

Viral Marketing – impacting established brands.

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In a rapidly changing technological landscape, some high profile brands are facing the challenging decision of whether to embrace ‘viral’ marketing campaigns. As there can be no assurances with each viral project, executives do not have the ‘usual’ facts and figures to make a well-informed and substantiated decision.

By its very nature a viral project must be unlike anything that has been done before.

This means there is no formula, no statistics, nor guarantees. Results can only be proven retrospectively, by which time it can be too late for those results to have any more meaning than the knowledge that viral marketing works in principle. Even the most successful new media viral campaigns would likely not be able to generate anything like the same results if replicated by another company simply wanting to emulate that same success.

Viral marketing is in this way a high risk, high gain means of marketing. It is changing all the time and there are not really any experts that can accurately predict how the marketplace will respond.

Fortunately the cost is not measured in financial terms, but only in the way the

public perceives the brand. Get it right and a brand can become suddenly very prominent in secondary media articles and traditional media. Get it wrong and the brand’s reputation can be affected negatively. Sometimes this secondary

(and free) publicity ends up impacting the campaign more than the viral content itself.

Large, slower moving corporations are being startled into responding to these changes as best they can. Smaller and more progressive companies are challenging the old stalwarts of business by using whatever viral means they can to establish greater market share.

Often the biggest and most well respected brands are not accustomed to this radical and non-traditional approach to marketing, having spent many years establishing an expensive,

rigorously consistent and highly polished corporate identity.

Their company identity may well have evolved over several decades. For such a company to consider the idea of diluting the brand into something generic, cheap, gossipy, comic, populist, or otherwise remarkable to the masses raises red flags and executive concerns. These executives naturally fear losing the consistency of their on-brand message, or the

Some viral guidelines

Content should...

Be small in file size, in order that it doesn’t require a great amount of time to view and be impacted by it.

Be distributed in a format that most people can use or view without custom or difficult to install software.

Never be attached to an email, as anti-virus and office Spam-blocking filters remove the attachment

Be easy to use, and easy to refer to a friend

Be presented in a way that is either blatantly branded, or not branded at all...so that the content is not boycotted or sabotaged by groups who may be offended by the commercial intent once discovered.

particular 'look and feel' of the brand as predetermined in their own internal corporate style guides.

Yet those corporations that are taking risks in the way they present their brand by embracing this viral trend are already observing great benefits, with lower costs and higher response rates from their target market. They are perceived by their target demographic as 'cool', 'hip', 'cutting edge', and 'in touch' with a changing world.

Consider Nike™, Adidas™, and Pepsi™. All three brands have used viral marketing as a mainstay of their digital FIFA World Cup 06 football campaigns.

The power of viral marketing is that people willingly pass it on for free, which means there are no manufacturing, packaging, licensing, or distribution costs. The total cost of ownership includes only the cost involved in creating the initial idea and the actual content.

How viral marketing works

In all instances an initial 'viral' concept must be developed and published either to a website, in an email, as a mobile phone message, or through some new or emerging distribution channel.

Some of the most effective viral content is quite poor in production quality and often quite controversial if not offensive to some, but if successful will be high in public appeal. This can also be an obstacle for some executives whose brand has been built on maintaining the highest production and moral standards in all printed and televised materials.

Sometimes the more professional or polished something looks, the less likely the end-user will be to consider

the source credibly worth passing on. In some cases, the corporation funding or initiating the viral content will actually distance themselves from the content and claim to have no knowledge of how it came to be, nor that they had anything to do with its creation. This is all a public relations angle to improve the chances of the mass market accepting the content as non-intrusive.

People know only too well how annoying it is to receive materials that are not directly known beforehand to be of value to the recipient.

If on the other hand, the recipient or user is actually stimulated to respond emotionally to a piece of viral marketing i.e. anger, disgust, joy, sadness, laughter etc. they will likely also want their circle of friends to experience the very same thing. It is the very targeted nature of a 'circle of friends' that makes viral marketing so effective. The old anonymous saying has some merit in this context ...

'Birds of a feather flock together.'

If a company or brand can make a solid impression on any single individual within a selected group, that person will likely share about it with their 'flock' knowing that it will also be of interest to them.

A viral campaign could end up affecting several million highly targeted consumers, which to achieve using traditional media would potentially cost as many dollars, Pounds, or Euros as the amount of consumers reached. Generating a return on investment using traditional media has a greatly reduced profit margin in comparison to the miniscule investment involved in initially creating a piece of viral marketing.

The importance of embracing viral marketing

Increasing bandwidth is now making possible for the first time such things as video on demand, live video, IPTV, and other formats of rich media interactivity. Those companies that are harnessing these trends in a creative and viral way are finding themselves to be moving ahead of competitors who perhaps previously held the greatest market share by spending large sums of money in the traditional media.

The success of a viral marketing campaign can only really be measured in terms of how many people visit or view a viral site, or how many times an email has been read and so on. In some cases it may also be possible to measure click-through conversion via a call to action, although this level of transparency can often also become an obstacle to the tool becoming viral in an epidemic way.

There are currently very little hard statistics demonstrating conclusively that viral marketing makes a difference to the bottom line, yet there is no doubt that this type of content is being seen by millions of people. Much like television advertising, it is not always clear whether people are buying product because of the advert or in response to a variety of brand promotions across multiple platforms.

Those large corporations who are struggling to reconcile whether to embrace the idea of viral marketing now have the advantage that they can learn from some of the world's largest and best-known brands. As these brands have been forced to change their understanding of marketing on a day-by-day basis, so too will all companies wanting to compete in tomorrow's world. In the coming years

many more companies with their traditionally established branding will need to concede that the concepts of marketing are changing right now, and very quickly at that.

By seemingly diluting their brand in order to create generic viral content, these companies can in fact capture the interest of the next generation of media users, thereby building a massive community of loyal customers that not only buy but also recommend their products and services.

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