

The Application of Communication Strategy in Automobile Brand Marketing

—Take Daimler China as an example

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Abstract: With the continuous and stable development of China's economy, the sales of luxury car brands in the Chinese market have grown steadily, and the competition among car brands has become increasingly fierce. This article takes Daimler China as an example, starting from the Chinese automobile marketing environment, combined with the SWOT analysis method, analyzing Daimler China's overall marketing environment, competitive advantages, disadvantages, and future development opportunities and threats. From the perspective of the passenger car and commercial vehicle market, this paper analyzes the deficiencies in the communication of Daimler's Chinese brand marketing activities and, based on the theory of integrated marketing communication, explores the communication optimization strategy of luxury car brands in the process of Chinese car marketing.

1. Preface

In order to promote the steady development of the automobile industry, the Chinese government has issued a number of supporting policies in recent years. In July 2018, the Chinese government officially lowered import tariffs on complete automobiles and parts^[1]. In 2022, China officially canceled the limit on the number of joint ventures with no more than two and opened up the shareholding ratio. The foreign shareholding limit on new energy vehicles was also officially canceled.^[2]

In recent years, car sales of luxury passenger car brands in China have grown steadily. Among them, Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Audi have the largest market sales volume and occupy the top three luxury car brands in the Chinese auto market all year round. At the same time, competition among luxury car brands has also intensified. Within the first echelons of Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and Audi, there are alternating changes in rankings. In 2021, BMW's sales increased significantly, surpassing Mercedes-Benz to win China's luxury car sales championship.

Mercedes-Benz (Mercedes-Benz) has entered the Chinese market for more than 30 years. As a luxury car brand under the world-renowned century-old car company Daimler AG, the brand image, "high-end, quality, and luxurious," of Mercedes-Benz cars has long been deeply rooted in the hearts of the people in China. On May 19, 2022, Mercedes-Benz held a strategic upgrade conference in France and stated that it would further focus on the luxury market and reshape its product lineup^[3].

Although Mercedes-Benz has flourished in China's luxury passenger car market, there has always been a problem of "ungroundedness" in high-end imported commercial vehicles. The presence of Mercedes-Benz commercial vehicles in the Chinese market is mainly obtained through joint venture models. Foton Daimler's Auman series heavy trucks, Fujian Benz Sprinter, and other models are all jointly produced by Daimler and Chinese car companies.

Daimler attaches great importance to brand marketing in the Chinese market and has invested a lot of human and financial resources. Still, it has inevitably exposed some areas for improvement in marketing, crisis handling, and communication. This paper takes Daimler China as an example to analyze the shortcomings of luxury car brands in China's marketing and explores the communication optimization strategies of luxury car brands in the process of Chinese car marketing based on the theory of integrated marketing communication.

2. Daimler China's auto marketing environment and SWOT analysis

2.1 Introduction to Daimler China

Daimler is a world-renowned German century-old automobile company. In 2005, Beijing Benz-Daimler Chrysler Automobile Co., Ltd. was officially established in Beijing; in February 2012, Foton Daimler Automobile Co., Ltd. was grandly established in Beijing, aiming at the global economical medium and heavy truck market; in 2013, Mercedes-Benz Mercedes-Benz (China) Automobile Sales Co., Ltd. (MBCL) and Beijing Benz (China) Automobile Sales Co., Ltd. (BBAC) formally merged to form Beijing Mercedes-Benz Sales and Service Co., Ltd. (BMBS).

In the passenger car market, Mercedes-Benz, a subsidiary of Daimler, sells products in China, including sedans, SUVs, MPVs, coupes, roadsters, pure electric vehicles, plug-in hybrids, and Smart. There are 12 series and more than 100 models, including Mercedes AMG. In 2020, Mercedes-Benz delivered a total of 774,000 passenger cars in China, a year-on-year increase of 11.7%, as shown in Figure 1, keeping pace with BMW and Audi among luxury car brands^[4].

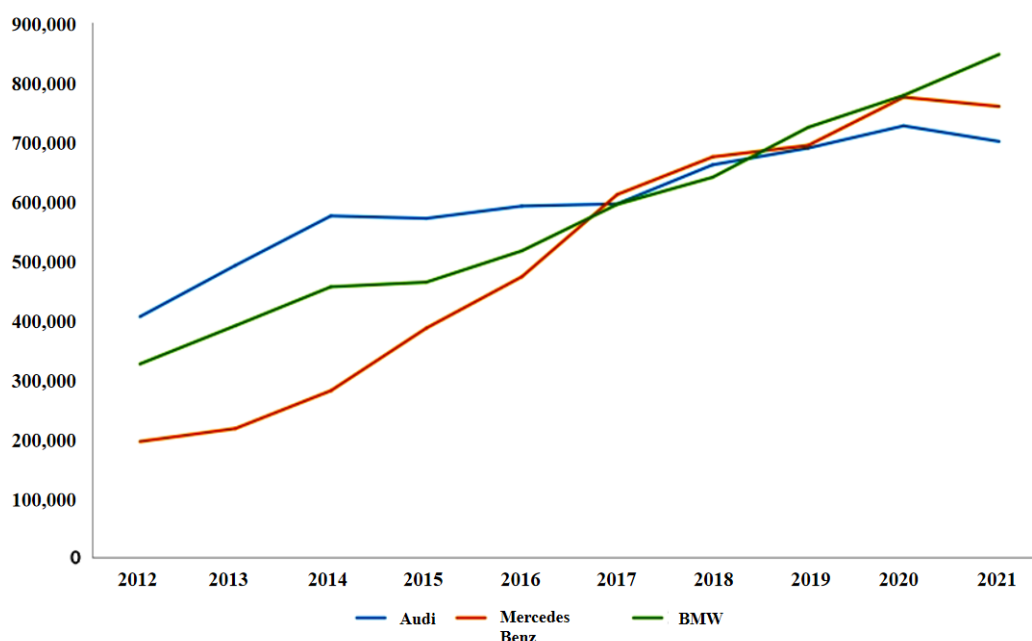


Figure 1: Sales volume of the Top 3 luxury car brands in China from 2012 to 2021

In the commercial vehicle market, the heavy-duty trucks produced by Beijing Foton Daimler Automobile have performed well in the Chinese market in recent years: in 2020, the cumulative sales of heavy-duty trucks were 150,200 units, a year-on-year increase of 75%, the largest increase in the industry; the market share reached 9.3%, an increase of 2 percentage points year-on-year; sales of heavy trucks with automatic transmission reached 36,200 units, a year-on-year increase of 574%^[5]. Not only that, the Mercedes-Benz domestic heavy truck ACTROS produced by Foton Daimler Automobile Factory officially rolled off the production line on September 23, 2022, and will be officially launched on December 10, 2022^[6], marking the official entry of Mercedes-Benz domestic heavy trucks production stage and entered a new stage of operation in China.

2.2 Analysis of Daimler's Auto Marketing Environment in China

(1) Competitor analysis

As the fastest-growing segment of China's passenger car market, the SUV market has flourished in recent years. With the rapid sales growth in the luxury SUV market, more and more competitors have joined the market segment, and competing models have exploded. As shown in Table 1, taking Mercedes-Benz GLC as an example, its main direct competitors are Audi Q5 and BMW X3. Mercedes-Benz GLC has a strong brand advantage. With the upgrade of the Chinese consumer market and the slight price reduction after localization, Mercedes-Benz GLC has maintained a

high-speed growth in sales even though the discount rate of the market terminal is relatively small after its launch. However, after the domestic production of the BMW X3, it is consistent with the overseas version. While the configuration is rich, its market terminal is greatly discounted, resulting in a year-on-year growth momentum of the BMW X3 that exceeds that of the Mercedes-Benz GLC and Audi Q5.

Table 1: Comparisons of luxury passenger car sales in China in 2021

Rank	Brand/Car Model	2021.01-2021.12	2020.01-2020.12	Year-on-year increase
1	BMW X3	149,742	134,232	11.6%
2	Audi Q5	139,909	149,180	-6.2%
3	Mercedes-Benz GLC	135,884	165,170	-17.7%
Data resources: China Passenger Car Market Information Association(CPCA)				

(2) Consumer analysis

Due to the explosive development of China's auto industry, the domestic auto market has gradually shifted from a seller's market to a buyer's market. Until now, consumers have fully grasped the initiative in the auto consumption market and enjoyed sufficient bargaining power. In the luxury passenger car consumption market, the average age of consumers continues to show a trend in the younger generation. As the first luxury brand to enter China, Mercedes-Benz is well aware of Chinese consumers' preferences and consumption habits. The products sold by Mercedes-Benz in the Chinese market will be re-developed and upgraded in detail according to the preferences and needs of Chinese consumers. This is also one of the essential reasons for the success of the Mercedes-Benz brand in China.

(3) Marketing intermediary analysis

A marketing intermediary is an essential link in the marketing process of enterprises and plays a vital role in communication between consumers and automobile manufacturers. In the large-scale passenger car market, due to the stable or even stagnant development of the automobile consumer market, the coverage of 4S stores of major automobile brand dealers has become saturated; at the same time, affected by the new crown pneumonia epidemic and intensified brand competition, dealers The profit margin of new car sales continues to decline, and many marketing intermediaries have changed the traditional offline marketing model of 4S stores to an online marketing model mainly in the form of live broadcasting. According to statistics, in 2021, 1,944 auto dealers in China were deregistered, 161 more than the 1,783 in 2020^[7], and the deregistration speed will be further accelerated. At the same time, Mercedes-Benz officials have stated that they will cancel the "4S store" model in Australia; authorized car dealers can no longer sell new cars. Customers can only book from the manufacturer's official website, and the retail price of new cars is unified. If the strategy is effective, it may be implemented in China.

2.3 SWOT analysis of Daimler in China

The SWOT analysis method is based on the external market and industry environment, and integrates the identified opportunities and threats with the company's strengths and weaknesses, conducts a comprehensive analysis, and obtains relevant conclusions based on the analysis, which provides a basis for the company's marketing and development strategies.

(1) S: Strength

Daimler's Mercedes-Benz has a substantial brand value as a strong backing for marketing. Mercedes-Benz is considered one of the world's most high-end car brands. Its perfect technical level, excellent quality standards, and innovative ability are commendable. Therefore, in terms of brand history and reputation, the Mercedes-Benz brand's cultural accumulation still excels in the automotive industry and is its biggest competitive advantage.

(2) W: Weakness

The marketing strategy of Mercedes-Benz in China is still based on traditional channel marketing, and most of the annual marketing expenses are used in traditional media channels. For

example, at the beginning of the launch of the new-generation E-class sedan, many print advertisements were placed. Although the effect was eye-catching, the actual impact was different than expected. Due to a lack of interaction with fans and stereotyped content on the new media social platform, the existing Sina official Weibo restricts customer viscosity and brand affinity.

(3) O: Opportunity

With the continuous improvement of China's per capita income level, the consumption growth of China's luxury passenger car market is becoming increasingly strong. Since 2019, the global economy has experienced sluggish growth due to the impact of the new crown pneumonia epidemic, but the sales of China's luxury car market have bucked the trend, and the situation is gratifying. At the same time, as the luxury car consumer group gradually shifts from the middle-aged generation to the younger generation, the number of consumers continues to rise, bringing growth momentum to the sales of luxury cars. In addition, with the official roll-off of the first domestically produced Mercedes-Benz heavy truck from Foton Daimler's factory, the future performance in the field of commercial vehicles is also worth looking forward to.

(4) T: Threat

Competition among luxury car brands is intensifying in China's massive passenger car market. BMW has won the favor of young Chinese people with its pure driving pleasure and excellent acceleration performance. In 2019, BMW surpassed Mercedes-Benz to become the No.1 brand of luxury car sales in the Chinese market, with sales of 723,600. In 2020, Audi A6 surpassed Mercedes-Benz GLC to become the domestic Luxury car sales champion. Not only that, Changan, Geely, Great Wall, BYD, etc., among China's local auto brands, have opened up a vast world of their own in the domestic and even the global markets. Domestic high-end brand cars are also gradually rising. For example, a series of brands such as Lynk & Co and WEY have good market sales.

3. Insufficient communication in marketing

(1) Marketing communication lacks vitality and initiative

Daimler has more than 100 years of history, with first-class product quality, strong reliability, high economic use, and long maintenance cycles. Industry leaders in innovation, interior ergonomics, and safety. The product's superiority deprives the idea of marketing communication of a certain vitality and initiative. In addition, the brand image of Mercedes-Benz has always been synonymous with high quality and luxury in the minds of Chinese consumers, so the marketing communication of Mercedes-Benz in the Chinese market also needs a down-to-earth strategy for the Chinese market. Relying on and using German communication strategies and tools makes it lose the opportunity to communicate sincerely with consumers.

(2) Inefficient communication without a clear positioning

In commercial vehicles, Mercedes-Benz heavy trucks' most familiar advertising slogans are usually a century-old heritage, surging power, and excellent performance. The advantages of the product or the convenience it can bring to oneself. In contrast, Volvo has accurately positioned its products on "safety" from beginning to end, while Scania has firmly grasped the feature of "fuel-saving" and used this concept throughout all marketing communication strategies. Volvo and Scania are deeply rooted in consumers' awareness by repeatedly transmitting product positioning and characteristics to consumers.

(3) Scattered social media marketing, lack of online communication and interaction

With the rapid development of social media networks, consumers are now more than just recipients of the information. In this era, when consumers change from passive to active, one-way marketing communication can no longer accurately convey effective information to target customers. Effective communication can be achieved only by truly understanding the target customers, analyzing and finding out the key information points they care about, and using effective channels to contact them.

Take Mercedes-Benz China's Sina Weibo as an example. As the official Weibo of Mercedes-Benz, before 2016, various activities and essential information about Mercedes-Benz

were displayed on the platform. However, due to the lack of a real understanding of the core content of social media, the Weibo account was criticized by fans due to frequent swiping of the screen and a lack of honest communication with fans.

(4) Insufficient crisis public relations communication

From the "smashing of Mercedes-Benz" incident on December 26, 2001, to the "smashing of Mercedes-Benz again" incident on March 8, 2002, Mercedes-Benz has kept a low profile. In addition to two public letters, negotiations with car owners have proceeded smoothly. Be very cautious. As a result, it has been labeled as "indifferent," "rebellious," and "discriminatory" against Chinese consumers.

Regarding the situation of Mercedes-Benz in China at that time, McKiller, then the president of Mercedes-Benz (China) Co., Ltd., said with a sigh: "The skills of communicating with customers are too important." McGill believes that this is due to the need for more communication between the Mercedes-Benz company and the owner of the Mercedes-Benz car. The lack of mastery of skills led to some misunderstandings, which intensified the problems that could have been resolved through negotiation. "It would be better if there were better communication with the customer at the beginning," he said^[8].

4. Communication Strategy Optimization Based on Integrated Marketing Communication Strategy

With the development of information technology, communication tools and media have undergone innovative changes, communication means and channels have been continuously expanded, and the influence of marketing communication on the market is also gradually expanding. The application of integrated marketing communication(IMC) strategy in China is also increasing. Internationally, as shown in Figure 2, there are five definitions of integrated marketing communication, among which the most comprehensive definition is the definition of integrated marketing communication by Don Schultz and Heidi Schultz in 1998: *<IMC is a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, customers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences^[9].*>

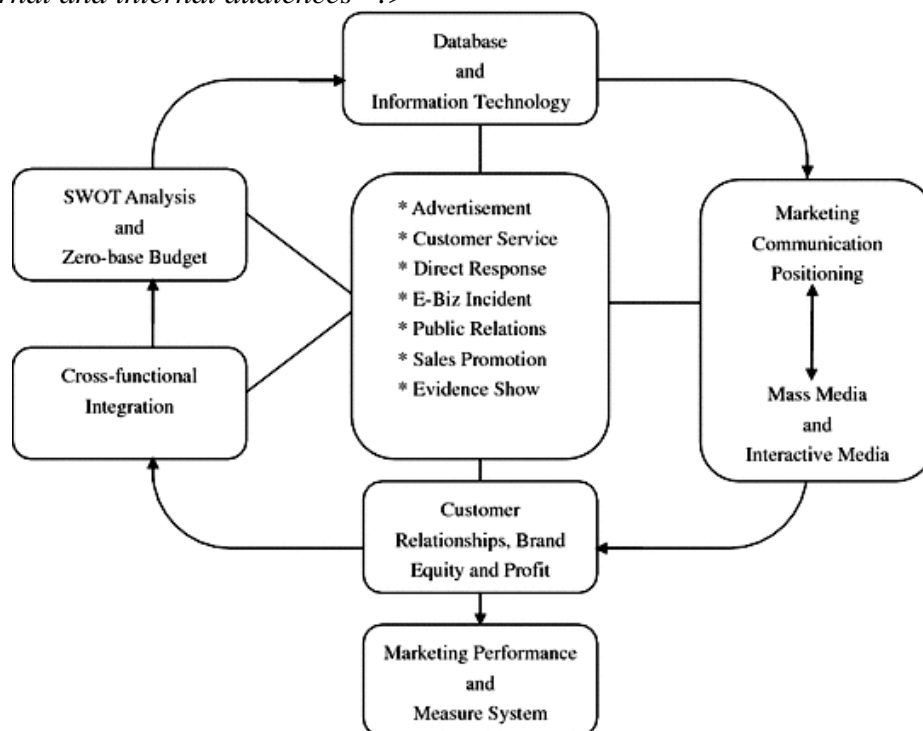


Figure 2: Theory of Integrated Marketing Communication(IMC) Strategy

This definition comprehensively expounds the elements of integrated marketing communication

and proposes a new communication channel that integrates all resources such as advertising, promotion, public relations, direct sales, and websites, emphasizing coherence and synergy to maximize the communication effect and then through precise positioning and effective Communication channels enable the company to closely combine its own competitive advantages with the needs of consumers, and ultimately promote sales^[10]. However, due to the differences in political and cultural factors between China and western developed countries, the actual application of integrated marketing communication in China often needs to combine the characteristics of the Chinese market with playing a better role.

Taking Daimler China as an example, based on the integrated marketing communication theory, the communication optimization strategy in the luxury car brand marketing process is studied as follows.

4.1 Continue to optimize the layout of the existing dealer network

In the Chinese passenger car market, car dealers and 4S stores are an essential part of car brands and marketing and also one of the crucial channels for direct communication with consumers. Before 2013, Mercedes-Benz China was troubled by dealers and after-sales channels. However, since 2013, while Mercedes-Benz's marketing network has expanded rapidly, the relationship between manufacturers and dealers has also been greatly improved. In terms of product matching, Mercedes-Benz China has always maintained the best combination of Chinese product lines and relied on the support of a strong product system to ensure the profitability of dealers.

While the network is rapidly expanding, Mercedes-Benz China implemented the "climbing plan" in China in 2014^[11]. After the store construction is completed, the matching stations, equipment, and scale of after-sales service can be gradually improved. At the same time, Mercedes-Benz China timely adjusted all the original standards, procedures, and ratios that affected the dealers' operation and carried out the "Showroom Optimization Project," which greatly improved the utilization rate of dealers' showrooms. Also, Mercedes-Benz has created a model dealer cooperation and win-win relationship in China. In the future, Mercedes-Benz China should continue to use this strategy, optimize the dealer network layout, gradually eliminate outdated dealers, and consider taking some outdated dealers as pilots promptly to switch from offline sales to online sales.

4.2 Create a "three-level communication mechanism."

In September 2016, Mr. Li Hongpeng, Senior Executive Vice President of Beijing Mercedes-Benz Sales and Service Co., Ltd., said in an exclusive interview with the reporter of "Automobile Vertical and Horizontal" that in order to reshape the long-term and win-win relationship between manufacturers and dealers, Mercedes-Benz China Many innovative models have been formed in the development of the distribution network. For example, Mercedes-Benz China creatively proposed a "three-level communication mechanism"^[11]. The mechanism consists of three levels, from high to low: communication with the top management of the manufacturer, communication at the Mercedes-Benz dealer association level, and communication between regions and dealers. These three levels of communication systems have maintained good trust, transparency, and fairness between Mercedes-Benz China and dealers and laid the foundation for Mercedes-Benz's high-end brand marketing in the Chinese luxury car market.

4.3 Identify effective communication channels and make good use of social media

In recent years, more and more social media users have begun to follow companies and brands on social media platforms, including the automotive industry. According to the survey, 38% of the respondents will search and view new car information on social media platforms before buying a car, and 23% said they would share their purchase experience and experience process on social media platforms. 41% of customers who used social media platforms in the buying process had seen an automotive brand posting that made them consider a purchase. Social media is the medium for socializing and has become the best way for brands to connect with their potential buyers.

In the fierce market competition, Mercedes-Benz China has maintained contact with young consumers through social media to increase communication with the target market. From 2017 to

2020, when the short video platform was developing explosively, Mercedes-Benz China seized this important social media and used platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou to attract customers in China. It is one of the most successful auto brands using social media. As shown in Figure 3, on the Douyin platform alone, Mercedes-Benz has more than 3.33 million fans^[12]. In addition, the Mercedes-Benz long-wheelbase A-class sedan has successfully created the first WeChat ecological, social panoramic marketing case in the automotive industry. The Mercedes-Benz A-Class uses WeChat mini-programs as a key link to connect online and offline service scenarios during its warm-up period, launch period, and continuation period. At the same time, it uses WeChat advertisements, such as circles of friends, public accounts, etc., to achieve exposure, " The function of "search, search" has also achieved excellent results for the mini-program.

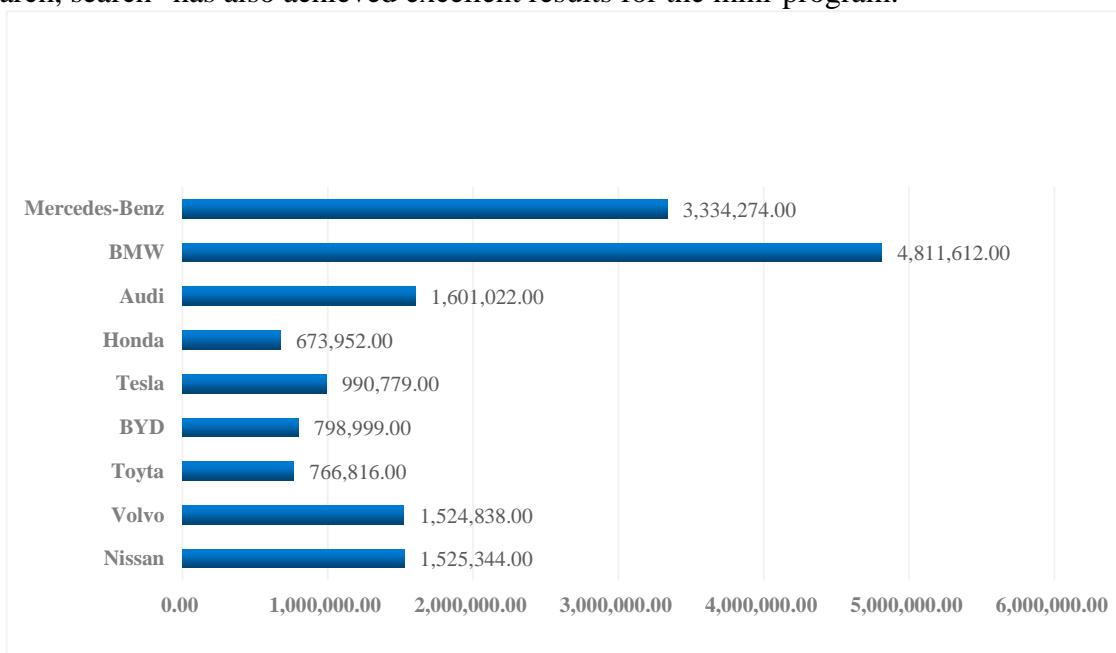


Figure 3: Comparison of the Number of Auto Brand Douyin Fans in China
(Data from “China Automobile News”, as of 2022.1.31)

4.4 Situational marketing promotes communication effect

In recent years, luxury car brands' situational marketing planning and projects have been gradually enriched. This marketing method that allows consumers to understand the connotation and product performance of the brand through personal experience has driven marketing upgrades, better communication effects, and higher sales—order rates. When luxury car brands organize and carry out offline marketing experience activities, online recruitment is usually open to specific high-spending audiences in the car brand-free community.

Considering geographical issues, the recruitment activities of Mercedes-Benz China are usually divided into two types: the first is the recruitment of large-scale nationwide activities initiated by Mercedes-Benz China Automobile Company; the second is the recruitment of regional activities independently initiated by dealers.

For example, on October 22, 2022, the "2022 Mercedes-Benz High-End Model Experience Event" jointly organized by Zhejiang Yuexing and Shaoxing Star 4S Store was held at Puqi Yijing Hotel in Shaoxing. Check-in at Zhenli", "Entering the park by boat and experiencing the charm of Jiangnan," "Enjoy luxury afternoon tea," "Product tasting/test drive," "Sharing fossil research," "Perceiving the charm of art," "Porcelain restoration manual work," "selection dinner" and so on. The organizer not only carefully prepared gift bracelets for the experiencers but also ingeniously chose the venue of the event in a garden with the characteristics of a water town in the south of the Yangtze River, and carefully planned a series of activities, so that consumers could feel leisurely while enjoying the scenery in the garden Enjoy afternoon tea and test drive, bringing consumers an excellent personal experience.

4.5 Establish customer database and make effective evaluations

In the Chinese market, many departments of Daimler China have their own databases. The sales, marketing, after-sales, training, and other departments will maintain their databases according to their work characteristics. The enterprise integrates these data effectively and plans the customer type as a whole to formulate effective communication and promotion strategies.

Taking the Mercedes-Benz truck business as an example, the types of business in the Chinese market can be divided into two types of data in the database; one is for direct sales, and these customers are usually large-scale refits factories, such as Sany Heavy Industry, Zoomlion, Xugong Group, etc.; the other type is customers who sell through dealers, and these customers are usually private transportation companies. For the company level, the company needs to collect information such as its business type, income status, asset-liability ratio, and solvency; for purchase decision makers, fleet captains, and drivers, it is necessary to collect statistical information about individuals, such as gender, age, and income. Educational status, preferences, behavior, and other information. Division of labor and cooperation among various departments by analyzing the market share of products in each market segment to determine the potential market growth; by focusing on analyzing the return on investment of marketing communication; by integrating all factors in marketing communication, scientific analysis of customers, and give differential treatment during communication implementation.

4.6 Communicate promptly to understand customer needs and keenly grasp market trends

For Daimler China, there is a big difference between commercial and passenger vehicle customers. In this regard, the marketing department of the enterprise conducts surveys and interviews representatives from different levels of customers, asking them to list information on how they come into contact with the brand, and directly understands customers' touch points and preferences through interviews and other methods. Through collecting and recording this information, we can truly understand consumers' habits and ideas.

For example, with the continuous growth of China's expressway network and the promotion and implementation of toll-by-weight throughout the country, the economic benefits of heavy truck transportation have become increasingly prominent, and transport vehicles are gradually developing towards large tonnage and multi-axis. The requirements of car owners for transport vehicles gradually shift to high speed and heavy load, lightweight and high fuel economy, and high attendance rate. How transport vehicles can improve overall operational efficiency has become a critical factor in the profitability of vehicle owners. After obtaining the market trends, Mercedes-Benz Commercial Vehicles Division immediately conducted serious research and analysis on the heavy trucks in the Chinese market, and through the in-depth interpretation and promotion of "Total Cost of Ownership (T.C.O.)" so that customers Understand the advantages of buying Mercedes-Benz trucks: For commercial vehicles, the cost of purchasing a car only accounts for 10% to 15% of all expenses in the vehicle's life cycle. Buying a heavy-duty truck is an investment rather than an expense. Mercedes-Benz trucks have an unparalleled investment value advantage.

In the passenger car market, Mercedes-Benz China also accurately understood and determined customer needs through timely multi-channel communication, keenly captured the opportunities in the B+ SUV segment market, and officially launched the GLC long-axis version on October 17, 2018. The model GLC-L has further impacted the rival Audi Q5L in the Chinese luxury car market competition.

4.7 Appropriate management in the communication and handling of crisis events

In recent years, car brand crisis public relations incidents caused by quality accidents have emerged one after another, among which luxury car brand enterprise crisis public relations incidents have particularly attracted media attention. In a product quality crisis, managers need to respond quickly to the crisis and find ways to reduce the loss of brand value and maintain customer loyalty and corporate image. Studies have shown that a company's active communication strategy is

conducive to restoring the company's reputation after a crisis. If the company's incident handling measures are reasonable and appropriate to obtain the public's understanding, it may usher in the public's goodwill and trust; if the company's crisis handling is inappropriate and angers the public and the media, it will seriously threaten the company's products, operations, and organizational reputation and image.

In recent years, crisis public relations incidents represented by Mercedes-Benz, BMW, and other luxury car brands have occurred from time to time. If enterprises fail to follow up and deal with them in time or mishandle them, it will negatively impact brand marketing. Based on the 5S principles of crisis public relations response, the suggestions are as follows:

(1) Shoulder the matter: automakers should express sympathy and comfort from the standpoint of victims and take the initiative to take responsibility;

(2) Sincerity: enterprises should take the initiative to get in touch with the news media, parties, and the public and communicate sincerely;

(3) Speed: enterprises must act decisively, respond quickly, act decisively, and quickly control the development of the situation to prevent the situation from expanding, escalating, and spreading;

(4) System: system operation must be performed during crisis management, and one cannot lose sight of the other;

(5) Standard: It is more convincing to ask a heavyweight third party to speak to the public on its behalf after a crisis than the company's self-justification. It is easier to eliminate consumers' vigilance and regain trust.

5. Conclusion

At present, the marketing competition between the world's luxury car brands in China is becoming increasingly fierce, and in the vital communication link in marketing, due to the lack of understanding of the characteristics of the Chinese auto market and young consumer groups, insufficient or untimely communication inevitably occurs, thus reducing the actual effect of brand marketing. The communication deficiencies exposed by the world's luxury car brands in China's marketing usually include a lack of vitality and initiative in marketing communication, lack of clear positioning of products leading to low communication efficiency, too scattered social media marketing, lack of online communication and interaction, and improper public relations communication for crisis events, etc.

Based on the theory of integrated marketing communication, it is possible to explore the optimal communication strategy of luxury car brands in marketing. Through continuous optimization of the existing dealer network layout, situational marketing to promote communication effects, and appropriate communication and handling of crisis events, enterprises will build an effective way to communicate with consumers and enhance the reputation and word-of-mouth of car brands.

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