

Making Friends the Weibo Way

By Campbell Morrison

In less than six months, Mark McDowell, Long Wu and Lin Lin, all officers in the Embassy of Canada to China, have made more than 100,000 friends.

With much support from Ambassador David Mulroney, and after several months of developing a plan, in June the officers launched the embassy's presence on Weibo, China's wildly successful social media equivalent to Twitter.

Within two months, the embassy's Weibo account had 40,000 followers. In October it broke the 100,000 barrier and was on its way to becoming number four in terms of followers among the dozens of embassies in Beijing that have accounts.



"It is a complex and alien environment," says McDowell, counsellor of public diplomacy at the embassy. "We did our homework about the social media environment in China, but in the end, the only way to do something very new like this is to just get started and learn as you go along."

It's all about content and knowing what will appeal to Weibo's 250 million (and growing) subscribers, most of whom are between the ages of 18 and 30. Wu, Second Secretary and Vice Consul, and Lin, Media Services Coordinator, ensure that the content is diverse, transparent and interesting. All content is posted in Chinese only.

Like Twitter, Weibo has a limit on the size of messages, but in Weibo's case it is 140 Chinese characters rather than Twitter's 140 letters. It means that Weibo effectively allows the equivalent of about 100 words, allowing for greater communications options.

And the whole embassy is getting behind the account. The visa section has a weekly column. The economic section offers Canadian economic news three times a week. "Inside the Embassy" features stories about the embassy every Thursday. There are photographs and videos. The most popular subject is food, such as icewine and seafood, followed by studying in Canada. But the embassy also posts information about tourism and cultural events, such as a recent music festival headlined by the Canadian band Cowboy Junkies, and they address subjects such as human rights.

"We are not afraid to be entertaining and fun, but we are also not afraid to talk about serious issues too, like the environment, the rule of law or food safety," says Wu.

The key to success, he added, is responding to the followers. The objective is to respond within 24 hours so followers know that the embassy is acknowledging their interest.

Typically, the response is even faster. For example, the Weibo team live-blogged from Beijing's major education expo, generating hundreds of responses and questions and quickly connecting followers from distant parts of China with the Canadian schools exhibiting in Beijing. It followed this up with live-blogging from the seafood trade show, introducing Canadian products to a wide and enthusiastic audience.

"It is a very powerful medium," says Lin. "It's like electricity. You can use it for anything."



From left to right: Lin Lin, Mark McDowell, Long Wu - photo: DFAIT