

RETAIL

## Social selling: What can the West learn from China?

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Google introduced its Shoploop platform that introduces users to products with short videos within 90 seconds. Image credit: Google

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Due to the impact of COVID-19 on the offline retail environment over the past few months, brands have gradually discovered the power of short videos, livestreaming and simple text-image messaging.

In the absence of physical stores and access to products, these digital channels are proving to be effective in reaching and activating consumers, consequently boosting ecommerce performance especially in China, where its digital natives are no strangers to such online behavior. Now, Western tech giants are following in their footsteps.

Late last year, [WhatsApp debuted a shopping catalog feature](#). In May, Facebook and Instagram launched Shops, [a feature that allows users to purchase products directly](#) within the Facebook or Instagram ecosystem.

More recently, Google introduced its [Shoploop platform that introduces users to products with short videos](#) (within 90 seconds). Users can then click on in-video links to make a purchase via the product's official ecommerce page.

While the integration of ecommerce and social media could be seen as a radical move for Western platforms, such features have already been realized and widely rolled out in China.

Short video platforms (Douyin, Kuaishou), instant messaging platforms (WeChat) and social media (XiaoHongShu, Weibo) have leveraged their social reach to snap up a share of the ecommerce pie across different categories.

What can Western companies looking to develop their social selling businesses learn from these Chinese platforms?

Fresh content concepts

Due to COVID-19, many bricks-and-mortar stores have been faced with prolonged closures and, even after reopening, low foot traffic.

Consumers have been spending inordinate amounts of time online much more than ever before and are, for lack of a better expression, getting bored. Brands need to produce new and varied types of content to recapture the attention of these consumers.

A good example of an alternative content focus is that of XiaoHongShu (RED).

While it started out as a platform primarily focused on travel and shopping reviews, RED eventually evolved to include a wide range of customer reviews, products or otherwise.

As the number of product reviews on the platform grew, the social platform pivoted to ecommerce users could shop products directly reviewed by other users.

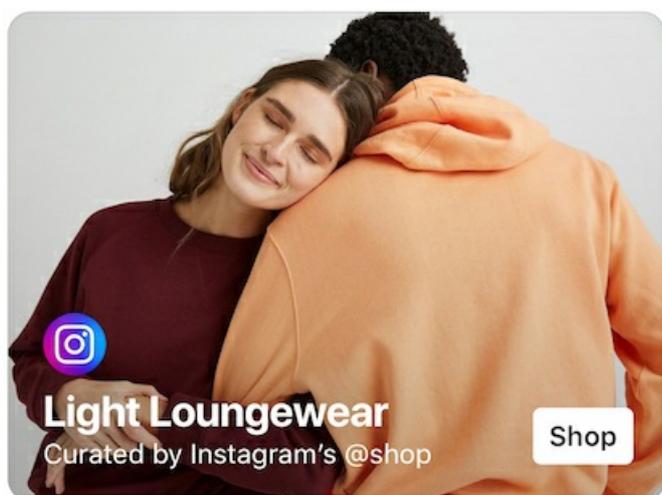
By focusing on user-generated content instead of brand-created content, product descriptions come across as more authentic and relatable. This helps to build consumer confidence and drive conversions.

Frictionless purchase journeys

With Instagram and Facebook Shop, **shoppers are now able to directly buy items within Instagram** instead of being redirected to an external page to complete the transaction.

Just a few months ago, this was not the case for most social media platforms in the West trying to engage in selling.

More often than not, social media platforms end up acting as conduits rather than actual selling channels due to technical limitations.



*In May, Facebook and Instagram launched Shops, a feature that allows users to purchase products directly within the Facebook or Instagram ecosystem. Image credit: Instagram*

That is not to say that social media outlets in China do not face the same issue.

Platforms such as Douyin and Weibo are like their Western counterparts. Without in-built ecommerce capabilities, these platforms are only able to link content to relevant product pages on ecommerce marketplaces such as Tmall or JD.com.

The exception here is WeChat. Besides being China's most ubiquitous social platform, it is also a **self-sustaining one with a myriad of in-built functions**.

The platform covers all touch points throughout the typical consumer journey: awareness and interest (Official Account, Channels), purchase (WeChat Pay) and even loyalty.

Here, consumers are able to discover a product through a brand's communications on WeChat, directly shop the item via its WeChat store, and purchase it all without leaving the app environment.

Consumer retention and reactivation

One thing that is universally lacking on Western social selling platforms today is CRM functionality.

In China, this is something that brands largely build on WeChat. Besides setting up a loyalty program for clients on WeChat, brands can also opt to attach a CRM and clienteling solution to their accounts to scale up operations.

This added layer of infrastructure allows them to better manage and track client communications, and build richer client profiles with the transactional and behavioral data tracked on WeChat.

Fundamentally, this approach relies on the willingness of consumers to give up some degree of personal data. In exchange, they receive a far more customized experience on the platform.

However, given the strict data and privacy laws that govern digital platforms in the West, this is an unlikely reality.

WHAT WORKS in one society might not necessarily take off in another.

However, understanding the capabilities and limitations of the different platforms will allow Western platforms to better adapt and evolve existing social selling models. And when that happens, everyone wins.

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