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An Analysis of Innovative Marketing Paths for Children's Popular Science Books from the Perspective of Trust Theory — A Case Study of DK The Natural History Book

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the booming children's popular science book market, intensified homogeneous competition and readers' trust barriers are restricting the growth of high quality book brands. Drawing on McKinsey's Trust Theory and the marketing practices of DK The Natural History Book, this paper proposes that marketing innovation for children's popular science books should advance along three dimensions: content trust, brand trust and scenario trust. Differentiated trust assets can be built through approaches such as "highlighting authority" to showcase selling points, establishing the book identity as an "educational partner", and "emotion oriented setting" to foster emotional bonds. This research hopes to offer references for the marketing and promotion of domestic children's popular science books in China.

Keywords

Trust Theory; Children's Popular Science Books; Book Marketing

1. Introduction

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, funding support for popular-science publishing has risen substantially. China attaches great importance to science popularization, placing it on an equal footing with scientific and technological innovation[1]. Statistics show that 11,500 titles of popular-science books were published in 2022, with 104 million copies distributed[2]. More than 60,000 children's popular-science encyclopedias are sold annually, and original titles account for roughly 60 % of the market revenue in this segment[3]. Children's popular-science publishing in China is presented with promising opportunities.

Nevertheless, while children's popular-science reading gains momentum, most widely-recommended popular-science book brands remain imported. Although

creative domestic original popular-science books conduct active marketing on social-media platforms, few Chinese brands have built substantial influence. As actual purchasers, parents suffer from "choice anxiety" amid information overload and impose increasingly high requirements on book quality. Customer trust is widely acknowledged to help enterprises secure unique competitive edges, as it exerts influence over purchase intention, customer loyalty, brand building and word-of-mouth communication. Constructing trust relations therefore becomes a critical factor determining book-marketing effectiveness.

DK, a British popular-science brand, has maintained high popularity in the Chinese market in recent years. DK The Natural History Book, with sales of nearly two million copies[4], stands out as a phenomenal best-seller and has earned brand trust among Chinese readers. Taking this book as a research subject, this paper applies the McKinsey Trust Formula to dissect its marketing strategies. By summarizing its success in winning over Chinese readers, this study intends to provide strategic guidance and practical suggestions for domestic children's popular-science book marketing.

2. Book Marketing Under Trust Theory

In the new-consumption era, digital tools enable deep interactions between merchants and consumers. Publishing institutions leverage AR, VR, AI and other technologies, together with WeChat official accounts, short-video platforms and livestreaming, to carry out promotional campaigns, live retail sales and reading outreach, so as to boost brand influence. However, copycat and excessive marketing have eroded readers' trust. Marketing ploys including AI-fabricated mass-purchase hype, emotional scripts delivered by virtual streamers[5], and scattered blanket advertising have triggered a "trust crisis". Consequently, readers may abandon books after single use, decline repeat purchases, or even question publishers' competence.

According to relationship-marketing and social-exchange theories, trust constitutes a cornerstone of successful exchange relationships[13]. Consumers are willing to spread positive word-of-mouth for trusted products and make repeat purchases. Book marketing has shifted from product-centered to human-centered. Publishers and readers now maintain a more affective, interactive consumer relationship[6], whose foundation is trust. Readers' trust in publishers' products underpins long-term stakeholder relationships.

McKinsey's Trust Theory was initially proposed by management consultants David Maister et al. in the book The Trusted Advisor (2001). It serves as a core model for trust-building analysis in interpersonal and organizational contexts. Its formula reads:

$$Trust = \frac{\text{Credibility} \times Reliability \times Intimacy}{\text{Self-Orientation}}$$

Here, Credibility (C) refers to hard power such as professional expertise and accumulated experience. Reliability (R) stresses consistent conduct and performance-delivery capacity. Intimacy (I) concerns the strength of emotional bonds. Self-Orientation (S) measures how overtly self-interested motives appear. Widely adopted in business cooperation, brand management and cross-cultural communication, this model quantifies drivers of trust.

For publishers of children's popular-science books, multiple factors shape readers' purchase intention, reading stickiness, loyalty and brand confidence: the credibility of sources for popular-science content, resonance with brand philosophies, the fit between reading products and target audiences, proper selection of communication channels, and deployment of digital reading aids such as AR and VR. Trust thus becomes a pivotal competitive advantage for publishing institutions. It fosters reader satisfaction and brand loyalty, forming the bedrock of user-relationship management.

3. Trust-based Marketing Practices of DK The Natural History Book

DK The Natural History Book published by DK (UK) has successfully entered China's popular-science market via trust-oriented marketing and reached nearly two million copies in sales[4]. Drawing on this strategy, DK has rolled out sequels including DK The Earth Book, DK The Biology Book and DK The Ancient Civilizations Book. These titles topped Dangdang's 2024 best-seller chart for children's popular-science encyclopedias, completing IP localization in China. Among book enthusiasts, the catchphrase "Products by DK guarantee fine quality" prevails, testifying to the effectiveness of trust-driven marketing.

3.1. Highlighting Authoritativeness in Compilation

Print media's influence partly stems from authority built upon rigorous editorial vetting. Amid overwhelming online information, parents instinctively seek publications endorsed by professional institutions for children, particularly for popular-science titles. First published in 2012 as The Natural History Book through a joint project between DK and the Smithsonian Institution, the work is marketed as "a publication marking the centenary of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History under the world's largest museum system", and highlights that the Smithsonian is "America's sole semi-official museum complex federally funded by the government". Such messaging underscores endorsement from world-renowned natural-history institutions and validates the book's authority and credibility in content compilation.

Notably, when the Chinese edition launched in 2018, publishers localized

endorsement strategies. Popular Science Press of China retained the core strengths of "world-class content plus authoritative institutions". Further, drawing on its identity as "a national publishing institution directly under the China Association for Science and Technology", together with a domestic panel of distinguished popular-science experts for translation and revision, it established a certification pathway combining "international authoritative content, national professional institutions and local academic communities". Concrete, verifiable evidence such as expert rosters and production specifications replaced vague claims of "high-quality content", making labels of "expertly compiled" and "authoritative sources" tangible.

3.2. Globally Validated Quality Control Through Iterative Editions

Four editions of DK The Natural History Book have been released for the Chinese market. Following the 2018 standard Chinese edition, subsequent versions have been updated to match educational needs and market shifts. The 2019 Chinese Mairui Talking-Pen Edition centers on "interactive learning plus independent reading", leveraging talking-pen technology for family-education scenarios. The imported English original edition of 2023 emphasizes "bilingual cognition plus parent-child reading", catering to international-education demands and deepening its connection with household reading contexts. The newly revised 2025 release features 30 % updated content and refreshed scientific data, positioning itself as "a timeless family science consultant" and expanding its readership to "ages 0-99", crossing age-group boundaries.

Despite successive revisions, DK enforces globally unified printing standards. It strives for consistent tactile reading experiences across language versions so that readers worldwide perceive the same solid knowledge depth when opening the book[7]. Such quality assurance sustains DK's enduring popularity in mainland China.

3.3. Value Resonance and Emotional Connection in Livestream Sales

Books for young children, dictionaries and language-learning titles enjoy great popularity in the Chinese market[8]. Capitalizing on this observation, DK frames DK The Natural History Book around educational value with the mission "help Chinese children observe genuine nature through popular science", shifting audience focus toward knowledge acquisition. As Douyin rose in influence, Popular Science Press opened its official Douyin store account in May 2020. Beyond self-operated promotions, it cooperated with knowledge-oriented influencers such as Dong Yuzhui, Fan Deng, Liu Yuanyuan and Mama Tutu of Peking University[9]. Livestream rooms were transformed into virtual classrooms where educational value was translated into perceptible emotional experiences via cultural output.

For instance, Dong Yuzhui introduced the book with remarks such as "What makes this book outstanding? It respects the laws of nature… I may never visit the primeval

forests of Changbai Mountain or behold its snow-capped peaks, yet I can imagine tigers' habitats and appreciate nature with reverence." His lyrical narration enabled audiences to "visualize authentic nature" through voice and language. Hard-core scientific knowledge was communicated in a soft, affective way, awakening readers' passion for scientific exploration.

To sum up, analyzed under McKinsey's Trust Formula, trust-building marketing for children's popular-science books can be divided into three dimensions: content trust, brand trust and scenario trust. See Table 1 below.

Table 1. Analysis of Trust-based Marketing Practices for DK The Natural History Book

Practice Dimension	Deconstruction of Trust Elements	Mapping to Trust Formula	Trust-marketing Path
Highlight authoritative compilation	Credibility (C) ↑	Strengthen the C dimension	Content Trust
Emphasize globally consistent quality control	Reliability (R) ↑	Consolidate the R dimension	Brand Trust
Evoke universal value resonance	Intimacy (I) ↑	Activate the I dimension	Scenario Trust
Channel adaptation for target audiences	Self Orientation (S) ↓	Mitigate the S dimension	

4. Suggestions for Innovative Marketing of Domestic Children's Popular-Science Books

Chinese publishing institutions have long deliberated on how to integrate fine traditional Chinese culture into compelling popular-science works, telling science stories from a Chinese perspective while pursuing both domestic commercial success and international dissemination[10]. Drawing lessons from DK The Natural History Book, this section puts forward innovative marketing proposals tailored to China's children's popular-science-book sector.

4.1. Content Trust: Highlight Authority to Highlight Selling Points

In a homogenized market, digital content ecosystems and channels facilitate side-by-side product comparisons. Even as online content multiplies, limited consumer attention and platform recommendation algorithms create heavily filtered information access[14]. Therefore, during topic planning and editing, children's popular-science books must articulate core themes concisely so audiences can grasp book value rapidly.

Third-party authoritative endorsements such as international certifications and expert editorial reviews are essential to establish cognitive legitimacy and answer readers' fundamental question: "Why should I trust this?" Professionalism should be made visually explicit, for example through age-grading labels aligned with children's cognitive development or safety-quality marks, lowering parents' decision-making costs. Marketers should implement a marketing strategy of "making authority visible".

4.2. Brand Trust: Forge a Book Image as an "Educational Partner"

Within the children's popular-science-book market, brand trust hinges on transforming publishers from "knowledge transporters" into "growth companions". Traditional publishing houses often exhibit "ample authority yet insufficient warmth". Personality-driven strategies are needed to inject human touch into book brands. Brand and IP co-marketing have become prevailing marketing trends. Closely linked to youth education and scientific-literacy promotion, children's popular-science books can adopt the positioning of "educational partner" to ease parents' purchase-decision anxiety and help them identify professional, age-appropriate popular-science titles amid information overload.

100 000 Whys, a flagship popular-science brand from Juvenile and Children's Publishing House, has built its reputation as "a silent teacher" and "a partner for scientific enlightenment" through continuous iterations. It develops study-tour activities including "Plant Detective" and "Following 100 000 Whys into China's National Parks", cultivating a large fan base with abundant derivative content potential. Its collaboration with Zhihu adopts a Q&A format to "offer updated answers for contemporary questions", enabling deep user engagement. The brand resonates with older-generation readers while influencing new generations, fostering a sense of community between the brand and its audiences.

4.3. Scenario Trust: Build Emotional Bonds via Emotion-Oriented Setting

Barry Feig introduced affect into marketing theory, arguing that imagery and emotion constitute powerful marketing forces. Nowadays, functional product value alone fails to satisfy diverse consumer demands; experiential and emotional value increasingly governs purchasing decisions[6]. Young readers seek engaging scientific experiences, while parents value tangible educational benefits. Marketers should design targeted scenarios that evoke empathy, fostering emotional identification. Publishers may convert purely transactional relationships with consumers into affective bonds centered on scientific enlightenment, establishing two-way trust with family-user groups within immersive interactions.

Zhang Yong, former CEO of Alibaba, advanced the "people-goods-scenario" framework at the 2016 New E-commerce Summit. The "scenario" refers to spaces reconstructing real-world social contexts empowered by virtual-reality technologies[11]. It transcends mere product display to embed brand philosophies, cultural atmospheres and user demands. For children's popular science, "scenarios" must intertwine real-life contexts, educational aspirations and virtual technologies to build exploratory spaces that spark curiosity. For instance, Phoenix Publishing & Media Group of Jiangsu advocates "building new knowledge spaces" and designs customized livestream rooms for different age groups and book categories. Outdoor livestreaming is another promising option: broadcasters may move beyond studios

to parks, natural sites or production origins for natural-science, agriculture- or transportation-themed books. Authentic on-site experiences corroborate book knowledge, and the exploratory nature of outdoor environments sustains curiosity and participation among family audiences.

Against the backdrop of "culture-technology integration", advanced technologies including AI, AR, VR and 5G enrich books with aesthetic, technological and fashionable qualities, acting as key drivers for high-quality publishing-industry development[15]. AR/VR technologies in popular-science publishing break temporal-spatial boundaries, enhance learning experiences, enable interdisciplinary knowledge integration and stimulate intellectual curiosity[16]. Selective technological upgrades add value for readers. Technology occupies an indispensable position in marketing children's popular-science books.

5. Conclusion

In the highly competitive children's popular-science-book market, escaping homogenization hinges on building a trust-driven marketing ecosystem. Making content authority visible addresses parents' core concerns about scientific accuracy. Positioning brands as educational partners delivers long-term value. Immersive scenario design closes the loop from knowledge acquisition to affective practice. These shifts enable children's popular-science publishing to evolve from pursuing short-term traffic to nurturing enduring trust. Chinese popular-science books can move past the rigid "hard-science" stereotype. By combining rigorous scientific knowledge with humanities, art, literature and new digital technologies, publishers can deliver genuinely interesting, narrative-rich "soft-science" content for young audiences.

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