

# GLOBAL VIEW notes



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## The Mother of Mobile Software Is Changing Trade Show Management in China

by Michelle Bruno

**I**n four years, mobile software called WeChat has transformed marketing and communication in China. “WeChat is actually more of a portal, a platform, and even a mobile operating system depending on how you look at it,” writes Connie Chan for Andreessen Horowitz. For both Chinese and international exhibition organizers, it is becoming an essential registration, audience promotion, conference directory, and attendee engagement tool.

### Apps within an App

Imagine one mobile app that is actually a portal for other apps. It would be like having all the apps in the Apple Store or Google Play available without having to download and install each one individually. Businesses can use it to create their own channels, called “official accounts,” and build their own apps that access the networking, ecommerce, GPS, content distribution capabilities, and user information inside WeChat. It is also FREE to use.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable aspects of WeChat, says Stephanie Selesnick, president of International



Trade Information, Inc. and U.S. representative for the Shanghai New International Exhibition Center, is that “everyone in China is already using WeChat and they aren’t using individual apps anymore.” She describes the hard-to-explain WeChat as a “combination of Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, voicemails and text with the ability to create unlimited groups.”

### How Organizers Use WeChat

Info Salons, a leading provider of event technology solutions for online and onsite registration, data tracking, and data capture in Asia, has been creating channels and deploying applications for its clients’ exhibitions and conferences on WeChat for over two years. They use it in a number of specific ways:

**Mobile event registration**—attendees use their mobile devices to scan a QR code (WeChat has a built-in QR code reader) and open the show registration page created by Info Salons. When registrants are WeChat users (and almost everyone

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in China is), the registration form pre-populates. Once the registration is complete, users receive a confirmation in the form of a QR Code, which they then use to collect their badges (from anywhere) onsite.

**Conference-directory app**—Info Salons builds show apps on top of the WeChat platform. The apps have all of the features available in most standalone, native event-mobile apps, including general event information, floor plan, exhibitor list, session agenda, speaker list, online mobile registration, interactive marketing, customer services, news, games, and show announcements.

**Attendee engagement solutions**—capabilities already built into WeChat allow attendees to exchange e-business cards, find other visitors nearby, play interactive games, vote, and complete surveys and evaluations.

**Payments**—attendees can pay for registration, additional sessions, merchandise or special events using QR codes and one-click payment portals set up for each show within WeChat.

**Mobile marketing**—Organizers can create personalized audience promotion campaigns and use custom QR codes to track where registrations are coming from. Event invitations, tickets and confirmations can be sent through WeChat and registration links can easily be shared with others in WeChat.

**Content delivery and geolocation**—WeChat can access the Bluetooth and GPS capabilities of smart devices allowing organizers and sponsors to deliver personalized, proximity-based messages to attendees on site.

## How Organizers Benefit

Because the WeChat Application Programming Interface (API) is open and the platform is free and easy to use, it is delivering tremendous benefits to organizers looking to reach exhibitors and attendees in China:

- Increased pre-registrations. “Ten years ago, only about

10% of attendees pre-registered for an exhibition or conference. Today, using QR codes and WeChat, we are getting 50% pre-registering,” says Jo-Anne Kelleway, founder and CEO of The Info Salons Group.

- Unified communication. There are over 750 million Chinese users of WeChat. That means that organizers don’t have to build different promotional campaigns on different marketing automation apps or social media platforms to reach their prospects and customers. They can build one campaign on WeChat and reach everyone.
- Cost savings. Using Wechat to advertise, market and communicate with show participants is free. There is no platform or advertising expense. The costs for onsite registration have dipped dramatically as well. “We used to use hundreds of terminals and staff. Now we use hardly any. The cost savings is huge and we don’t have to charge our clients for the equipment,” Kelleway says.
- Cultural acceptance. “It is not considered rude to message someone on WeChat. It’s a very quick way to get an answer,” Kelleway explains.
- Year-round community building. Because attendees use WeChat all the time, for everything (paying bills, making doctor appointments, doing banking, paying for goods and services, reading the news), organizers can “speak” with them all year long, unlike typical mobile event apps experience a large user drop off in usage immediately after the show concludes.

There is currently no equivalent to WeChat anywhere in the world, experts say. While WeChat can be downloaded on any smartphone anywhere—meaning that any organizer can use it—the massive user base is located primarily in China for now. The owners of WeChat, Chinese investment holding company Tencent, have plans to expand to the rest of the world. When they do, the potential for exhibition organizers and all brands could be breathtaking.

Global View Notes is published by:  
[Rogers Worldwide](#)

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