

Viral Marketing – Take Two

Almost two years ago, in these pages, we explored viral marketing and the way it can bring life to a marketing effort. Since that time we have also discussed word-of-mouth marketing and creating a buzz for your company or products. The tactics used to achieve viral marketing and the channels available have since become better defined and more accessible, and so we have determined it worthwhile to revisit the notion and drivers of viral marketing. This article will define viral marketing and explore some of the channels that can be used to successfully engage it.

Defining Viral Marketing

The term “viral marketing” comes from its intent, which is to spread the word about a product or company from person-to-person, very much the same way a virus is spread. The idea is to exploit existing social networks so as to encourage the spreading of the message within the controlled groups, until an epidemic of sorts occurs and the brand becomes well known and established.

Challenges of Viral Marketing

The primary challenge with viral marketing is the lack of control over your message. Anyone who has played “telephone” as a child knows that whenever a message gets repeated from person to person it gets, to one degree or another, distorted. In some cases the final message is nothing like the one you intended. This can be a good thing if the final message is one that is positive because it means that the market itself has defined the message, making it their own and making certain it is meaningful and compelling to them. On the other hand, if the final message is negative or too dramatically changes your message it could hurt you in your targeted market or peripheral markets.

Another danger to viral marketing is that it is subject to rumors that can, if negative, hurt your brand. The engagement of a viral marketing campaign opens your company up to the antics of competitors who can use the grapevine system you are deploying to insert negative feedback or a harmful image onto your company or product.

The losing of control, while having both positive and negative aspects, is something that needs to be carefully considered when the decision to engage in a viral marketing campaign is under consideration.

Advantages

While the challenges of viral marketing may lead some companies who feel they need to have exact control over their message to bow out, the advantages of the tactic are such that many other companies will be enticed to give it a try, particularly those who have as part of their brand image an anti-corporate or youthful image. They will be saying in their viral campaigns that they have nothing to fear by letting their customers define them and that they are certain that the market’s definition of their product/company will be as positive as if they were defining it themselves. This in and of itself is a powerful marketing statement.

With the growth of the internet, e-communities and the use of e-mail, and the introduction of blogs and other opinion expression vehicles, the ability to “spread the word” has become simplified. This translates into viral marketing being not only an inexpensive way to get the word out, but also a significantly accelerated way, as it takes only a fraction of the time a traditional marketing campaign could take to reach similar numbers of people.

Finally, as with most word-of-mouth or referral marketing programs, viral marketing comes with the authority of the sources spreading the word and therefore have credibility and legitimacy in the market that a company generated traditional marketing campaign lacks.

Channels

The execution of a viral marketing campaign can leverage both offline and online channels. The online channels are typically less expensive and move through the targeted community quicker. The channels are:

Offline

- Events – community (targeted market) related events that give you the opportunity for non-traditional exposure through samples, t-shirts, etc. being distributed not by company employees, but community influencers that genuinely endorse the product.
- Hotspots – most communities of consumers (particularly those most receptive to viral marketing) have gathering spots or places where they and likeminded people are know to meet. Securing a presence in these places is useful, particularly if it is done in a way that generates conversation about your product.
- Promotions – although a bit of a throwback to more traditional marketing tactics, the promotion works in viral marketing if it is fueled by grassroots and not by the company. This can be done by getting the ball rolling and the stepping back and letting the incentive of the promotion and the community of your consumers take over.

Online

- Email – the use of email to blast your message to people who have asked to receive your updates is inexpensive and drives an immediate (sometimes even instant) response. The viral effect can occur when you include reasons why the email should be forwarded to friends. Sometimes this could mean information that is useful to others, an offer that is of interest to others, or a bit of entertainment that people will want to share.
- Website Share Mechanisms – many websites have the opportunity for a visitor to tell their friends about the site. Sometimes this is driven by the content of the site and other times by an incentive such as a contest or promotion. The key motivator is that the visitor wishes to share with a friend the value she/he extracted from the site. In order for this to be the case your site must, of course, have content of interest to the group you are targeting.
- Polls – people like to express their opinion and they like to get measures of where their opinion lies within the context of the broader community. The use of a poll sometimes works because people may wish to gather additional votes for

- their opinion, spreading your site around to their friends in order to encourage them to voice their opinions.
- Quizzes – similar to polls, people also like to test their knowledge. The use of a quiz that is both fun to take and a bit challenging could lead to people passing the quiz on to others so that they too can have the positive experience of taking the quiz.
 - Games – the use of a short online game is an excellent way to drive a viral campaign as many people will play the game and then send it on to others to play as well.
 - Microsites – a micro website is a distinctive URL that has content that is specific to a certain market sector and is compelling and interesting to the sector. The site is used as a means of creating community and encouraging the discussion of the company and its products. The presence of your brand is not apparent on the microsite, rather the topic associated with the product (sports, health, etc.) that allow mention of the brand to be more subtle and natural.
 - Giveaways – there are things – virtual things – that you can give away and at the same time create a viral movement. For example, e-cards are a useful tool because they are, by definition, something that is going to be sent from one person to another. These kinds of give aways have a built in viral element and help spread the word.
 - Video and Audio Clips – once again, getting people talking about the topic with which your company or product is related is a good way to ease them toward talking about you. The use of video and audio clips can be an entertaining way to get the conversations starting. Usually distributed through email or available on websites and microsites, the clips, if designed right, will be sent from friend to friend, generating a viral effect.

Viral marketing is all about getting one person to tell another about your company and your product. Sometimes you can achieve this overtly and sometimes you need to be more subtle. In general people are both interested and willing to share their opinions with others. In certain circumstances you can encourage this without incentive simply by providing the opportunity and the mechanisms through which the word can be spread. The most important thing to remember with viral marketing is that you need to meet your promise and stay true to your brand so that those spreading the word are not embarrassed and get to keep their positions as influencers. If you threaten their integrity by having them questioned as to why they recommended you, the viral campaign will either fail to take off or quickly crash and burn. However, if you meet your promise and continuously give the viral campaign the chance to grow you will find your name popularized quickly and inexpensively.