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WeChat: The app you've never heard of that's key to cracking China

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Every day Rania Awad reaches out to some of Roy Young Chemist's most important customers through a social media app you've probably never heard of.

The shoppers are 9000 kilometres away in mainland China, where Facebook is blocked by the country's so-called Great Firewall.

But Chinese of all ages have taken to the homegrown all-in-one social media platform WeChat in droves.

The app is basic to look at but boasts a suite of features akin to Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Instagram, Tinder and Chatroulette rolled into one.

WeChat rocketed past the 700 million regular-user mark earlier this year and Roy Young, in Chatswood, Sydney, is one business realising the potential of tapping into that audience.

Miss Awad, e-commerce manager at the Pharmacy 4 Less chain, said Roy Young's account had grown a following of more than 10,000 people since registering in November.

About 70 per cent of those followers are in mainland China and the rest are Chinese-speaking Australians.

"You can't go to China without doing WeChat as well, just like a business cannot afford not to have a Facebook page here in Australia," Miss Awad said.

"We're able to interact directly with our customers and it increases the trust – if there any are issues we know about it straight away."

The chemist sends followers information about popular products, like vitamins and milk formula, and news about the latest specials.

Those dispatches spark conversation among followers and their friends and have led to "significant" sales for Roy Young, Miss Awad said.

Benjamin Sun, director of digital marketing firm ThinkChina, said WeChat was much better integrated with e-commerce than its western counterparts.

Customers can order and pay for goods from within the app itself, with no need to go to the website of the business selling them.

Another system, WeChat Pay, lets users add funds to a "digital wallet" and then transfer money to friends, buy items in person by scanning barcodes, and pay for goods online.

"Chinese people are not comfortable entering credit card numbers [online] in any way – that's where the problems are," Mr Sun said.

"So that's why consumers are very likely to use WeChat Pay instead."

Facebook is playing catch-up, launching a payment feature in its messenger app in the United States last year.

Mr Sun said more than 2 million WeChat users either lived in Australia or visited every year, making the platform valuable even for brands that did not export to China.

His firm runs WeChat accounts for brands including Australia Post, L'Oréal and even a construction company, whose main targets were Chinese-speaking Australians.

"They're not trying to sell to China; they're trying to connect with the Chinese community in Melbourne and Brisbane," Mr Sun said.

This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/business/wechat-the-app-youve-never-heard-of-thats-key-to-cracking-china-20160703-gpwcv3.html>