



People power: Kin-ming Liu demonstrates one of Apple Daily's marketing ploys at Publish Asia

Principles and profits

In Hong Kong, says Kin-ming Liu, it's possible to take a stand and make money in newspapers

SARS IS COMPLETELY OVER IN THE SAR. AT LEAST THAT WOULD BE THE CONCLUSION TO DRAW FROM THE SPECTACULAR EVENT THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE HONG KONG SPECIAL ADMINISTRATIVE REGION ON JULY 1, THE SIXTH ANNIVERSARY OF THE CHINESE TAKEOVER OF THE FORMER BRITISH COLONY.

Just a few months back – when SARS was still killing people on a daily basis – people would jump away if you sneezed. Clearing your throat would make you persona non grata. Restaurants and cinemas were virtually empty. Masks covered most people's worried faces, and you tried to keep away from everyone.

Then came July 1, when 500,000 people or probably more endured six hours of intense heat and great discomfort and jammed the narrow streets to stage the biggest demonstration since the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989.

The Hong Kong government should have taken advantage of such a massive display of humanity and declared: "SARS is over. Look how so many people have rushed on to the streets for a carnival!"

Of course, the authorities don't have a

sense of humour. After all, Chief Executive Tung Chee-hwa is facing the biggest political crisis since being appointed by Beijing six years ago. The controversy stems from the government trying to impose draconian national security legislation, the so-called Article 23, without proper consultation and discussion.

Controversy sells newspapers. We at Apple Daily love controversies. Ever since the launch of our paper more than eight years ago, we have never shied away from controversy. Sometimes we became the controversy ourselves. Our philosophy is simple: people will only pick up your paper if it's interesting. I think the overall record would show that readers like our style of journalism. The market has rewarded us by making us one of the most profitable newspapers in Hong Kong.

So, what kind of naughty things did Apple Daily get up to amid the biggest controversy in Hong Kong for years? Well, a few controversial things.

First of all, Article 23 deals with subjects like subversion, sedition and theft of state secrets. Without a clear

and reasonable definition of such offences, journalists in particular would be in great jeopardy while carrying out their jobs. Apple Daily has been at the forefront of campaigning against Article 23. Our news coverage and editorial line has clearly demonstrated our viewpoint. In an environment where self-censorship and kowtowing to China have unfortunately become the norm, it has been quite a lonely stand.

Not only was Apple Daily opposed to Article 23, we also encouraged our readers to stand up for their rights. A few days before the July 1 march, we gave out a million free stickers to our readers. The stickers, with several different designs, carried anti-Article 23 and anti-Tung slogans. The message was clear: join the march! The stickers were scattered all over the city.

On the day of the march, Apple Daily produced a special wraparound which carried a big headline: GET ON TO THE STREETS, WE WON'T LEAVE UNTIL WE SEE YOU. If you opened up the wraparound, it became an anti-Tung poster you could carry on the march. Many did.

All these were quite seditious and subversive activities, I would say. But that's exactly our response to Article 23.

Once again, the market seemed to agree with us. According to a joint survey done by the University of Hong Kong and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, almost 50 per cent of the demonstrators read Apple Daily while our main rival, which enjoys a higher circulation, trailed behind at 22 per cent.

This is so encouraging for us. We know too well that both the quantity and quality of the readership matter. Most of the demonstrators were middle-class professionals. This affluent group of people is what every paper is dying to attract. Not only has Apple Daily a large number of readers (at 343,600, we're No. 2 in the market), but we also have the quality of readers that advertisers are looking for.

In fact, after the big march, readers and advertisers alike expressed their appreciation and approval. We're certainly creating a buzz.

The writer is general manager of Apple Daily.