

MARKETING

## Nostalgia marketing. Why it works in China?

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*As China's millennials feel the effects of an uncertain future, marketers are tapping into nostalgia-driven marketing campaigns to resonate with them. Image credit: Shutterstock*

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- Long working hours, vanishing mid-level jobs and a labor market that is flooded with highly skilled and highly educated workers is signaling that the new market economy is producing a generation of desperate, sad and lonely young adults.
- Marketers are tapping into emotional marketing to create campaigns that resonate with affluent, but lonely, consumers. Images of a bygone era seen in these retro-styled campaigns drive engagement by creating communities of like-minded individuals.
- Western companies from sportswear brands to film franchises are using it to boost profitability and increase market share. Surprisingly, even brands that were not in the China market during the 1980s in China, are building connections with the local audience, proving the power of this form of marketing.

For years, Western marketers have captivated audiences with nostalgia marketing, a strategy that aims to evoke a feeling of sentimentality or longing for the past. In the last number of years, businesses are capitalizing on it even more, especially in China.

In fact, Chinese affluent **millennials** are responding to their need for physical wealth by acquiring products that remind them of the more relaxed and comfortable days.

In an emotionless age and a society that worships professional success, "**workism**" has become the new scripture, and millennials are feeling the full effects of emotional, physical and mental exhaustion.

According to **Gallup's World Poll**, chronic stress is rising in China. This is mostly because of financial setbacks and the fall in household income. However, even individuals who do not suffer from economic anxieties are feeling drained and lonely in this modern society.

It is common to hear that the post-eighties individuals feel isolated, abandoned and burned out. Long working hours, vanishing mid-level jobs and a labor market that is flooded with highly skilled and highly educated workers is

signaling that the Western model and the new market economy are producing a generation of desperate, sad and lonely young adults.

According to [Xinyue Zhou](#), a psychologist at Sun Yat-sen University, in Guangzhou, "The uncertainty, the lack of control over our lives, is most unbearable to the post-Eighties, so we have to seek confirmation from the past." And marketers are more than happy to oblige.

By tapping into emotional marketing, companies are creating campaigns that resonate with these affluent, but lonely, consumers.

Through associations with images of a bygone era, some international brands have touched on a positive spectrum of emotions.

Raw and retro campaigns drive engagement by creating communities of like-minded individuals.

For instance, [Nostalgia Hotel Beijing Xidan](#) has a rustic feeling to it. From the charming 1930s desk phone to the collection of vintage Vladimir Lenin magazines, every detail communicates the return to the old times and positive reviews illustrate this is what tourists love about it.

Nostalgic dining is also on the rise.

Author [David L. Wank](#) writes that a local dish boom has developed in China's restaurant industry.

"Restaurants ranging from family-style to luxury establishments started serving local dishes that are self-consciously represented as the foods eaten by the common people of a specific locale in China," he explains.

The author quotes cultural historian Mark Swislocki when explaining that local dish restaurants evoke cultural nostalgia, which is defined as "the purposive evocation of another time and place through food."

Thus, food assists in understanding social changes.

It is safe to say that companies are not pursuing nostalgia marketing because they are interested in ongoing social change. Their intrigue has material aspirations and is based on the desire to boost profitability and market share.

[International brands](#) can win big with retro products and nostalgia marketing.

For example, Chevrolet regained its reputation and won back the hearts of the Chinese consumers after the racist "[ching-ching, chop suey](#)" ad that referred to China as "the land of Fu Manchu."

Through a perfectly curated [print and online campaign](#), Chevrolet featured images of personal journeys, from a guitarist who connects with the younger generations through songs of the past, to the journey of a group of friends who raised money to open a retro store, the images recall the good old days.

However Chevrolet is not alone in using imagery from the 1980s and 1990s to encourage emotional connections between consumers, in particular Chinese millennials.

[The Luxury Society](#) mentions the 2017 launch of Cartier's Pac-Man inspired game to promote the Amulette de Cartier.

Another example is Nintendo's return to its classic 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System (NES), released in 1985, after losses with its modern gaming system.

[Betty Bei Chen](#) states that on [Taobao.com](#), an online store called "Memories for the Post-80s Generation," deals with various 1980s products including toys, clothes, food, glass marbles and bubble gum.

According to scholar [D. J. Huppatz](#), the concept of designer nostalgia is even more striking in Hong Kong for example a city that during the 1980s and 1990s suffered under the anxiety of the 1997 handover.

Hong Kong's unique situation made it "an exemplary production site for a wide range of nostalgic cultural products."

The writer gives the example of Shanghai Tang a brand that was built on the exoticism and appeal of a bygone era.

*Nike Air Jordan VII commercial with Bugs Bunny*

Even sports brands such as Adidas with its 1980s tracksuits and [Nike](#) with its sneakers are advertising its products to the cool Gen Zed generation through ads with idols who belong to an era that they probably do not even know. Who cannot forget [Michael Jordan playing against Bugs Bunny](#) in that already iconic ad?

Interestingly enough, many of the **Western brands** that are now cashing in on the millennial nostalgia were not present in 1980s China, so it is surprising they can build connections with the local audience, especially when nostalgic Western ads cannot be exported to China because of discrepancies in personal experiences.

However, this has become an opportunity for some. Brands are digging deep into their archives for messages, flyers and products that were successful decades ago to reinvigorate marketing campaigns with an edge that builds on personal journeys while creating an emotional connection with millennials.

The popularity of Michael Bay's "Transformers" films is the perfect example in this direction since it inspired various lines of products in China.

CREATING MARKETING campaigns that mirror moments in time when consumers were more serene and unconstrained will always be a winning ticket.

**Zander Nethercutt** rightfully points out that "people don't buy products, they buy better versions of themselves."

In conclusion, some marketers can transform their brand by unleashing the full power of their goods through nostalgia and emotional adverts.

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