar China Group putting the brand commerce concept to work in campaigns? For Durex, it helped the condom line create an online social commerce platform where people could order packs of condoms with horoscope packaging and personalized messages on them; the messages had clever Chinese-language double entendres ("Just Do It" was one), and generated big buzz on social media.

For Japanese retailer Uniqlo, the agency set up mirror-like digital screens in stores; people trying on clothes would pose in front of them and see themselves on vacation in far-flung locales. Then

they could share the snapshot on social media. The campaign drove in-store and online sales, and more than doubled the brand's number of fans on social app WeChat.

"Agencies have really been shying away from directly contributing to commerce because it's not conceived as sexy, it's not conceived as something creative," said Jane Lin-Baden, CEO of Isobar China Group. "But yet, it is very critical and fundamental to brands' success in China."

Isobar China Group's inventive campaigns buck that stereotype. And 2015 was a great year for the digital agency, with organic revenue up 44% despite the slowdown in the Chinese economy.

It boosted staffing by 29% last year; part of the Dentsu-Aegis network, the agency now has nearly 1,000 people in four agency sub-brands, spread across six cities in China. Unusually for a digital agency, it launched a 15-person brand consultancy in 2015 to help clients solve business questions beyond just campaigns.

Clients are evenly split between international players and local ones, such as Alibaba's Taobao online marketplace, telecoms giant Huawei and internet giant Tencent. That balance is important.

"By working with local brands, you are exposed to stronger local insights and different types of services model requirements," said Ms. Lin-Baden, an Ad Age Women to Watch China honoree in 2015. "It helps the agency to have a much more holistic view about customer need."

International clients include KFC, Adidas, Shanghai Disney Resort, Procter & Gamble and Coca-Cola. For three summers, Isobar China Group has helped shape "Share a Coke," each time giving it a new spin -- first putting popular local nicknames on labels, then song lyrics that could be shared digitally, then famous movie quotes.

Each campaign kept upping the ante: sales were up 20% year-on-year, then 6% on top of that, and most recently up 11%. (McCann and Starcom also work on that campaign.) For 2015's movie campaign, Isobar did fun augmented reality tie-ins; people could add a "Jurassic Park"-like dinosaur to their video clips.

Going forward, the agency is working on projects where it will share revenues with clients; one example is "Iso-Patch" for sick children, which transmits children's temperature data to parents' smartphones and connects them with a pediatric medicine platform online. (That product, a proactive response to a pharmaceutical client's need, isn't yet on the market.) Revenue-sharing seems to be an especially big opportunity with local Chinese entrepreneurs, who might rather share revenue than have a fixed cost.

"They want the agency to take risks as well, to be frank, but they are open to higher revenues for agencies too," said Ms. Lin-Baden. "They want the agency to have skin in their business. And as an agency we are open to doing that."