REPORT TAKEAWAYS

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS ARE THE MOST POPULAR NBA TEAM ONLINE IN CHINA.

JEREMY LIN IS THE MOST POPULAR CURRENT NBA PLAYER ONLINE IN CHINA.

KOBE BRYANT REMAINS THE MOST FOLLOWED NBA STAR. HIS LEGACY LIVES ON.
Welcome to the NBA Red Card 2018. For the second year in a row, we have produced a comprehensive analysis on the digital performance of NBA teams, players and the sponsors. The aim of this report is to educate sports professionals, teams, and organisations about the basketball digital landscape in China and to highlight new opportunities and potential challenges.

Following the NBA Red Card 2017 report, there has been a lot of discussion about the strength of the NBA in China. What is rarely discussed though is the strategic positioning of the teams and players. The NBA Red Card 2018 aims to measure the influence of both of these online in China across five different metrics. The report also undertakes an analysis of the content performance of two NBA teams, comparing their global and Chinese channels to reveal the best practices and key factors for success online in China.

NBA players are free to leverage the NBA’s strength in China financially. Two of the most recent examples of this are the $80 million, 10-year deal between ANTA and Klay Thompson in June 2018 and Dwyane Wade’s lifetime deal with Chinese apparel brand Li Ning. Franchise revenue streams, meanwhile; such as jersey sales, new sponsorship deals and tourism, are becoming increasingly competitive.

One of the most striking findings from the report is that despite NBA teams being amongst the most innovative digital groups, only a small number have a clear content strategy and a long term plan in China. Most notable are the NBA Red Card 2018 winners, the Golden State Warriors, who produced special edition Chinese New Year jerseys for the sixth consecutive year and executed a tailored digital marketing strategy for China. As part of their success, the team has been able to secure four sponsorship deals and boast the highest quantity of jerseys sold in China. The Dallas Mavericks are the highest movers in our rankings, with owner Mark Cuban himself leading their marketing strategy. The most successful was challenging Chinese fans to create a new nickname for the team; 100,000 votes later “the Lone Ranger Heroes” were established.

Congratulations go to both the Golden State Warriors and Jeremy Lin as the winners of the NBA Red Card 2018, as well as Kobe Bryant for continuing to grow his legacy in China and retaining his title as the most followed NBA star. All provide examples of what dedication and focus towards this market can achieve. We are also looking forward to welcoming the Dallas Mavericks and the Philadelphia 76ers for this year’s China Games, marking a 25th consecutive sell out crowd for the NBA in China. 2019 is going to be another fantastic year for the NBA and all of its China stakeholders.
The NBA teams were assessed across the following metrics:

Full methodology available upon request.
WINNER: GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS

In order to better understand the global social strategy of NBA teams, we analysed upwards of 2,000 posts over a set duration for both the Portland Trail Blazers and the Golden State Warriors’ Twitter and Weibo accounts. Whilst both platforms have individual traits and unique user behaviours, they are the closest platforms in terms of output, engagement and channel strategy.

WARRIORS VS AVG. NBA TEAM

3X more popular

1. Situation: The Golden State Warriors are the most followed account on Weibo with 4.4 Million followers. They also have a strong engagement rate (average engagement divided by total followers) of 0.042% which is nearly the same as Twitter and the highest amongst all NBA teams. These results are similar on Twitter, where the Warriors have one of the most popular accounts of all the NBA teams with 5.9 million followers and a higher than industry average engagement rate of 0.045%.

2. Reason: Whilst the Warriors’ recent triumphs are one of the main drivers for progress online, their popularity cannot be attributed solely to sporting success. The Warriors are the team with the highest output and the highest percentage of rich media (42% videos and gifs per month). Most importantly, the Warriors post 6x more China original content than the average NBA Team on Weibo. From a content diversity perspective, the Warriors leverage Chinese interest around entertainment, with over half of their output focus on this category. This resulted in a 14x higher total engagement than the average NBA team.

3. Takeaway: The Warriors show a clear social strategy for the local market which has led to the team developing their brand identity and generating a cult following online in China. This dedication has enabled them to translate their sporting and global digital success into the #1 spot online in China as well as reaping the financial reward. The Golden State Warriors are not just the #1 team in terms of jersey sales in China, but with 4 Chinese partners, the franchise has the highest number of sponsors from this region.
CONTENDER:
PORTLAND TRAIL BLAZERS

We performed a Weibo content audit on the Trail Blazers to gain a clear understanding of their digital performance in the NBA Red Card 2018. Serving as a case study for other relative teams, we have then analysed their Twitter performance to draw comparison on the team’s approaches to both platforms.

1. Situation: The Trail Blazers’ Twitter is renowned for being one of the most fan-centric NBA team accounts online, however their approach to China is very different. On Twitter, the team has a relatively strong engagement rate of 0.031%, driven by their entertaining interactions with fans and other accounts, at an average rate of 4 per day. Yet given their Weibo engagement rate is 5x lower than Twitter - placing them in 24th on the NBA Red Card - the Blazers have a long way to go to bring their fan-centric social approach to Chinese netizens.

2. Reason: On Twitter, the Blazers integrate the fan community into their social strategy. One in ten posts incorporate a fan-centric element, including CSR, fan activities and votes etc, however, only 4% of their Weibo output was fan specific. This unique characteristic was decisive to the outcome of their digital ranking. Their output on Weibo is also significantly lower than on Twitter, only posting around 25% of content featuring on their global channel. This has led to lower exposure as well as fewer interactions and touchpoints with fans. In comparison to the Warriors, the Blazers focus primarily on match related content, rather than the more engaged entertainment content on Weibo.

3. Takeaway: The Trail Blazers are lacking a clear Chinese content strategy to grow their brand in China. The team needs to localise their successful western approach to the China market, and by putting the fans first, the franchise will become increasingly popular in China. This in turn will open the door to more opportunities such as sponsorship deals or an increase in jersey sales.

BLAZERS WEIBO VS. BLAZERS TWITTER

lower engagement

11X

Data correct as of July 31st 2018
The NBA players were assessed according to the following metrics:

Full methodology and table available upon request.
THE WINNER: JEREMY LIN

Jeremy Lin’s Weibo boasts the highest average engagement of all current NBA players - 10x higher than the league-wide average, whilst also commanding the second highest following amongst current NBA players online in China. This is due to his high posting frequency, interaction with online stars, content originality and platform proliferation. In addition, he has launched his own cartoon series and featured prominently in a Chinese New Year documentary hosted on the official NBA Weibo channel. He has also been quick to jump on new trends, launching an account on short form video platform Douyin, amassing over 6.8 million followers and becoming the highest followed western sports star in the process.

KOBE BRYANT’S LEGACY LIVES ON

Kobe Bryant has continued to build his brand online as he engages with Chinese fans on life outside of basketball. The superstar has travelled to China for 15 consecutive years, whilst his Academy Award announcement was the most engaged post from a basketball star last season. In the list of current NBA players’ performance, the NBA Red Card 2017 winner would still be ranked as #1 above Jeremy Lin, and remains the most followed NBA star with twice as many followers than Stephen Curry.

Over 25 current NBA players have endorsement deals with a Chinese apparel brand

3 PLAYERS
THE FACE: KLAY THOMPSON

12 PLAYERS IN TOTAL
THE FACE: DWYANE WADE

10 PLAYERS IN TOTAL
THE FACE: TONY PARKER, DWIGHT HOWARD

NBA players are increasingly looking East to monetise their popularity and brand. Currently, over 25 NBA players have signed with Chinese apparel brands, with Klay Thompson and Dwyane Wade making the biggest headlines. The advantages are clear - aside from the monetary incentives compared with Western apparel brands, they increase the awareness of players’ personal brands in China. Almost every single one of Li Ning’s 6,000 stores in China stock Wade’s signature shoes, with 10 stores exclusively dedicated to the Wade brand.
When comparing the NBA Red Card ranking and the Top 5 jersey sales in China, 4 of the 5 teams feature in both lists, highlighting a direct correlation between online performance in China and jersey sales.

Having identified through our team analysis that a clear sustained commitment to digital in China has a direct positive impact on popularity online, we thus concluded that investment in digital performance can be a major driving factor behind sales in China. The Chicago Bulls are the only exception here, something that can be attributed to the historic and ongoing popularity of Michael Jordan in China, particularly amongst the older generation of basketball fans, who are not as regularly active.

In contrast to the team rankings, there is low correlation between the players’ online popularity and the jersey sales of players despite them having more power and freedom to monetise their popularity. Of the NBA Red Card Top 5, only Stephen Curry sits in the top 5 for jersey sales.

China is an icon market, where players are the main trigger for fans to follow a team. We discovered that players who are not investing in their digital presence are leaving millions of dollars on the table in China. LeBron James, despite his digital savviness in the West, his widespread interest in China and offline presence through Nike tours, does not have an official social presence.
As China’s sport industry is maturing, western brands are shifting their focus from brand awareness to monetisation. When looking at the NBA in China, there is a lot to learn for other sports organisations, especially when looking at sponsor and partner activations. NBA China has more than 40 media and marketing partners in China, more than any other sport. The NBA launched its sub-division, NBA China, 10 years ago and is now worth more than $4 billion.

The breakdown of NBA’s Chinese partners shows that 20% are from the “Electronics & Gaming” industry. This is due to the NBA’s global focus on being the most innovative sports organisation in the world but also highlights their local expertise. This industry overlaps heavily with their target audience and gives the NBA a major competitive advantage in the market.

Many of the NBA China partnerships target longer-term sponsorships with multiple purposes. A good example of this is their multi-million dollar deal with Tencent, which not only fulfills a financial purpose, but also builds the technological infrastructure for the league’s China development, including their digital broadcasting platform. Similarly, their partnership with Ctrip presents a great opportunity for the NBA to grow in the thriving Chinese tourism industry.

NBA China manages to successfully activate these partners with local expertise. The league’s Chinese New Year campaign featured 12 of its franchises, with Dongfeng Nissan acting as the campaign title partner, whilst the NBA also co-launched a CSR project (including Spalding) around China. Over the Chinese New Year period, a total of 93 games were broadcasted in China across its various media partners, with Nike also designing special edition Chinese Jerseys for a number of the 12 participating teams. The holistic campaign was activated digitally through Mini Games on the NBA App, on Chinese social platforms as well as the fan loyalty platform NBA QMQ, presenting fans with the chance to win a trip to a NBA game.
The 30 NBA teams have a combined 68 million social followers in China. The league’s commitment to launch every team online has provided the foundation for each to succeed and grow their own following and revenue. No other single sports league has a comprehensive team presence with this level of followers, and the NBA’s rule on this has been instrumental.

The team and talent that appeared at the top of the rankings have implemented a local content and platform approach to their social presence. Jeremy Lin launched the most followed Douyin channel of any sports star, meanwhile the Warriors have the highest percentage of original China content across all teams. This China focus has been key to their success.

With all 30 teams and over 80 NBA players online, it’s hard to deliver something different. The teams and players at the top of the rankings have been able to negotiate this competitive landscape and develop something unique. The Mavericks nickname initiative became a record-breaking campaign, and will be followed up by their China Games appearance this year.

Four of the top five in the NBA Red Card ranking featured in the top 5 of team jersey sales. This correlation confirms that there is a direct link between social popularity and investment into this market with significant revenue streams from China. The Warriors also have the highest number of China partners, presenting an opportunity to further activate in this region.

The biggest challenge for the NBA, teams and talent now is to deliver a value-add to the Chinese stakeholders. Very few sports IPs are asking themselves ‘how do we give something back to China’, a question that reverses the traditional marketing narrative. The fan loyalty app ‘NBA QiuMiQuan’ and the ongoing ‘NBA Cares’ initiative, both showcased during CNY, are a step in the right direction.

Following the findings from this report, we’ve identified five key takeaways that can be applied to not only NBA franchises and talent, but also implemented by global sports brands.
ABOUT MAILMAN

Est. 1999, Mailman is China’s leading sports digital marketing agency. We have over 120 experts across China, UK and the US powering the brand for the world’s most ambitious sports organisations and athletes.

Our services include:
- Digital Strategy
- Content Production
- Technology
- Social Media
- PR & Brand Activation
- Sponsorship
- E-Commerce

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## Full NBA Team Ranking

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