Chapter IV
Targeting E-Commerce to Chinese Audiences and Markets:
Managing Cultural and Regional Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The market for e-commerce to Chinese audiences is one which has tremendous potential, given the fact that the number of potential users and customers is projected to exceed that of English-speaking Western users. However, managing the host of cultural issues that come up is an important need which must be met. This chapter examines the cultural issues which are relevant to sites targeted at China and Chinese-speaking audiences, including user and consumer behavior patterns, categorizing China using Hofstede's cultural dimensions, examining traditional and historical attitudes, and addressing business issues including trust, payment, and infrastructure challenges. In the chapter design principles based on these are proposed, as well as an examination of the differences between the cultures of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of China is certainly one which has had an impact upon the world in terms of history, culture, and the global economy. This includes not only the influence of mainland China proper, with a population of over one billion, but also in other countries which speak Chinese, and from countless communities of "overseas Chinese" which exist throughout the world.

Many experts predict that China will have the second largest population of web surfers, after the US (McCarthy, 2000), and currently, the Internet population in China is doubling every six months (CNNIC, 2001). The population of Internet users in China is rivaling the United States and western countries in terms of growth. While it may be assumed by some that English-language sites, together with European languages and Japanese, make up the majority of what is on the web, however, the fact is that Chinese language and content sites comprise as many, or more sites than those in English and Japanese. This enormous, yet perhaps less recognized emerging market for the Web is the Chinese-language population, well over a billion of them in mainland China alone, spread out throughout China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and with many more "Overseas Chinese" throughout the world. According to Global Reach, the population of Internet users who speak and read Chinese and Japanese will have exceeded English language users in 2005 (Global Reach, 2004). As such, the ability to effectively market to this audience is important in our global market economy.

In fact, the Chinese market may evolve into one of the largest in the world, even though currently it is in the earlier of development. Back in 2000, there were close to 9 million computers connected to the Internet in China (CNNIC, 2000), and the number of users exceeded 22 million (CNNIC, 2001). Based on a more recent report, there were at least 80 million Internet users in China reported in 2003, up from 68 million in 2002 (UNCTAD 2002) with the number increasing since then. The latest update puts the estimate at 210 million (Jesdanun 2008).

All of this growth occurred since 1996, and China is now considered one of the top five nations in terms of Internet use, and some experts predict, that China is making strides towards having the second largest population of web surfers in the world. Clearly, there is a vast potential market which has yet to be expanded and tapped to its fullest potential.

Certainly, when dealing with users who speak and use a foreign language, and also have grown up with an entirely different culture, background, and expectations, there are a host of considerations which come into play. The issues relating to the translation between English and other Western languages to Chinese, together with the mechanics and issues involved with the effective display and management of Chinese fonts online, are issues which can be solved with the employment of a translator, and in consultation with technical guides on properly displaying Chinese characters on the web.

However, there are a number of other issues, relating to the cultural aspects of Chinese culture and society which can impact the design and content of web sites which are directed towards Chinese audiences. Some of these issues include the basic differences between Chinese and American/Western cultures, family and collective orientations, religion and faith, color, symbolism, ordering and risk/uncertainty. Attitudes and perceptions about the Internet, shopping, and buying also come into play, as well as some traditions and methods of doing business which have been ingrained into Chinese culture.

Although they are sometimes perceived as being similar or identical, attention is given to the differences between the cultures of China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore. Related theories and frameworks, and their relevance to Chinese

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