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Leping Supplement
Seeking Common Ground
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Seeking Common Ground

Through cross-sector partnerships and identifying ways to meet the needs of the community, China-based Blued is a business success story that also proves to be an asset for LGBTQ rights, ensuring that members' voices are both heard and visible.

BY LE GENG, YULIN LI & YONG WANG

With 40 million registered users around the world (30 percent of which live outside of China) and valued at \$600 million, the Beijing-based app Blued has become a global business empire. In February 2018, Blued—a social platform for gay communities—raised \$100 million in a Series D funding round—its seventh round of fundraising since its establishment in 2012.

Before Blued was founded, it started as a personal website in 2000 that was known as danlan.org (*danlan* means “light blue” in Chinese), which served as an online discussion forum for the gay community. Today, besides being China’s largest gay dating app, Blued is a pillar for the LGBTQ community, offering online and offline services ranging from fertility care to HIV/AIDS prevention education to information about HIV screenings. Users can share updates and photos, watch live broadcasts, play games, and even shop through the app.

While Blued’s business success is impressive, its story shows that even in China, where homosexuality was considered a mental illness until only a handful of years ago (though the situation has vastly improved thanks to globalized thinking that has resulted from access to the Internet), an organization can strengthen the LGBTQ community and advocate for LGBTQ rights while simultaneously being profitable.

CHANGING HEARTS AND MINDS

Blued’s story begins in the mid-1990s when gay sex was considered a crime and homosexuality was classified as a mental illness in China. At the time, Le Geng, a former police officer, was grappling with an identity he thought was abnormal and different from other people. By the time Geng graduated from the police academy in 1996, the Internet was more accessible in China, and he found solace and support through online LGBTQ communities.

Online activism in China played a big role in uniting ostracized people and reassuring them that they were not alone through the establishment of online communities that shared information and knowledge with one another—essential to physical and mental health and well-being. Online groups, like Boya, Aibai, and Pengyou Bieku (Don’t Cry My Friends) gave people in the LGBTQ community a sense of belonging through shared marginalized identities. As a result of joining these early

digital communities, Geng was eager to share his story. He purchased a manual guide on website design, and his personal blog, Blued Memory, was launched shortly after, in 2000.

Because of his profession and China’s complicated cultural stance on homosexuality, Geng—like many gay Chinese men—lived a double life. By day, he was a police officer chasing burglars in Qinhuangdao, a coastal city in the Hebei province. By night, he was a gay man operating a popular website, Blued Memory, for the LGBTQ community. For six years, Geng ran Blued Memory on his own, relying on his police wages and donations and technical support from Chinese netizens to keep the site up and running.

As readers began to demand more interactions on Blued Memory, Geng put together a team of website owners and friends who ran online gay communities. In 2006, Blued Memory was renamed Blued and rebranded itself as a discussion forum for news and information relevant to the LGBTQ community.

With the support of a new team, Blued quickly became a well-known gay Web portal in China. However, as a gay site, it was repeatedly shut down by regulators and service providers who categorized it as “illegal” or “pornographic.”

Access to the Internet and information began to change the social climate and public attitudes in China. In 1997, consensual gay sex was decriminalized, and in 2001, homosexuality was removed from the country’s list of diseases. When the 2008 Summer Olympic Games were held in Beijing, Xinhua, a state-run media platform published a report on Blued in July to showcase China’s openness to LGBTQ groups and lifestyles.

GOVERNMENT PARTNERSHIPS

In 2009, Geng and his team moved to a rented residential building in Beijing known to be home to a centralized gay community, as well as

people who are more tolerant of alternative lifestyles. In general, Beijing has more talent and resources to support the growth of its specialized and community-focused network.

Around this time, after learning that some of his friends had contracted HIV and that infection rates were climbing among men who have sex with men (MSM) in China, Geng founded Blued for Good, to offer assistance and services on HIV/AIDS prevention.

At the time, the HIV endemic affecting MSM raised concerns among Chinese health departments, which found it difficult to

identify the community in need of intervention services. Blued for Good, which consisted of a few staffers and volunteers, partnered with the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Beijing’s Changping District to offer services that included information on HIV/AIDS prevention, HIV screenings, and antidiscrimination education.

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Because of its work with the gay community, Blued has been praised and recognized by local and national health departments, such as the CDC, WHO, and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS.

LE GENG is the founder and CEO of Blued. YULIN LI is the founder of Philanthropy Watch Lab. YONG WANG is a journalist, based in Beijing.

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS. In November 2012, the Department of Health invited Geng and 11 other representatives working on HIV/AIDS prevention to take part in a conference chaired by China's vice prime minister Li Keqiang, then director of the State Council's committee on HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. A photo of Geng shaking Li's hand was widely shared in media reports and social media groups, increasing Blue's clout and popularity among the public.

SOCIAL NETWORK CAPITAL

By 2012, Blue had developed into an influential organization, transforming from its humble beginnings as a personal blog into a platform that offered HIV/AIDS prevention services and partnered with government agencies to respond to the needs of the gay community. Yet, Blue was far from being a sustainable operation and relied on advertising revenue and government funds to make ends meet. It desperately needed to find a business model that was profitable.

Also, Blue could no longer rely on Geng's police wages after a documentary featuring him led to his resignation from the police force. There was still much work to be done for the LGBTQ community, but Geng had a hard time finding talent to add to a team when he was already struggling to maintain current team members' meager salaries.

Around this time, social and economic development was flourishing in China. Geng realized that the gay community was more than a community of friends; it was also a large group of consumers whose needs and interests Blue understood well. After this realization, Geng identified marketing opportunities in entertainment, shopping, and movies that were targeted at gay and lesbian consumers in order to maximize the potential of his base, and to even extend it further.

In 2011, Geng participated in a Social Entrepreneur Training Course organized by the British Council in Beijing, where he learned about the concepts of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship. After the training, Geng rebranded Blue as a social enterprise dedicated to providing services to a disadvantaged minority group and destigmatizing gay culture in China.

Next, Geng and his team developed the mobile social networking app Blue, which was launched in 2012 with features that enabled authentication of profiles, the ability for users to broadcast live, a timeline with endless streams of photos and videos, and group chats that users could join. Blue's high traffic, recognition by the government, and large gay user base made it an influential platform, especially after it received 3 million yuan (\$450,000) in its first round of funding. The following year, investments in Blue reached a whopping \$30 million.

Thanks to its new investments, Blue expanded its products to include live broadcasting in the vertical market in December 2015, allowing it to sell virtual gifts and coins to users. The revenue from these sales is shared with broadcast hosts. The app also introduced short videos and joint gaming operations. As one of the few Internet traffic sources for the LGBTQ community, Blue attracted advertisers—including big brands like JingDong, Taobao, and Durex—and revenue generated from advertising increased 20 percent between 2015 and 2016.

In May 2017, Blue expanded its services to include overseas medical consulting in countries such as the United States and Canada to provide sexual and reproductive health services to minorities and people who have dealt with infertility.

Today, Blue is available in 11 languages. It is also among the leading gay apps in Thailand, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, and other Southeast Asian countries; recently, it has expanded into Mexico, Brazil, and India. Blue continues to grow internationally, and in August 2018,

the organization sponsored the Gay Games 10 in Paris, a worldwide sports and cultural event that promotes acceptance of sexual diversity.

PROFIT WITH A CONSCIENCE

Blue's profitability does not jeopardize its social mission to provide information and services for HIV/AIDS prevention, acceptance of sexual diversity, and antidiscrimination advocacy. Blue shares information vital to the LGBTQ community through its app and online platform.

HIV/AIDS prevention education, free screenings, an online portal that connects users with local labs, and consulting are its priorities. And a large number of resources have been secured to ensure that these priorities are met and made easily available to the community. Additionally, ten percent of the organization's advertising revenue is donated to a campaign for charity purposes.

Today, Blue has a dedicated team of eight full-time staffers and more than 150 volunteers in Beijing working in its HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives.

The story of Blue shows that there is always a chance to seek common ground by recognizing and meeting the needs of the LGBTQ community in China. Blue gives its members much-needed visibility.

In Beijing, Blue developed four Blue Happy Testing offices with the CDC to offer free HIV testing and health and medical consulting services for MSM. In 2016, more than 22,000 people in Beijing accessed these free services. Through partnerships with local grassroots organizations, Blue established 15 more testing offices in the cities of Qingdao, Chengdu, and Shenzhen.

In addition, Blue has developed an online system, or online testing lab, that connects users with more than 200 HIV testing centers nationwide. Through its online data bank, Blue devel-

oped a digital platform for 46 HIV/AIDS organizations across the nation to provide education and intervention programs and services. The Internet has enabled Blue to extend its HIV/AIDS prevention activities to Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam. Blue also contributed to research programs for Tsinghua University, Sun Yat-Sen University, Beijing CDC and the national CDC. Blue is currently applying, alongside North Dakota State University and Emory University, for a research grant on Internet-based innovation funded by the National Institutes of Health in the United States.

The story of Blue shows that there is always a chance to seek common ground, despite people's differences. By actively responding to the government's need for HIV/AIDS prevention, Blue was able to build partnerships with agencies at the local and national levels. By tapping into marketing opportunities targeted at gay and lesbian consumers, Blue became sustainable and profitable. More important, by recognizing and meeting the needs of the LGBTQ community in China, from health care to entertainment to culture, Blue gives its members much-needed visibility. ♦

Editor's Note: In January 2019, Blue (among other social networking apps) was accused by Chinese media of failing to prevent minors from misusing the app, resulting in the spread of cases of HIV/AIDS. In response, Blue released an official statement that repeated its longstanding policy of zero tolerance of users under 18 years of age, and added that it will review its internal governance and technological capability to ensure that such incidents won't happen again. This problem is not unique to Blue; all social networking platforms must make serious efforts to ensure that users are not harmed when they are connected to others.