Viral Marketing

Spreading the Word in an Advertisement-saturated Marketplace

KEY TAKEAWAYS

• Advertising overload and distrust of marketing “spin” is turning customers away from traditional marketing messages and toward social media-based messaging.
• This trend has given rise to viral marketing, through which businesses are leveraging the ever-increasing power of electronic word-of-mouth to connect with customers and build brand awareness.
• Successful viral marketing campaigns depend on knowing how to create an engaging viral message and how to most effectively “spread the word.”

In the current social media-driven age, consumers are increasingly relying on electronic word-of-mouth when making decisions about products and brands. Advertising overload and lack of relevance are causing customers to turn away from traditional ads and toward blogs, videos, and social networking channels to get the information they are looking for. Disenchanted with marketing spin, they believe they are more likely to find truthful messages that resonate with their personal lives in the online world.

This change in direction opens a huge opportunity for marketers to employ viral marketing techniques—in which customers share and spread marketing messages among one another—to help companies build brand awareness and increase customer loyalty. Viral marketing is rapidly becoming a leading marketing practice, providing strong results at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing techniques.

START A CONVERSATION

Enlisting the help of popular bloggers who have a strong following can be a very effective method for “going viral” with a marketing message. Many companies are partnering with key blogosphere influencers by giving them a product to test and then talk about on their blog, or compensating them in some way to “spread the word” about a product or company.

In “Be More Than an Ad, Get in the Conversation,” Forrester Research vice president Josh Bernoff (2009) explains that there are two required elements for this type of viral marketing

FURTHER AMA READING

• Seeding Strategies for Viral Marketing
• Be More Than an Ad, Get in the Conversation
• I Tube, You Tube
• Good Cheer
to have the desired effect. First, because one of the most important aspects of viral marketing is authenticity, complete disclosure by the blogger about the terms of the partnership is absolutely necessary—or that blogging partner will lose all credibility. Second, the blogger must be free to say whatever they want to about the product or company without censorship.

Sponsored conversations can be very effective in sharing messages about products that don’t typically get a lot of visibility and so their value is relatively unknown by customers. With a reliable and quality product, the likelihood of negative feedback is very low and a company can gain exposure through the blogosphere that it might not otherwise have. Sponsored conversations guarantee a product or company will be talked about—versus relying on the unpredictable nature of public relations. However, success with this type of viral marketing depends on selecting bloggers who are most relevant to the product or company—and monitoring the conversations to make sure enough traffic is generated to make the investment worthwhile.

Sears and subsidiary Kmart were very successful in one such campaign in which they paid influential bloggers to talk about the company. They were able to increase their share in online shopping-related conversations by 59%, garnering an estimated viewership of 500,000 during the month their campaign was active.

Ford Motor Company embraced the blogging partner concept when it provided a popular “mommy blogger” with the use of a new Ford Flex car for a year, after she’d mentioned on her blog that she was planning to buy a new car. Her ongoing and unbiased online relation of her experiences with the car came at a very low cost to Ford, when viewed from the aspect of the potential return in creating a personal connection between Ford and her readers.

**MAKE A VIDEO**

At its inception, YouTube offered an easy-to-use platform for amateur videographers to post and share videos of themselves and their friends doing silly things. Now it is one of the hottest venues for viral marketing, providing a very large bang for the buck in terms of sharing a message with millions that doesn’t cost millions.

Blender manufacturer Blendtec represented everything that is necessary for viral video marketing success in their “Will It Blend?” campaign (Levy, 2009). They posted a series of eighty-three YouTube videos demonstrating their blenders blending all kinds of unlikely objects you wouldn’t ordinarily put in a blender—like shoes, marbles, and lighters. The videos were simple, humorous, and spread like wildfire, generating more than 200 million views and boosting Blendtec sales by 700%.

While videos are a great way to connect with customers, it is important to make sure they meet key criteria. They must be engaging (i.e. fun, funny, or emotionally connective), they must be short, and they can’t blatantly be about selling something. Also, because quickly
getting a video to the top of search lists is a primary goal, getting the word out about the video is an important step. Recommended seeding tactics include sending notification emails to friends, employees and business partners at launch or buying sponsored video spots (Levy, 2009). However, artificially inflating views to get to the top of the search lists is a no-no. There’s no way around it—the only way to be successful in video viral marketing is to create a good video that people want to watch and share.

**GET PLAYFUL**

While viral marketing is not about selling a product, it can in a sense be about selling a brand. Viral marketing offers companies a great opportunity to reinvent their brand in a way that makes it more appealing to consumers. This principle was strongly demonstrated in OfficeMax’s “Elf Yourself” campaign (Borden, 2008).

In 2006, out of a desire to take advantage of the holiday shopping season, expand consumers’ view of Office Max as a brand, and differentiate themselves from the competition, the company undertook a massive viral marketing campaign that showcased the best of what viral marketing can be. With the help of advertising agency Toy New York, OfficeMax launched twenty holiday-themed websites that allowed people to simply have fun. For example, viewers could arm wrestle with a reindeer, play hangman with a snowman, or superimpose a photo of their own face onto a dancing elf, all customized with a personal message to share with others.

In alignment with viral marketing’s seeding principles, the agency and OfficeMax spread the word about the websites through email and the blogosphere and then waited to see which site would most appeal to viewers. The entire project cost less than one television ad.

The hit website feature turned out to be the dancing elf which generated 11 million elf creations and 36 million visitors during the 2006 holiday season. Not only that, the campaign was picked up by mainstream media, generating coverage in major outlets including the New York Times and Good Morning America. And, the campaign continued into subsequent years, influencing customers to shop at OfficeMax and improving their overall perception of the retail chain.

**CONNECT**

Why were all these viral marketing campaigns so successful? Because they created a connection with customers and that connection helped build brand awareness and loyalty. Nowhere was anyone trying to sell anything. Viral marketing success proves that in this new world of social media, you have to appeal to customers’ hearts.

**WORKS CITED**


