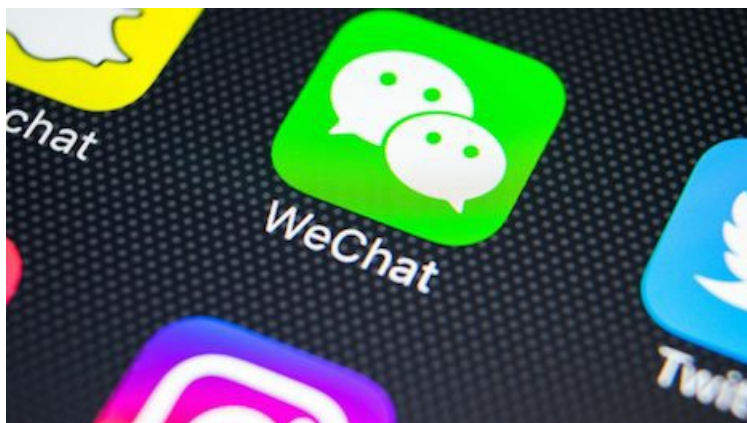


MARKETING

How WeChat is losing the war for users' attention

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Fast-forward to 2020, and users are already spending more time on Douyin than they are on WeChat, swiping for hours between short videos. What went wrong? Image credit: shutterstock.com

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Back a couple of years ago, [WeChat](#) seemed like an unstoppable force. It was completely dominating the Chinese social media landscape, beating [Alibaba](#) in payments and making forays into ecommerce.

Fast-forward to 2020, and users are already spending more time on [Douyin](#) than they are on WeChat, swiping for hours between short videos. What went wrong?

Too disruptive to be incremental

It can seem easy to paint WeChat's current demise by its inability to spot the short-video craze early.

I would, however, argue that WeChat started losing the battle earlier. WeChat neglected incremental changes that could have improved the platform.

Back 10 years ago, [Facebook](#) would frequently revamp its interface, each time creating an uproar among its users. Yet it kept going at it, constantly refining its user experience and design.

That is something that WeChat did not do. The result: WeChat moments interface seems old-fashioned compared to its Western competitors.



WeChat pictures are cluttered and only occupy a fraction of the screen

Action calls such as "Like" or "Comment" are hidden in a sub-menu, making it hard for users to interact

The app barely uses the phone screen, keeping

pictures cluttered and forcing users to click to see them. Engagement buttons are also hidden in a sub-menu, making it harder for users to like photos or comments.

Facebook takes a very different approach, displaying engaging full-screen pictures and prominent actions calls to like and comment.



Facebook leverages the entire screen real-estate with engaging full-screen display

Large and visible action calls make it easy for users to interact

The truth is that WeChat has been innovating quite a

bit: it launched payment, **Mini-programs** and many other disruptive features that have changed the behavior of both users and businesses.

But WeChat has been looking down at small incremental changes. **Tencent** was apparently too afraid to make any modifications to its hit product that might anger or confuse users.

Too proud to steal

"Good artists copy; great artists steal." Many businessmen such as Steve Jobs have been shamelessly implementing this famous quote from Picasso.

When Douyin came up with its amazingly intuitive swiping interface, that got users watching an endless stream of

videos, competitor **Kuaishou** did not wait too long to copy it.

We find the same qualities of the Facebook interface: full use of the screen and prominent action calls. But, most importantly: a simple swiping motion enabling to move from one video to the next.

However, when WeChat released its own short-video feature, **WeChat Channel**, it could not bring itself to copying the Douyin interface. Instead, it had to come up with its own, arguably inferior user experience.

The result is a disappointing and unengaging experience. In fact, WeChat Channels would be a great UX for the WeChat timeline. In many ways, it looks more like the Facebook timeline than short-videos Apps such as Douyin and Kuaishou.

Too top-down to empower the masses

Another flaw of the WeChat approach is that it was and stayed a top-down content ecosystem. A few popular WeChat Official Accounts are creating the content which might become viral on the platform.

User-generated content cannot really go viral on WeChat: it is only visible to your own friends, and user-generated videos and pictures cannot easily be shared further.

Douyin takes the opposite approach: it creates accessible tools for users to generate beautiful content. This approach was first pioneered by Instagram in the West, which helped its users generate more engaging content with filters.

This content can easily go viral, driven by Douyin's algorithm.

In contrast, WeChat makes it difficult for users to apply for a content-creator account.

WeChat Official Accounts require a special application, and creating content on them is better done on a desktop computer.

Newly launched WeChat Channels also require special authorization from Tencent, although WeChat will likely simplify the application after this initial testing phase is over.

Too shy about curating content

Another drawback of WeChat is that, because it does not insist on user interactions with the content likes, comments it also distributes content chronologically.

Almost any other modern social network takes a very different approach: Weibo, Douyin, Instagram, Facebook and Kuaishou will all feature content which is getting the most likes and comments. Boring content that people do not look at or interact with will be hidden for most users.

Instead, WeChat is not doing any content curation. It simply displays content chronologically on WeChat Moments. The result: you are much more likely to bump into boring food pictures than on any piece of content in which you would actually be interested.

WeChat recently added a new section called "Wow" or "Top stories" to counterbalance this trend. Top Stories is one of the only sections that ranks content in the order of likes clicked by the user's friends.

This shows, once again, a lack of boldness of WeChat to implement changes within its Moments section. Instead, it created a completely separate section that most users do not visit frequently.



Video liked by most friends

Moreover, only 0.1 percent of readers of an article

Article liked by most friends

Comments within Top Story only stay in Top Story. They won't appear under the article

click "like" after reading it. Many WeChat articles take more than five minutes to finish reading. Thus most users will not read to the end to click on the like button.

The fact that WeChat makes it difficult to "like" articles means there is not enough data to rank articles in the Top Story section. Very few articles reach the critical number of "likes" necessary to separate boring articles from the ones that would actually be of interest because the algorithm focuses on likes from direct friends, so the number is bound to remain small.

Conclusion: too little, too late

In the end, WeChat is doing too little and too late to fight off the competition from Douyin and Kuaishou.

Of course, the social network still has a lot going on for itself: it remains pretty much the only messaging platform in China.

The WeChat Mini-program ecosystem is booming. **WeChat Payments** are stronger than ever. And some pieces of content such as this article are still much more suitable for WeChat than for **short-video** platforms.

Yet, Douyin is moving fast into Tencent territory such as gaming. There are no guarantees that it will not move into messaging or payments.

If WeChat does not react fast, it might just become another Renren.

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