

Chinese phone-maker mimics Apple's best product: mystique

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Meizu M8

In a trendy mall just west of Tiananmen Square, a cell phone shop with minimalistic decor displays the store's only product inside a clear geometric case on the center of its floor.

Visitors are invited to sit on sculpted chairs along a broad, plain table or stand at a counter where they can scroll their fingers across the device's touch screen. Although the products are offered in black or white, customers also can buy an attachable case in myriad colors and patterns called an iBack.

Thinking Apple Inc.? Not quite. This is Meizu Technology Co., a young Chinese brand that could be one of dozens of companies making [iPhone](#)

look-alikes in China. But it has taken much more inspiration from the Cupertino, Calif., company than simply the design of its popular mobile phone.

With its massively hyped announcements, leaked photos of prototypes and legions of fans both at home and abroad, Meizu has taken the unusual step for a Chinese manufacturer of imitating a foreign brand's marketing strategy.

The driving force behind this Chinese upstart is an enigmatic chief executive, Jack Wong, who is rarely seen in public but keeps a curiously strong fan base energized with occasional online chats.

"Jack Wong is a kind of [Steve Jobs](#) character -- it's all a very carefully orchestrated PR campaign," said Chris Ziegler, mobile editor for taste-making tech blog Engadget, which covered the release of Meizu's first iPhone clone, the M8, last year.

"If you look at Meizu's forums, you notice this very strange cult of personality," Ziegler said, "Every time (Wong) makes a comment on his company's online forums, there's this groundswell of pandemonium around those posts."

In early June, Wong uploaded and promptly deleted grainy pictures of a next-generation phone onto the official Meizu forum, setting tech bloggers' hearts aflutter with speculation on the upcoming product.

Regardless of whether Apple's own information leaks are intentional, the company has become synonymous with this method of building and sustaining hype, keeping consumers guessing what new features the latest models will offer.

Wong's calculated buzz-building hasn't necessarily resulted in huge sales

in the world's largest cell phone market, estimated at 800million users. Meizu controls only 0.9 percent of China's fragmented sector for smart phones -- high-end devices that can handle e-mail and Internet access. Still, that puts it only 0.1 percentage point behind Palm, a name-brand foreign competitor.

"If you look at (their phones) from a specifications-level perspective, they really aren't any different from your typical knock-off" iPhone, Ziegler said. "But they are able to cast a sort of mystery over their products that is very intriguing."

It's probably why Meizu commands a dedicated following. Meizume, an unofficial fan site, has 39,500 members spread across the globe, from the United States to Scandinavia, Eastern Europe and Asia.

Carl Pei, founder of the Meizu fan site in Sweden, said many fans are drawn to Meizu as a rejection of what Pei calls Apple's "ecosystem": iTunes and the Apple applications store, which is the only legal way to buy programs for the iPhone or iPod Touch.

"Some people would like more freedom" from Apple, Pei said. "If you buy an iPod, for example, you (can only) use iTunes to add music to it."

Then, of course, there's the price. An iPhone 4 costs about \$870 in China. The Meizu equivalent is a little more than \$300.

"Cost is the most important thing," said Wang Dawei, a 23-year-old recent university graduate who was window shopping at the Meizu store in Beijing.

Wong founded Meizu in 2003 and released its first product, the M6 MP3 player, three years later. Although the device was conventionally regarded as a copy of the iPod Nano, it included innovative features such

as a vertical touch strip in place of Apple's standard tracking wheel.

Meizu's first iPhone clone, the M8, came out in 2009 and generated unanticipated positive feedback. An Engadget review acknowledged the device's closeness to its inspiration but also called it "surprisingly good." Excitement is building online about the release of an M9 in the coming months.

Little personal information is known about Wong even though he maintains a presence on his company's public message board, answering users' questions and receiving their feedback.

Meizu representatives declined to comment for this report, and Wong has never spoken on the record to foreign media.

Chinese magazine Business Story reported last year that Wong had never finished high school. One of the only photos of Wong available to the public shows a youthful man in a bare office, dwarfed by his towering leather computer chair and with an ancient clunker of a computer on his empty desk.

Whether Wong's company will break out from its cult success is unknown. But there's already one sign that the company must be doing something right.

Knockoff versions of the still-to-be released M9 have been spotted in Chinese cell phone markets at too-good-to-be-true prices, according to knockoff phone website M8cool.com.

"It says something about Meizu," Pei said. "It's strange that people want to imitate a product that isn't that well known."

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