

Viral Marketing Revisited

Viral marketing is now universally recognized as a low cost and highly effective way to get a marketing message to spread rapidly. The second-cousin to word or mouth, and sometimes uncomfortably close to multi-level marketing (without the sales component), viral marketing is being explored by nearly every company as a tactic that can (and should) be deployed whenever possible.

From the feedback and questions coming in to Tudog, there seems to be some confusion out there as to what actually constitutes viral marketing and how best to implement a viral campaign. Although Tudog has reviewed this topic (twice actually) in past editions of our newsletter, the level of interest and the scope of understandings, has led us to conclude that this article – which will define viral marketing and explore some execution options – is necessary.

Defining Viral Marketing

Viral marketing gets its name from the idea of a virus, something that spreads from person to person. The idea is that, typically within an Internet environment, marketers are able to encourage (through incentives and great services or experiences) people to recommend a website to their friends and family. The first real success at viral marketing was Hotmail, which was the first free email service. Hotmail grew at a dizzying pace because they included a postscript on every email sent by a hotmail address that identified the email as originating from a hotmail account and informing the recipient that the service was (a) free, and (b) available to them (by clicking on a link attached to the postscript).

At the time, some people thought that the mandatory postscript reduced the attractiveness of the service, as business professionals and others would not want the postscript attached to their outgoing emails. While there may have been some people who declined a hotmail account for this reason, the hundreds of millions of accounts opens demonstrated that mandatory viral announcements did not serve as a significant barrier. And so the rush for viral perfection began.

Today the idea of viral marketing has extended beyond the Internet, as companies in the mainstream have tried to launch campaigns that encourage people to pass on their marketing message to others. Such efforts to create a buzz have met with mixed results as the traditional marketing environment does not have the mechanisms for mandatory viral announcements, nor the ability (through a click or email) to execute an immediate viral message. Nonetheless the notion of viral marketing, still strong on the Internet, is gaining traction in traditional marketing channels as well.

Effective Viral Tactics

The success of a viral campaign rests on the logic and implementation of the tactics deployed. Tudog has identified 5 tactics we believe should be considered as central to a viable viral campaign. They are:

1. Provide Incentive

Although it may seem curious that we, as consumers, are often willing to serve as marketing channels for the brands we buy – by wearing their brand across our chests for

example - most people don't readily pass on to others marketing messages without some sort of reason to do so. In many cases the reason could be a high level of satisfaction or a narrow market need that is well fulfilled (for example, people may recommend a successful medication to someone they know suffers from an ailment similar to their own). But otherwise we tend to keep our satisfaction to ourselves (although we share our dissatisfaction readily).

To break the habit and get people to spread the marketing message marketers should devise incentives that serve to encourage people to get the word out. Sometimes this can be done by giving something away for free. Sometimes it can be done by establishing a program that rewards per person successfully recruited, and sometimes it can be achieved by distributing praise. The elements to the incentive system you construct should be based on the people you are targeting and your understanding of what will serve to properly motivate them. In all cases though, you should have an element that serves to motivate.

2. Make it Easy

The hesitancy people may feel at serving as carrier of your marketing message may be compounded if they have the added burden of having to make a concentrated effort at it. It is pretty safe to say that under those circumstances only the die hard fans of your company and product will serve as evangelists. The task before you is to establish simple, easy, non-intrusive ways for people to carry your message forward. This can be done online through email, web notification buttons, software giveaways and other tactics. In the more traditional marketing environment this can be achieved through clothing, buttons, hats, product giveaways and more. In every instance, however, the key is integrating your mechanism for how they pass on the word with their existing flow of activity.

3. Press the Right Buttons

In understanding why someone might elect to pass on your marketing message you need to recognize why the individual is so pleased with your company, product/service and image. By becoming a link in your viral marketing chain the individual must feel something – and it is that something you need to tap into.

Your product/service may symbolize coolness, sensitivity, success, or beauty. Your viral promoters may be seeking to demonstrate their know-how or gain attention. Whatever the underlying motivations are, you need to plug into them and make certain that your viral campaign serves to satisfy the need.

4. Tap into Existing Communication Channels

People have their preferred methods of communicating and they engage the channels that best suit them. Some people are comfortable with email and instant messaging and others like the telephone and snail mail. You need to make certain that you provide the means for your viral agents to communicate within the channels that they already prefer. Trying to get them to use a different channel will most likely meet resistance and affect the efficacy of the campaign because it brings people away from their normal habits. The use of communication channels that are already popular and in use allows people to spread your message as they traditionally communicate. Not only does this increase the

chances of your message being passed on, but it also serves to preserve the integrity of the message as it is coming not only from a trusted source, but through the usual channel.

5. Deploy Existing Resources

There are existing channels you can use to get your word out and have others do the preaching for you. For example, online chat rooms and targeted websites can be excellent forums for viral marketing. In the traditional environment there are publications and news outlets that can be deployed (as well as events and promotions). All of these resources are already in place and only require that you tap into them. That is a much quicker and cost effective alternative to creating the channels on your own.

To be sure, even though every company is searching for ways to get other people (their customers) to do some of their marketing for them, viral marketing is not right for every company. The products you sell and the people you sell to need to be compatible with the viral market. If they are not, all the planning and attempts at execution won't serve to establish a successful campaign. On the other hand, if your products and customer base are suitable, viral marketing is a great way to get your message out.

Do us a favor and pass it on.