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# Digital dream

CEO of Nasdaq-listed online marketing startup eyes joining the ranks of China's internet giants

By **DAVID HO** in Hong Kong  
For *China Daily Asia Weekly*

**S**ammy Hsieh studied economics at university. Today he runs the largest independent online marketing technology platform in China — and he insists the two fields, economics and digital marketing, have much in common.

“The two share similar themes and principles in balancing demand and supply. But in digital marketing, the demand is coming from advertisers, and the supply from the publishing platforms like Tencent and Baidu,” said Hsieh, who earned his bachelor's degree in economics from the University of California, Los Angeles, and later went on to set up iClick Interactive Asia. The Hong Kong-based company went public on Dec 22 with a listing on Nasdaq.

To better understand how iClick applies those shared supply and demand principles, consider its business model.

“We collect data from different digital sources and turn it into useful information for companies that help them set and track their marketing campaigns,” Hsieh said, describing the iClick platform as a “one-stop marketing solutions and omni-channel reach to Chinese audiences”.

iClick derives its data from three main sources: its own ads that come with tracking codes, its proprietary ad networks, and from publishing platform partners it works with.

These sources cover some 74,000 mobile apps and 2.6 million websites, giving marketers access to 19 individual attributes of more than 633.5 million Chinese consumer profiles, from their browsing habits to purchasing choices.

“Big data is a natural by-product of booming online transactions, enabled by sophisticated technology. The collection of data may be time-consuming, but processing the huge amount of raw data and turning it into useful insights is what advertisers, marketing agencies and trading desks need,” Hsieh said.

“We don't lack data in this day and age. The real issue is how to process the mass of data out there into helpful information and how to monetize it.”

Hsieh believes that every business — whether in healthcare, retail, or virtually any other field — can derive benefits and yuan from the data in its sector. And awareness of this is growing. Hsieh is seeing a shift in

attitude in the digital realm, especially when compared to around 15 years ago.

He worked with Yahoo for eight years during its heyday from 2001. “I started by working with Yahoo to launch their video-streaming projects, a concept which was in its infancy then,” he said.

As a big supporter of startups, Hsieh's advice to young entrepreneurs and companies is to start working with a big conglomerate to build a network and gain insight into how a big company operates. Many of his colleagues at iClick today hail from his time at Yahoo.

The outgoing and adventurous Hsieh thrives on finding opportunities in challenges, which would explain why he left the world of big corporations to pursue his own venture in the midst of the global financial crisis. And it has paid off.

Starting from a zero base in 2009, the company now has around 600 employees across seven offices in Asia and maintains a presence in London and New York.

Hsieh's decision to list iClick in the US, despite being headquartered in Hong Kong, with a China client base, was partly a personal goal to return full circle to the market where it all began for him.

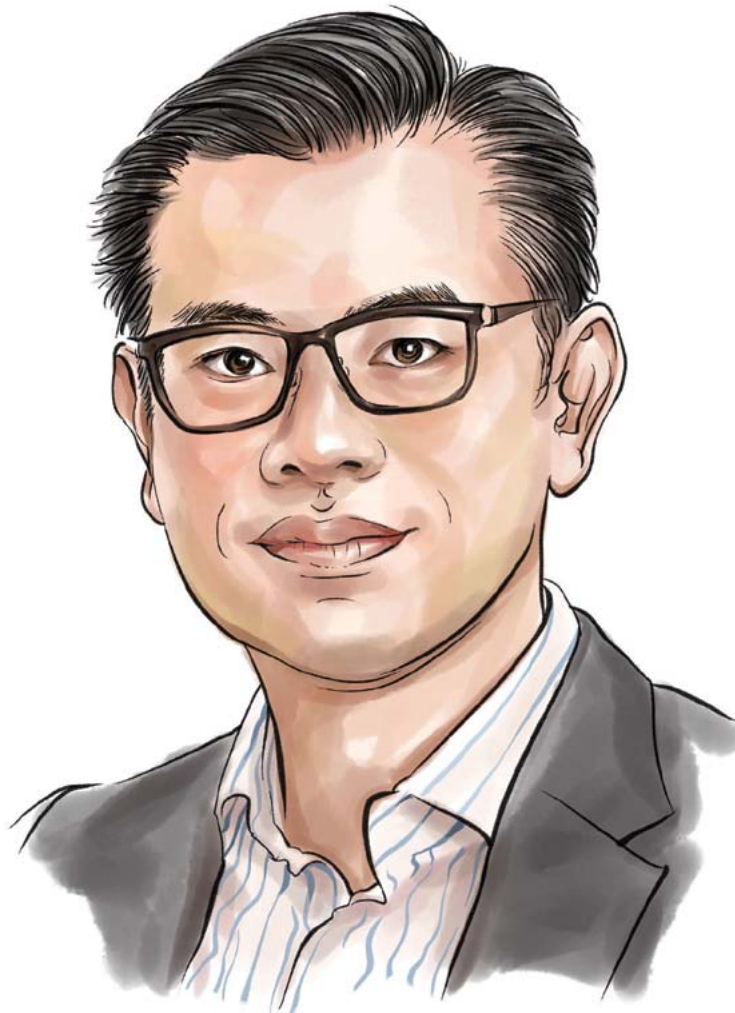
The father of two enjoys playing basketball and skiing in his spare time. But he said what keeps him “fresh” is the startup spirit — all those company pitches and interacting with young entrepreneurs at seminars.

Even during the IPO filing process, the iClick team maintained that spirit as they went about New York, sometimes on foot in the snow, with binders in hand, when the trains broke down. In the end the company raised more than \$27 million, after expenses, from the IPO.

The Nasdaq listing was in some ways a beginning, but it was also the culmination of a career that had moved inexorably toward that point.

The position at Yahoo eventually led to a move to Silicon Valley and a job at Efficient Frontier, a digital advertisement buying and optimization platform. But this was to last only a few months as the company was acquired by Adobe Systems.

After leaving Efficient Frontier, Hsieh decided in 2009 to strike out on his own, with visions of founding a marketing and data technology company. He cofounded iClick with fellow internet professionals Ricky Ng and Tang Jian to redefine the



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digital space using a combination of data, insight and innovation.

“Just a decade ago, data was very fragmented. Money was also splashed on non-targeted ads in spots that were not necessarily effective for the audience or advertisers,” he observed.

But now, the increasing personalization that comes from the incorporation of the internet of things (IoT), artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning on media platforms means that companies can offer relevant content to an audience more likely to reciprocate with interest. This means targeted real-time ads and even one-on-one messaging services.

“For example, we can help cosmetic brands reach their target audiences faster and more efficiently while affording them a real-time feedback loop on their campaign performances,” Hsieh said.

“It started with travel booking and recommendations, such as Expedia. Then it moved on to online retail sites like Amazon. But virtually any industry can do the same to cut through the noise and offer a better user experience.”

Hsieh believes that in the future this could even extend to cars that come loaded with their drivers' profiles. He said personalization through recommendation engines creates a “win-win-win situation in daily life” for all involved — the audience, advertisers and publishers.

Backing this up is a finding from Deloitte. The consultancy firm reported that 77 percent of inter-

net users in China are willing to be exposed to more online advertisements if it means they can receive free content they find valuable.

“Now that China has such an advanced cyber ecosystem, the publishers like Baidu and Tencent are realizing the importance of personalization and the value of their data,” Hsieh said.

Even the more traditional media forms like TV, radio and print can use data to evolve with the times.

“These traditional media also need an online presence, whether on social media or other platforms. Having the right algorithms driven by the correct data will ensure their content converts to different screens and reaches a digital audience and increases their reach,” he said.

But Hsieh is aware of the complications along the way, such as data privacy. He maintains that iClick does not collect any identifiable data on individuals, such as phone numbers or email addresses.

And while he cites “the listing of a Hong Kong-based startup on Nasdaq” as his biggest accomplishment so far, he still harbors bigger dreams, figuring iClick is in the right niche.

“You know how people refer to the internet giants of China as ‘BAT’ (Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent) — we hope to change it to BATI, with iClick joining the team,” he said.

“The trio of companies mentioned here run on data. They will need someone alongside them to integrate that into information as we progress in the digital age of personalized marketing and services.”

## Bio

### Sammy Hsieh

Cofounder and CEO,  
iClick Interactive Asia

#### Education:

Bachelor of Arts in Economics,  
University of California,  
Los Angeles

#### Career milestones:

2017: iClick listed on Nasdaq

2016: iClick became largest independent online marketing technology platform in China (according to Frost & Sullivan)

2010-16: Established offices in the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, Singapore and London; built the first R&D center in China specializing in advanced data mining and algorithmic technology for digital marketing; completed four series of investments

2009: Founded iClick in Hong Kong

2008-09: General manager Asia-Pacific at Efficient Frontier

#### Awards:

2017: Marketing Tech Insights — Top 10 Ad Management Software Solutions Provider

2016: Platinum Partner Award — Tencent Social Marketing; Outstanding Big Data Marketing and Programmatic Marketing Award — World Mobile Marketing Summit

2015 and before: Red Herring Global 2014 — Top 100 Winner; Deloitte Technology Fast 50 China

#### Quick takes:

##### How has the online market evolved in the past decade?

I'm not sure if it is an evolution, as we all know that e-commerce has entirely revolutionized retail. It has gone from an online shop window to a ubiquitous and hyper-convenient channel bringing products and opportunities from around the globe to your smartphone.

##### Where do you see it headed?

Personalization is no longer the future, it is the now. Data analytics, AI, IoT are all technologies that can be leveraged now by brands and will help track and understand customers at a personal level and provide this personalized experience.

##### How do Chinese netizens differ from those in other parts of the world?

Chinese netizens are more mobile savvy. China as a consumer market is a pioneer in mobile commerce. The market is also one of the world's most attractive and dynamic, but at the same time unrivaled in its complexity. What Chinese netizens have been exposed to in the past decade far exceeds what their counterparts in other countries may have seen. They are more willing to try and adopt new technologies, but this does then come with a higher expectation in terms of user experience.