LAUNCHING A CHINA-READY WEBSITE:

A how-to guide for international brands

Building a China-ready website can help to drive online and offline sales, and be an important long-term investment to gain a competitive edge in the China market.

It's hard to call yourself an international retailer these days without China counting as a key driver of sales growth. With the steady year-on-year increase in Chinese overseas spending, alongside robust demand at home in the domestic market, now has never been a better time for international brands to focus on China.

But as an international retailer you don't need the media to tell you that China is a huge growth market for your industry. You know this. What the headlines and infographics fail to mention is that China also happens to be one of the more challenging markets to do business. The competition is also heating up as the rest of the world, with suppliers from Australia to Norway, fight for channels to push their products in front of Chinese consumers.

E-commerce platforms such as **Tmall** are a popular entry point

Brand trust and reputation - more important than country of origin

Building an Online Presence

Given the capital and time-intensive process of establishing a physical office in China, online channels are a popular option for international retailers and especially SME's to reach Chinese consumers. E-commerce platforms such as Tmall are a popular entry point for international brands to test market demand, develop brand penetration and outsource operations, including online payment and customer delivery.

Listing on a Chinese e-commerce platform offers enormous market potential for overseas brands. Meanwhile, given the low barriers to entry (in comparison to offline retail) and growing competition, brand trust and reputation are becoming increasingly more important than country of origin in determining long-term success.

Chinese consumers pay a considerable amount of attention to product quality, safety and brand reputation. As a result, new customers typically crosscheck and browse multiple touch points before buying a product. Popular touch points include online forums, social media channels, online question and answer platforms, family and friends, and of course the brands' official website.

Having a company website optimized for China is a vital touch point to build trust and improve online and offline sale conversions.

As Chinese customers are thousands of miles away from your production facilities or retail stores, having a China-friendly website is one way to validate that your brand is legitimate and to communicate your brand's credentials.

What is a China-ready website?

A China-ready website is a dedicated online portal with localized content for Chinese consumers to access information about your brand. Your China-ready website should ideally be a stand-alone website with a Chinese domain name (.cn), integrated with Chinese social media and hosted on a China-based hosting server for optimal performance.

Consider developing a **stand-alone** website **optimized** for China

Can I just add a page translated into Chinese to my current website?

This is an alternative option and works as a quick fix from a content perspective. However you will run into a series of compatibility and design issues. First, dual language content on your website makes it difficult for search engines to crawl and index your website. Second, websites which are integrated with Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Twitter and Google Fonts will experience delayed load speed as these elements are inaccessible in China. This can have an adverse affect on the user experience and aesthetics of your website. Third, your website load speed in China will be delayed if your website is hosted outside of China, and especially if hosted outside of Asia. Finally, website design fundamentals differ widely between western and Chinese websites, which we will cover in a later section.

To create a website truly optimized for China it is therefore recommended that you consider developing a stand-alone website optimized for China.

Web hosting

In regards to hosting your China-optimized website there are three main options.

Host in your home country

Chinese search engines may not be able to **index** your full website

Hosting your China website in your home country is the most convenient option as you will be familiar with local infrastructure procedures. However this option is the least effective in regards to enhancing search engine visibility and load speed. As your website is hosted outside of Mainland China, Chinese search engines may not be able to index your full website. Your potential to climb up the search rankings will also be severely limited as Chinese search engine algorithms favour websites hosted in China. In regards to performance, your website load speed will be negatively affected by latency caused by geographical distances between your server and end-users in China, as well limitations to international bandwidth and the online monitoring procedures that exist in China.

CDN into China

Manage large volumes of traffic by distributing traffic across nodes

A Content Delivery Networks (CDN) is another option to deliver your website content into China without hosting your website in China. A CDN is a network of nodes (or servers) distributed across different geographic locations to deliver cached content from your origin website to end-users. Thereby you can simply link your website up to a CDN in China or CDN nodes in proximity to China, such as Hong Kong or South Korea. This would minimalize latency, improve load time, as well as effectively manage large volumes of traffic by distributing traffic across nodes. This option however would only bring marginal benefit to your SEO rankings (based on load-speed), and there are high requirements to deploying on a CDN network in China. ICP certification is required to access a China-based CDN, and which is covered in a following section.

Host in Hong Kong

Your website will still be treated as an **overseas hosted website**

Due to its geographic proximity to Mainland China, hosting your website in Hong Kong will minimize latency from one geographical end point to another, and improve load speed. Optimizing load speed satisfies both the user experience and search engine algorithms. However, this is not a substitute to hosting in Mainland China as your website will still be treated as an overseas hosted website by search engines in China and be subject to international bandwidth limitations. Hosting your website in a country that neighbors Mainland China with developed ICT infrastructure such as South Korea can also provide improved load speed benefits.

Host in Mainland China

Don't worry about international bandwidth & latency issues

Hosting your website in Mainland China is naturally the best strategy for deploying a China-optimized website. You can think of it as being treated like a local website. As a local website you no longer have to worry about international bandwidth, high latency or limitations to your search engine visibility. Hosting in China indicates to the local search engines that your website performance and content is tailored to a Chinese audience and will therefore boost your page rankings.

In order to access a hosting server based in Mainland China, or a CDN, you must first obtain an ICP license.

What is an ICP license?

ICP Filing- Alibaba Cloud offers processing within 20 working days

An ICP (Internet Content Provider) license is a registration number that allows a website to operate on a hosting server based or CDN node located in China, and is a mandatory legal requirement set by the Chinese Government. An ICP license is divided into two certification categories:

ICP Filing: An ICP Filing, known in Chinese as 'Bei'An' and also referred to as a 'recordal' by some sources, is the first level of ICP certification. All applicants must apply for an ICP Filing regardless of whether their website is commercial or non-commercial in scope. After obtaining an ICP Filing, you will be eligible to host a website on a Chinese server or Content Delivery Network node, but you are not able to integrate e-commerce features or online payment. An ICP Filing can take up to several months to process but Alibaba Cloud offers processing within 20 working days.

ICP Commercial License: An ICP Commercial License, known as 'ICP Zheng' in Chinese allows online platforms or third-party sellers of goods and services to host their website or access CDN services in China. To apply for an ICP Commercial License, you must first obtain an ICP Filing. After obtaining both an ICP Filing and ICP Commercial License you will be eligible to launch your e-commerce website on a China-based server or CDN. An ICP Commercial License takes approximately 60 working days to process.

After the appropriate application materials have been collected, your hosting provider will submit your ICP application to the government on your behalf. Your hosting provider will submit your application to the local branch of the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) in the province or municipality where your business is registered. To be eligible for both an ICP Filing and an ICP Commercial License you therefore must have a registered business entity in Mainland China.

Host your website in **Hong Kong**

What if I'm not eligible for an ICP license?

International companies without a business office registration in Mainland China are not eligible to attain an ICP license. This being the case, hosting your website in Hong Kong is the next best option. Hosting in Hong Kong entails less regulatory requirements, as well as close access to Mainland China. Another option is to continue hosting your website in your home country but integrate a CDN with nodes in Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea or Singapore. This will help to minimize latency and optimize your content delivery to China.

Your **company logo** should be visible in the images

Creating a website

In setting up your China-optimized website there are two primary website models for you to consider.

Basic landing page: A basic landing page is a website with static content to market your product and share your brand's story. The landing page could consist of a single page website template with a scrolling menu (as website builders such as Strikingly offer), or a multi-page website consisting of 4-6 pages that include an About Us, Products, Our History and a Contact Us page. The landing page should also integrate professional images of your production facilities, employees, customers, office, farm or storage facilities. Your company logo should also ideally be visible in the images.

E-commerce platform: The second option is to develop a stand-alone e-commerce platform where consumers can research as well as purchase products directly from your website. This strategy reduces reliance on third-party platforms and provides you with more control over your product pricing and promotions. Developing a stand-alone e-commerce platform is more suitable for brands with China experience and expertise in operating an e-commerce website. In addition, you will need to double check that you have not signed an exclusive distribution agreement with another e-commerce platform in China.

An e-commerce platform should include individual product listings, a checkout page, purchaser comments, online customer service, and online payments optimized for the China market including Alipay and UnionPay. Building your own e-commerce platform also involves adhering to higher levels of compliance and operational demands. Operation demands include incorporating Chinese-language customer service and driving traffic to your website, both of which you may want to consider outsourcing to an experienced third-party service provider based in China.

Suggested platforms- **Magento, Strikingly** and **Wordpress**

Website development and design basics

Whether you are outsourcing your website development to a professional web design agency (ideally an agency with China experience) or building your own site, it is important to understand basic development and design requirements for China.

DNS

If your hosting server is based in China it is recommended that you also host your DNS (domain name settings) for your domain in China. This will help to alleviate any speed issues or glitches caused by bandwidth and other restrictions to local users. Purchasing a Chinese domain (.cn) is relatively straightforward, as it requires only passport identification. A Chinese domain name application takes approximately 2-3 days to process.

Website building platforms

Popular international website building platforms such as Wordpress, Drupal, Wix, Strikingly and Shopify are all accessible in China. However if you are using a website builder with integrated web hosting, you will need to check that they also provide a China hosting option. Shopify and Wix for example do not offer web hosting in China.

Wordpress and Strikingly are the two best international options to create a basic China landing page. Strikingly has a strong emphasis on mobile design and offers the option of integrated China hosting. Wordpress can be used as a website builder but hosted on a third-party web hosting platform in China. Magento, Strikingly and Wordpress are suggested platforms for building an e-commerce integrated website. If you decide to use a website building platform you will need to ensure that you disable Google Fonts[1], which slows down rendering speed in China. Wordpress for example has numerous plugins you can install to disable Google Fonts.
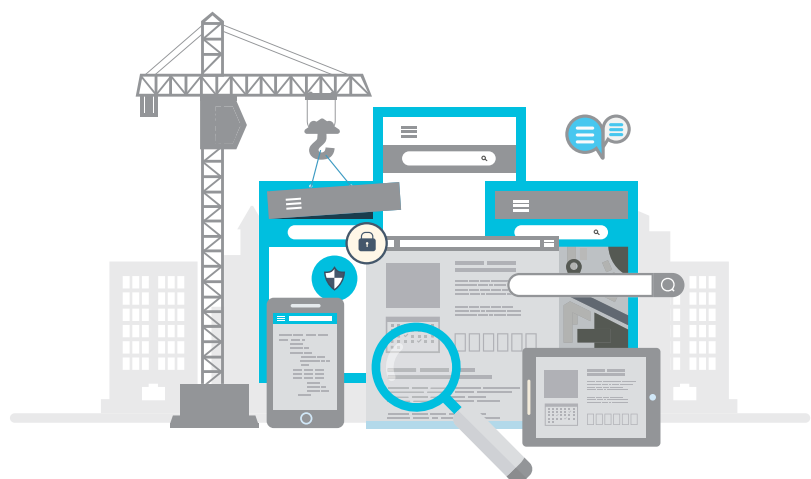
Communicate your **brand credentials** to potential customers

Website design

Website design priorities are somewhat different when catering to a Chinese audience. Chinese corporate websites tend to veer from minimalistic website design found in the West, and instead opt for more content-heavy designs, as well as vibrant colors and Flash promotion banners. Chinese consumers tend to trust corporate websites based on the depth, authority and creditworthiness of content provided rather than on navigational and aesthetic design.

As an international brand your main focus should be building a website that communicates your brand credentials to potential customers. Important credentials to highlight via text, images and video include your business registration, compliance certificates, awards, government relationships, customer testimonies, strategic partners and memberships of industry-based organizations.

Translation

When translating content into Chinese characters it is important that you use a high-quality translation service to localize your content. If you are launching an e-commerce platform it is especially important to draw on a professional marketing service to optimize the copywriting of your product listings and integrate Chinese keywords for SEO purposes.

Social media

Your website should include Chinese social media integration, such as Youku for online video and Weibo for public social media accounts.

Security

Finally, if you are integrating online payments to your website you will need to strongly consider cloud security products in order to protect against DDoS (Distributed Denial of Service) and other malicious attacks which are common in China.

Localize your website design and content for a Chinese audience

Conclusion

While launching a Shopify or Wordpress website in your home country may only take a matter of days or even hours to configure and deploy, transplanting this model to China is less suitable. Launching a China-ready website involves more technical considerations and longer lead-in time to deploy.

Acquiring an ICP license can be complicated, and the reality is that many international brands are not eligible to host their website in China without a Chinese business registration. In which case, it is best to consider hosting in Hong Kong, or to access a CDN in close range to Mainland China.

Localizing your website design and content for a Chinese audience also requires special attention. As mentioned, Chinese consumers are extremely street-smart when it comes to brand research, and skipping corners on your online presence can cost your company potential sales. In order to build trust and optimize sales conversion on your own website, you may need to call on professional service providers to assist with design, content writing, translation, social media integration, security and SEO optimization.

While the full process may seem daunting and time-consuming, paying attention to each individual step, from hosting to social media integration, adds up to a competitive edge over rival brands in China.

References

1. Google's suite of services including Google Fonts, Gmail, Google Drive and Google Analytics are not openly available for Internet users based inside Mainland China due to current restrictions.

Find out more about how to launch your China optimized website on the Alibaba Cloud international website: www.alibabacloud.com/chinaconnect