

## **DEVELOPMENT OF EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES IN USING WECHAT IN MARKETING**

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### ***Abstract***

With the development of mobile computing, the focus of the marketing media has shifted from traditional media to social media. We are no longer solely reliant on the newspapers, radio and television for marketing. In fact, people are inclined to go online on social media every day. One of the popular social media today is WeChat. As a mobile app, WeChat has been widely used for social networking and business purposes. Due to the lack of literature in developing effective strategies in using WeChat in marketing, the present study serves as a groundwork to explore the subject matter in Malaysia. This study investigated the strategies on how to use WeChat as a marketing tool to create awareness of self-branding, which leads to enhanced relationships and increased sales. To conduct this research, qualitative method which involved observations and interviews was used to gather the data. Observations in WeChat groups and WeChat Moments were carried out. Thirty interviews were conducted to elicit the ideas or beliefs from WeChat users who are micro e-marketers. All the data collection was subsequently analysed using content analysis. Results indicated that effective WeChat marketing strategies are composed of four main aspects and they are labelled as WeChat followers strategy, WeChat self-branding strategy, WeChat Moments strategy and WeChat groups marketing strategy. This exploratory study contributes a fundamental knowledge about strategies of using WeChat marketing to address why people buy from you and not others. The research results provided insights into how WeChat can be used as a platform to establish, keep and satisfy the customers; create job opportunities for society and overall, bring welfare to the nation.

***Keywords*** - Micro web marketer; Qualitative; Social networking; WeChat; WeChat marketing

## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

Today, in the mobile Internet era, we are addicted to smartphones and Internet. This phenomenon had prompted many people to start venturing into online businesses as the micro e-marketers in Malaysia. Micro e-marketer (“*Wei Shang*” in Chinese) is defined as the individual who starts selling their products or services on the Internet or social-media (Master Xi, 2016).

Internet-based businesses actually have existed for ages as the platform for buyers and sellers to meet up. It places leverage information technology to match buyers and sellers with increased effectiveness and lower transaction costs, leading to more efficient markets (Bakos, 1998). As marketers today, we are fortunate to have a huge number of free and low-cost online services to give us insights about our customers, competitors and markets. They also help fuel our marketing by delivering automated relevant, real-time communications integrated across desktop and mobile and digital plus traditional marketing channels (Chaffey, 2016). According to Jack Ma, a famous Chinese business magnate in successful Internet-based businesses, the best business in the world will be being the micro e-marketers where sales can be closed anywhere anytime regardless of work or play. Jack Ma never expected how quickly Tencent’s WeChat would challenge Taobao marketplace, operated by Alibaba Group (Yang, 2016).

WeChat (“*Wei Xin*” in Chinese) is a social media (instant messaging, commerce and payment services) mobile application that emerged in 2011 by Tencent Holdings. By 2015, the platform boasted some 600 million daily-active users (Bao, 2015). By 2017, it was one of the largest standalone messaging apps by monthly active users, with over 963 million monthly active users (Frater, 2017). Its tremendous growth over the years disrupted the telecommunications business, by replacing the need to send SMS, and even replaced the need for phone numbers, as people share their WeChat IDs, rather than phone numbers or e-mail addresses (Kontsevaia & Berger, 2016). This is where mobile marketing starts to evolve tremendously and becomes the latest acclaimed marketing strategy.

WeChat provides a platform for such online businesses to be made possible where people have more time to enjoy their lives through the concept of working from home. Nowadays, with the invention of smartphones, we are in the time of

mobile social networking (Bergstrom & Backman, 2013). According to Bill Gates, there are basically two types of people on the net: One who spends money on the net; one who makes money on the net.

WeChat has not only allowed the micro e-marketers to interact with the customers, but also allowing the customers to interact with other customers. It is also used to convince customers that the company's products or services are good (Neti, 2011). WeChat is China's equivalent of WhatsApp, Facebook, and PayPal, all combined into one app (Kontsevaia & Berger, 2016). It is widely known as one of the world's most innovative and versatile app, as well as China's "App For Everything", with numerous unique functions and platforms ranging from 'payment' to 'social media' to 'services' to 'shopping' and more, that are equivalent to multiple Google Play or App Store's apps, but merged into one (Chao, 2017). At the same time, WeChat groups share the contents with their friends as well as the contents that users see with their circle of friends (Tang, 2014). Despite the usefulness of WeChat as another social network marketing tool, little is known about the effective strategies in marketing by using WeChat. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore effective strategies in using WeChat in marketing to address why people buy from you but not from others besides exploring the best time of putting the ads in WeChat using qualitative approach. It is believed that such a study will be a significant precursor to further determine effective marketing strategies using WeChat.

## **2.0 THEORY**

### **A. *Social Media and Social Network Marketing***

Social media are computer-mediated technologies that facilitate the creation and sharing of information, ideas, interests and other forms of expression via virtual communities and networks. WeChat, an online community that targets to provide a space for people to communicate, has now become a well-liked channel for brand marketing (Hassan, 2014). This social networking platform does not only provide users with the option of expanding personal network, it also provides a platform for the business people to interact with potential customers (Blackman, 2009). Hence, social media are affecting the marketing phenomenon. Currently, there are many different industries who are advertising their products and services through social media. Through social media, big businesses can do better and small business can become better known without putting much investment on advertising (Zarrella, 2009). Social media have become one of the most favoured marketing strategies used by the business people around the world (Hird, 2013).

Social network marketing is a marketing involving online communities. The communities in the social networking sites are large and the gathered users often

share similar interests (Jadhav, Kamble & Patil, n.d.). Unlike the traditional marketing strategy, social network marketing requires marketers to be more attentive to customers to build a better image and relationship with customers (Erdogmus & Cicek, 2012). Many international companies acknowledge that social network marketing is a potential marketing platform (Neti, 2011).

### ***B. WeChat and Its Usage***

WeChat is a free application and free chatting app which provides instant text and messaging services for smartphones and tablets. WeChat provides the public platform to enlarge one's circle of friends, post news feeds and other functions. Users can simply add friends by shaking, searching numbers, sweeping QR code and viewing the people nearby to increase the networks on the friend circle. Users can send voice, videos, images and texts in an instance to their friends on circle to share about their views and experiences. They can use WeChat groups to easily share the contents with the members of the groups.

The first thing that many people do when they wake up in the morning is to have their smartphone. As such, where the people are is where the opportunities lay, that is on the smartphone, thus on WeChat! Reflecting back on the olden days, people used to have physical shops, then they have slowly shifted to having online websites. Furthermore, nowadays, transactions could be done simply via WeChat, even payment could take place in WeChat. According to Pony Ma, Tencent CEO, WeChat has hit 1 billion monthly active users worldwide during the quarter 4 of 2017. Sixty percent of Malaysians use their WeChat at least 10 times daily. (Fong, 2016).

## **3.0 METHODOLOGY**

Observations and personal interviews were deemed the most useful qualitative approach in collecting the data for this research. Observation in WeChat Moments and WeChat groups were carried out. 30 respondents who were the micro e-marketers were predetermined for interviews. Before the actual interview, interview questions were being checked so that they are clear enough for respondents to give relevant responses. Funnel approach, beginning with broad questions, such as 'Could you tell me why you use WeChat in marketing' and ending with specific question about the best time for putting ads in WeChat moments for better effects. The interviews took place from June 2017 to December 2017. Interviews were conducted at the respondents' convenient meet-up places, including respondents' homes or quiet cafés and even mostly via online WeChat to ensure their comfort. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Transcripts were later checked for consistency against audio records (Kurasaki, 2000).

#### 4.0 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of 30 respondents. The age range of the respondents is from 18 to 40.

Table 1: Respondents' Profile

Variable		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	10	33.33
	Female	20	66.67
Residence	East Malaysia	15	50.00
	West Malaysia	15	50.00
Micro e-Marketer Status	Full Time	10	33.33
	Part Time	20	66.67

Based on the empirical results from interviews and observations, it implied that effective WeChat marketing strategies can be classified as WeChat followers strategy, WeChat self-branding strategy, WeChat Moments strategy and WeChat groups marketing strategy. WeChat marketing is unique e-commerce marketing. The breadth of its information network, the shortcut of information dissemination, three-dimension product promotion, and interpersonal interaction; all have their own unique characteristics (Zhang, 2015).

##### A. *WeChat Followers Strategy*

Everyone could be a micro e-marketer now or in the future as long as they have a smartphone with the Internet connectivity to stay online in the social circle where social relationships can be established. Through the sharing and exchanging information process, one is like an online celebrity in WeChat to attract followers. This will indirectly lead to an open possibility to close a sales transaction.

*I share about my daily life happening as if I am a celebrity. I have my followers who love to see my posts. I post about my consumptions of my products and their effectiveness shown obviously on my body. The effects on me speak for me rather than I speak (Interviewee 29).*

*I don't post about my products all the time! I post about my activities, my career, my business partners and my positive thoughts to attract people. (Interviewee 14).*

*Stay active in WeChat Moments, groups, blogs, broadcasting app by sharing your life events. Keep in touch with friends in WeChat circle by commenting the posts in Moments. Interactions and friend recommendations are essential to create your own profile to illustrate how many people you helped as well as your strengths and capabilities (Interviewee 07).*

The strategy used by micro e-marketers is to stay active by letting more people to know them and follow them. Akin to a celebrity, they gain reputation in their endeavour to be who they desire to appear. An extremely successful example is a campaign by Uniqlo, the Japanese clothing company. As part of their “Style Your Life” campaign, they asked people to take pictures of the clothes they tried on in-store and post them online, subscribing to the company in the process. During the campaign, they increased their WeChat followers from 400,000 to 1 million. Sales of key clothing items increased by 30 percent (Doland, 2015). That is clearly a highly positive result on using WeChat’s advertising platform. With minimal effort, WeChat leads to great success for that business.

*To win in the online business, you need to create a group of people who get influenced by you and who are willing to pay for your services or products. As long as you have followers, you win! They admire you, they like you, they follow! This is an era of showing-off whereby you need to be able to offer or show your values and skills to attract and maintain your customers, rather than focusing on hard sales (Interviewee 01).*

*I am a part-time micro e-marketer. At the same time, I am also buying from other trustable micro e-marketers. I will follow the Moments of active micro e-marketers that I admire. I look at how they market themselves (Interviewee 13).*

*Customers are willing to pay for your products or services just because they want to follow you! They place their trust on you! They are willing to try the products that you are consuming (Interviewee 28).*

It draws to our attention that it is not about how to sell the products but it is about how the micro e-marketers portray themselves to be an influencer so that people develop trust and are willing to follow. Once micro e-marketers have established their followers, it eases the process of sales to take place. To win the followers’ heart, it basically depends on the relationships built: making friends,

sharing values, offering helps, and then indirectly promoting and selling the products or services that they have to offer. Successful transactions are done through trust. Micro e-marketers should portray their good personalities and professionalism. Interactions and communication with followers should not be neglected. As a micro e-marketer, there is a need to understand the followers' needs and wants or their preferences and interests to create the WeChat Moments posts. Pressing on hard sales on the products or services by extremely posting about products all the time are not advisable. Instead, they post something that has values which people prefer to read, for example tips on how to solve a particular issue or problem, humorous or useful information with values of the products, or about yourself to build the trust of the customers.

To improve their influential power, micro e-marketers may click to like or comment on the posts of their friends in WeChat circle to initiate interaction. They update the Moments in WeChat daily to stay active. They attract people to add them as a friend in WeChat frequently via friends, by joining groups, by blogs, through broadcasting apps such as Himalaya FM or Lychee FM online, or by attending seminars and conferences. They always introduce themselves in WeChat groups to grab more attention and influence. Good recommendations from other micro e-marketers are also one of the techniques that results in gaining trust.

### ***B. WeChat Self-Branding Strategy***

Usually branding efforts require extensive financial support for promotion to create brand awareness and later brand loyalty. Social media, with its ideological and technological structure, gives the opportunity to the people to promote themselves as brands in a relatively cheap and efficient manner (Karaduman, 2016). Self-branding is not merely limited to the physical appearance and personal knowledge; it leads to a uniquely distinguishable and memorable impression which includes personal beliefs, values and characteristics.

*Self-branding is vital, you may refer to DISC profiling. It concerns the initial feel or first impression on you. Let's say, when you start to listen to a song, if the initial part does not attract you or you do not feel good, you will not continue to listen to it (Interviewee 02).*

*Customers look for me and ask me because they trust my services and products. They believe I can help them. Impressions count! I am my own brand! Show your values and professionalism to your customers and potential customers. (Interviewee 30)*

Self-branding enables the micro e-marketers to be aware of their path by knowing their styles or personal profile systems of “DISC”. The DISC profiling model provides a common language which people can use to have a better understanding about themselves and to adapt their behaviours to others or within a team or a relationship. The four profiles identified are: Dominance; Influence; Steadiness and Conscientiousness. When the micro e-marketers decide and know their self-branding well, it is easier for people to remember them. Self-branding covers the name, knowledge, skills, experiences, personalities, traits and influences. Self-branding is a tool to build trust among the people.

*I believe that using your own profile, your real name and photo is vital to generate fundamental trust of your customers. WeChat's Cover Photo is serves as your “showroom” to inform others about you. The common mistake that the micro e-marketers make is to keep on putting ads excessively in WeChat Moments and do not show themselves in person whereby they opt to use cartoon or flowery pictures as their profile pictures (Interviewee 15).*

*I use my own real person photo as my profile photo so that people know who I am. Avoid group photo. This is a strategy to build trust also because nobody wants to buy from a cat or a tree or a cartoon. You may include a meaning slogan to describe yourself in WeChat What's Up setting (Interviewee 18).*

*My strategy is I create a name that represents me and this name is easy to remember. When people think about this product, they think about me. Collecting customers' testimonials or reviews are important as your potential customers read them to know your credibility (Interviewee 16).*

*Customers buy from you because they trust you. Customers have been monitoring your posts for quite some time before they bank in money to you. Think about yourself transferring money to a stranger's bank account who you never meet up! (Interviewee 03).*

As many online transactions take place involving strangers, thus, it is very important for micro e-marketers to have the values of righteousness, integrity and responsibility. Imagine a stranger who banks in to a micro e-marketer by viewing their products' pictures and descriptions posted online based on trust. The potential customers read reviews to anticipate the credibility of the sellers. To



gain good impression and to enable people to remember them, a unique name is very crucial. Micro e-marketers should use a good name that is easy to recall. The profile photo should represent the real person. They will avoid using a group photo because it will confuse the potential buyer in identifying which one the seller is. The Cover photo in WeChat serves as a business display showroom to inform about the micro e-marketer. In the What's Up in WeChat setting, the micro e-marketers may add a slogan that is meaningful to describe themselves.

### **C. *WeChat Moments Strategy***

To construct WeChat Moments posts, it involves WeChat ads-descriptions and WeChat ads-design. WeChat Moments is a place like Facebook's Newsfeed page where postings are being shown. WeChat ads-descriptions basically contain the texts for expression on micro e-marketers themselves as well as their products or services that are being offered by them. The ads-descriptions should not be too hard selling. The descriptions should be in a paragraph for easy reading, credited to whom if taken from a certain source. The Moments in WeChat are just like a magazine that is full of stories about the micro e-marketers' happenings.

*When I wake up in the morning, I like to post about my positive thinking and share it with my own selfie photos. I like to post about useful and informative details to suggest a solution to a problem (Interviewee 17).*

*I post about the activities of my team or company. People want to know how well I am developing my career and my happenings. Sometimes, I post about interaction activities to stay connected with my friends in WeChat (Interviewee 26).*

The description in the post of WeChat Moments should be in a way that:

- It suggests ways of solving the needs and problems of people. For example, how to cure a pro-longed cough; how to improve sensitive skin etc.
- It provides useful information. For example, what is the best time to use facial mask; what types of foods are good for eye health etc.

- It invites friends in WeChat for interaction. For example, a simple guessing game or click to like a post to ask friends to participate. This is a way to create a two-way communication, aiming for future networking relationship.

Suggested techniques of postings in WeChat Moments are as follows:

- To portray positive thinking and team spirit
- To share experiences
- To show the testimonials from the customers
- To disseminate the latest media news on the products or its company

*I prefer to post a single picture per time. I think it is more effective to grab others' attention because the picture is presented in a clear and big view manner. Nice photos or good designed pictures attract eyes! Write out of the posts have to be interesting, easy to read and not hard selling (Interviewee 09).*

*Avoid posting two, four, five, seven or eight pictures in a post in WeChat Moments because it will give an empty gap which does not look so nice in the layout presentation (Interviewee 12).*

*Take note of picture number 5 in a posting if you are posting for a total of nine pictures in a post because it serves as the center of attraction of your post (Interviewee 20).*

WeChat ads-design is the pictures that the micro web marketers use to attract WeChat friends to keep an eye on the micro e-marketers. A picture speaks a thousand words! The picture design is a way to illustrate self-branding. It is important to learn photographing skills so that quality photos are being taken. The picture design can catch the attention of the customers to enhance their experiences to visit WeChat Moments. It is a good practice to include own photos so that people can relate better. Use relevant wordings to add onto the emphasis of the ads. Some common mobile apps to design or modify the pictures are: MeiTu, FotoRus, PicAct, PosterLab, Jane, PhotoGrid, Eraser, Blender and Selfie. The pictures that are posted in Moments should be in the number of 1, 3, 6 and 9

for better presentation layout. This will give a better impression to their friends in their WeChat circle. The first picture is the most important. If 9 pictures are posted, then the first and fifth pictures will be crucial.

*I am active in WeChat during night time, especially after dinner. Normally I post in my Moments before I sleep and when I wake up in the morning (Interviewee 06).*

*I am a mother and fulltime micro e-marketer. I wake up and the first thing I do is to check my WeChat to find out any messages from my customers or potential customers (Interviewee 10).*

*I am a part time micro e-marketer. I stay active in WeChat when I wake up, during lunch time, after office hours and night time after my dinner around 8'o clock to 11 o'clock (Interviewee 05).*

*As a college student, I am a part time micro e-marketer. My response time to WeChat is very high, within hours. Many college and university students love to stay online till midnight (Interviewee 08).*

Based on the experiences, observations and interviews, they are certain time periods when more people are online on WeChat. Table 2 presents the best time to be active to post on WeChat Moments. It has been categorized into daytime and night time. It can be summed up that most people are active on WeChat before working, during lunch time, after office hours, after a long day at work as well as before they sleep.

Table 2  
The Best Time to Post on WeChat Moments

Daytime	Night time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 7:30 am to 8:30 am</li><li>• 12:30 pm to 1:30 pm</li><li>• 5:30 pm to 6:30 pm</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 8:30 pm to 9:30 pm</li><li>• 9:30 pm to 12:00 am</li></ul>

#### **D. WeChat Groups Marketing Strategy**

WeChat Groups Marketing technique is utilised by the micro e-marketers for the purpose of serving multiple people of up to 500 members in a group. The group creator is the leader of the group and group administrator can be appointed to help manage the group. Every group has a leader, which is the person who started the group. This person is at the top of the list of group members. If this person quits the group then the next person on the list becomes the group leader. The group leader is the only person who can actively remove members from the group. There is a special remove button which other group members do not have.

*In 2014, micro e-marketers can easily earn income by “copy and paste” the ads posted. In 2015, micro web marketers focus on building the team to earn income. But in 2016, the focus shifted to WeChat group marketing of one-to-many approach. Today, the focus has shifted to self-branding. Why not selling (promoting) yourself rather than selling products? (Interviewee 04).*

Micro e-marketers may create their own group chats and share a group chat QR code to invite their friends to a WeChat group chat. They scan the QR code to join that private group. WeChat group marketing strategy is to identify the needs of people, emphasize on the importance of achieving the needs or solving the problems, or otherwise the consequences of suffering from the problems. There are some WeChat norms to adapt. As micro e-marketers, when they just enter a WeChat group, they do not straight away put up ads, which is tremendously a hard sale action that will result in people disliking them. They refrain from quarrelling or attacking anyone in the group. Instead, micro e-marketers may enhance their influencing power by giving “WeChat red-packet” in the group, encouraging interaction in the group by answering questions, providing useful information or help when necessary.

*Normally when I enter a new WeChat group, I introduce myself and give WeChat “red-packet” to build up the impression of others on me. It is a reality that if you give out a high amount WeChat “red-packets”, people tend to remember you better (Interviewee 27).*

*Offering helps or providing useful information in the group will attract people to make friend with you. I tend to respond to the questions asked by group members by providing them with the appropriate information to help them in problem solving (Interviewee 25).*

Through the WeChat group, micro e-marketers may filter and find the people that are willing to buy from them. Interactions are possible where questions can be asked and queries or doubts can be answered. When questions are being asked in the group, the answers (or solutions) being provided in the group also give others in the group an opportunity to know and learn. It is really saving the time of micro e-marketers to reply the same query one by one personally. To get a friend to commit to the sale transaction in the group, firstly, it must fulfil his or her needs. Second, he or she must have the purchasing power. Third, he or she can make buying decision independently without asking someone else for approval.

*I love to be in WeChat group to answer enquires as a whole rather than one-by-one because some enquiries are the same. It saves my time and others in the group may learn new things from my reply too (Interviewee 19).*

*In the WeChat group, I will try to find out their needs and their purchasing power. If he or she needs this product and is able to buy it by making own decision, normally the sale will be completed (Interviewee 11).*

WeChat groups marketing strategy has not only allowed the micro e-marketers to interact with the customers, it also allows the customer to interact with other customers. Testimonials can be shared by customers to help or to convince other customers on a company's products or services. Potential customers are most likely to buy the products to try when they are convinced that the products are good from reliable testimonials as references. Word of mouth plays a very significant influence on the customers' decision to purchase.

*In a WeChat group, when the existing customers provide testimonials about products, they speak louder than what the sellers say (Interviewee 21).*

*I love to see or listen to the sharing given by other customers. Word of mouth gives me a reference too in the process of buying (Interviewee 22).*

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

In this research, observations and personal interviews with micro e-marketers on WeChat were carried out to identify and develop the effective strategies to be used in WeChat marketing. Future quantitative research is needed to validate the present study empirically with a larger sample in Malaysia. The results of the study indicated that it is important to create trust in the customers where the focus is on having more followers, self-branding, enhancing effective ads' design and descriptions, along with creating and maintaining productive groups. Listening to customers' needs and wants while being empathetic and understanding is pivotal. Micro e-marketers provide solutions to satisfy the customers in order to complete a transaction. They start the conversation with understanding customers, which could be customers' interests or targets to initiate a good relation which will lead to obtaining trust from the customers. The identified and developed strategies are effective to create awareness to generate more sales and thus bringing significant benefits that lead to increased income for individuals, simultaneously creating job opportunities for society and bringing welfare to the nation. The appropriate ways of putting ads on WeChat daily and the best time to post the ads on WeChat to gain targeted attention and achieve improved sales are being addressed too.

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