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further reading

www.gottaquirk.com

– the blog from the minds of Quirk, filled with the latest in social media and eMarketing.

www.mashable.com

– a blog that covers social networking and social media.

9. viral marketing

What's inside: An **introduction** to viral marketing, and a **history** of the term followed by **key terms and concepts**. In **how it works** there are a couple of short **case studies** to look at viral marketing in action, and we then look at the **steps required** when you are preparing to go viral. With a **viral campaign launched**, now what? shows you how to be prepared, and we look at astroturfing. There is a **summary** of the chapter, and **the bigger picture** shows how viral marketing fits into the marketing mix.

introduction

Word of mouth marketing is powerful. Edelman's 2008 Trust Barometer shows that 58% of respondents trust "a person like me" as a spokesperson. In the social media chapter, you learned some of the ways that marketers can tap into the media that promote this kind of trust. Messages passed on from "a person like me" is word of mouth marketing, and online that same message can be passed on through social media.

Viral marketing is a form of word of mouth marketing which aims to result in a message spreading exponentially. It takes its name from a virus, because of the similarities that marketers aim to emulate:

- It is easily passed on.
- The number of people who have been "infected" grows exponentially.

Viral marketing campaigns can have other similarities with a virus. Viruses often spread by masking their true intentions. Some viral marketing campaigns are similar – they hide their true message in an attempt to spread. Viruses rely on the connected nature of people to spread, and so do viral marketing campaigns.

Viral marketing campaigns are not as easy as they may appear. They require careful preparation, and a little bit of luck..

history

The term "viral marketing" was probably first coined by Jeffrey Rayport in an article "The Virus of Marketing" in the December '96 issue of Fast Company. That's not to say that there weren't viral marketing campaigns before that, but as the Internet developed, so have the electronic tools for passing on information.

Word of mouth has existed as long as there have been words and mouths, but it is a fairly recent phenomenon in the world of marketing. Positive word of mouth can have a tremendous impact on a brand, and can take up little to nothing of the marketing department's budget. However, planning for and measuring word of mouth can be tricky and unpredictable.

As the connected nature of the Internet has allowed for easier spreading and tracking of word of mouth information, it has become possible to see how this can be modelled on the spread of a virus in a population.

key terms and concepts

ARG Alternative Reality Game - a game that takes place in both the real world and in a fantasy world, and usually involves an online component.

Astroturfing Covert and manipulative use of word of mouth.

Brand awareness A measure of how quickly a brand is called to mind.

Buzz Online excitement and word of mouth is referred to as buzz.

Call to action Copy that encourages users to take a particular action.

Exponential growth If growth more than doubles with each iteration, it is exponential.

Mashup When content from two or more sources is combined.

Pass on To share content with another person.

Seed The process of initiating a viral campaign through strategic online placement.

Seed audience The initial audience from which viral growth starts.

Social currency A measure of a person's power and influence within a defined social group.

Word of mouse Word of mouth is sometimes referred to as word of mouse online.

Word of mouth Information that is passed between people, as opposed to messages from a company to people.

how it works

Viral growth occurs when a message is spread exponentially. Viral marketing campaigns work when a message is spread exponentially and it results in a desired outcome for a brand. Viral marketing utilises electronic means to spread messages. It harnesses the electronic connectivity of individuals to ensure marketing messages are referred from one person to another.

Viral marketing campaigns can be tricky and unpredictable. However, the lure of exponential growth, at a very low marginal cost, means that they are being attempted more often.

MSN Hotmail: from zero to 30 million

MSN Hotmail, the webmail service purchased by Microsoft, grew to 30 million members in just 2½ years from its launch in July 1996. A large part of its exponential growth is attributed to the sign-up link that was in the footer of every email sent with the service. When the company launched, every outgoing message from this platform contained an advertisement for Hotmail and a link to its web site at the bottom of the email. As people emailed their friends and colleagues, they were also advertising the service. Recipients could simply click on the link and sign themselves up, and as they continued to email friends from their new account, the message spread within existing social networks and was passed along with little effort from the company. Hotmail went from zero to 30 million users within the first 3 years and today has over 260 million users worldwide.

preparing to go viral

Viral campaigns are unpredictable. As the market becomes saturated with more campaigns competing for attention, it is increasingly difficult for marketers to ensure a hit. However, careful planning means that you are ready when your campaign takes off. Careful planning also means that you have given the campaign the best chance of success.

1. Define the aims of the campaign, and how you will measure success

A video created by your department and watched by millions of people on the Internet is certainly an attractive proposition, but if it does nothing to contribute towards your business goals, it is a fun but pointless exercise. Can this medium reach your target market?

Determine if your campaign will be aimed at building brand awareness, driving traffic to your web site, growing anticipation for a new product, building lots of SEO links or making sure customers make a purchase right away. Viral campaigns should always build you links, whether or not that is main aim of the campaign – because of this you should try to influence the anchor text being used.

2. Plan a message or content that users want to share

On the Internet, there is a lot going on. For a campaign to be worthy of sending on, it has to stand out from the clutter. You need to be original.

- Make something scarce
- Make something free and abundant
- Be very funny
- Be very interesting
- Be very informative
- Be very educational
- Be very unusual
- Be a little cryptic
- Be the best
- Create something users want to copy
- Present the tools for a mashup

Burger King created the web site Subservient Chicken (www.subservientchicken.com), where anyone could tell a man dressed up in a chicken suit what to do. It is very funny, and quite bizarre. It got a lot of traffic. Hotmail made their email service available to anyone. Gmail, when launching, made it invite only, and ensured that the invites were scarce. People talked about both services a lot.

note

A mashup is when content from two or more sources is combined. Search for “mashup” on YouTube to watch some examples

Using controversial or enticing names for viral content makes it more likely that your audience will want to investigate further. For videos, thumbnails are exceptionally important in enticing visitors to hit the play button.

3. Make your content easy to share

The easier a message is to pass on, the more likely it will be passed on. Emails should include “forward to a friend” links, and a “send to a friend” link can be added easily to any web page.

Viral marketers can make use of existing social media, both as an environment in which to host your message, and a means to share your message. Using a popular video hosting site, such as YouTube, for a viral video makes it easy for users to embed the video onto their own sites, for example.

For best response, personalise emails automated by the sharing process (with subject lines like: “Your friend Mark Hunter thought you’d find this amusing”). And for best SEO practice, tell users how to link to your content.

4. Make it as simple as possible for users to get involved

For campaigns that require interaction, it should be as easy as possible for users to sign-up and get interacting. Lengthy sign-up forms asking for lots of information will slow and can even halt your campaign.

5. Be authentic and transparent

It’s a viral marketing campaign for a brand, and marketers who pretend otherwise can see the attempt blowing up in their faces. Studies have shown that branding does not have a significant detrimental effect to the contagious nature of a viral campaign.

6. Provide an incentive for sharing and interacting

The greatest incentive for users sharing your content is social currency: create something that they want to share. People like to be seen by their friends and colleagues as resourceful, caring or humorous, and the content you create should tie in with those values. Tailoring your content for your target market will give you even better results.

Incentive can be financial: a gift voucher for every 5 friends the campaign is sent to. Or, users could be entered into a competition for every 10 friends they refer. However, campaigns work best when the prize doesn’t eclipse the content. Increasing social currency works for a brand too; it will increase their brand equity.

note

ARGs are often used successfully as viral marketing campaigns. One prominent successful campaign was I Love Bees for the launch of Halo 2. Do a quick search online – it's fascinating.

7. Make the message available

Sophisticated ARGs (alternative reality games) usually involve hiding messages and making them cryptic, but for the most part, marketers want their campaign to be very available. Research your target market, and make sure that they can access your campaign easily based on their usual online habits.

With any successful campaign, the spread of the message can usually be traced to several core influencers: those people responsible for the viral growth. Influencers tend to affect a large number of people, either by sending the message to lots of people, or causing lots of people to want to emulate them. However, influencers are difficult to identify prior to success, and so seeding a campaign should attract as large an audience as possible.

Be aware, as well, that editorial mentions in traditional media can also create a huge amount of traffic for a campaign, so press releases still need to be part of the seeding process.

Using forums and inciting blog comments can all help to get content out there.

8. Use a strong call to action

Be sure that the medium does not eclipse your message. If you have taken the time to create compelling and engaging content, make the most of the interaction you have with a potential customer. Be very clear about the action you want the user to take next:

- Send this video to a friend.
- Forward to a friend.
- Play now!

9. Track and analyse, and optimise

Monitor interactions with your brand from consumers, so you can see growth and response. Make sure you are aware of the many ways that users could be talking about you. The chapter on online reputation management provides guidelines for the process of listening online. If the campaign is growing, but the message is not as intended, there might need to be some adjustments made.

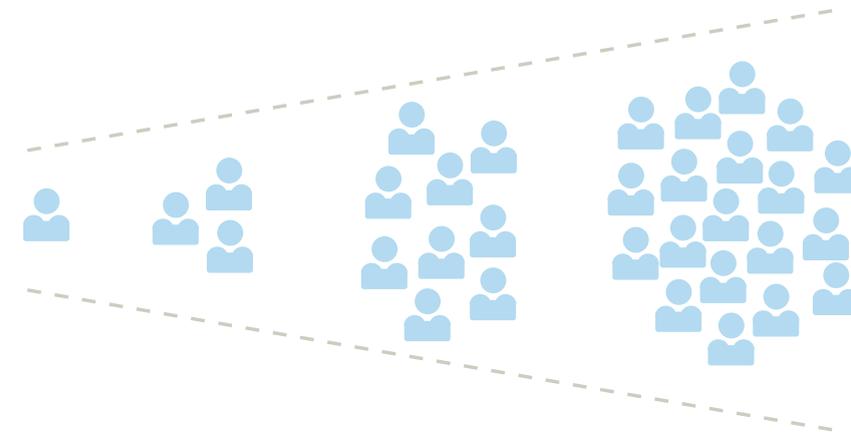
Analyse what elements of the campaign work, so that when the next one is launched, these can be optimised.

Tracking software ForwardTrack (forwardtrack.eyebamresearch.org) shows the geographical spread of a campaign over time, and also lets participants see the spread of the campaign. This tracking solution can become a part of the marketing of the viral message.

TubeMogul (www.tubemogul.com) and VidMetrix (www.vidmetrix.com) both provide tracking and audience analysis for online videos.

10. Get lucky

Careful planning and great content with an enticing incentive should all result in a campaign that is successful. A little bit of luck is usually required for a campaign to fly.



Viral Marketing uses communities to broadcast your message

now what?

With a viral campaign flying around the connected Internet, a company should be ready to capitalise on the benefits of the campaign.

be prepared for the traffic

Anticipate wild success and ensure that the server can cope with the additional traffic. Nothing will kill a campaign faster than it being unavailable, and this has happened countless times.

Ensure that all parties know about the viral marketing campaign, so that they can be prepared for any feedback that arises from this. If there is a cryptic element involved, or information that should not be released, ensure that all employees know about this.

If the campaign is to increase sales, be sure that there is sufficient stock in place.

start relationships

With millions of people being exposed to a brand, a company should plan to make the most of this first contact. As well providing all the tools to send a campaign on, a well planned campaign will also ask their audience permission to keep in touch with them. Build on the nature of the campaign, and ensure that future communications are not far removed from the viral campaign.

prepare a marketing success report

Consider the additional traffic and traction if the campaign becomes a case study, archived and accessed by marketers, journalists and other interested parties. Make the most of this additional latent traffic avenue by preparing useful case studies, screenshots and contact details. Even though the viral marketing campaign may be over, make sure it appears in online conversations and continues to generate traffic and links for your company.

If possible, keep relevant web sites up and running, and games still available once a campaign has finished.

getting it wrong: astroturfing

“Astroturfing” refers to parties trying to manipulate word of mouth, and comes from the term “grassroots campaigning”. Sometimes referred to as “stealth marketing”, it can also be a viral campaign killer.

Astroturfing usually occurs in the seeding period of a campaign. Employees may use fake names to try to seed a campaign on forums, in blog comments and through services such as Digg (www.digg.com). Communities are quick to pick up on false commentary, and this can be disastrous for a campaign. As with all social media interactions, transparency and authenticity can be far better for traction.

summary

Viral marketing uses people’s electronic connectivity to increase the velocity of word of mouth. People with similar interests, needs and lifestyles tend to pass on and share interesting and entertaining content.

When sponsored by a brand, the message builds awareness of a product or service and can provide qualified prospects for the organisation to pursue.

Viral marketing campaigns can be unpredictable, but careful planning can go a long way to ensuring success.

1. Define the aims of the campaign and determine how success will be measured.
2. Create something that people want to share.
3. Use social media to ensure that content is easy to share.
4. Remove all barriers to participation.
5. Be authentic.
6. Provide incentives.
7. Make the message available.
8. Use a strong call to action.
9. Track, analyse and optimise.
10. Get a little lucky.

Campaigns that experience rapid exponential growth (go viral) can reach a large audience in a short space of time at a very low cost, making viral marketing very attractive.

the bigger picture

Successful viral marketing relies on a solid understanding of social media. Most viral marketing messages are hosted, shared and even created with the tools of social media.

Viral marketing campaigns can increase the links to a web site, and can therefore be a valuable SEO resource and tactic. Using SEO knowledge, the campaign can be created so as to maximise the value of those links.

Email marketing can be turned into potential viral marketing with the simple addition of a “forward to a friend” instruction and link in an email newsletter.

Viral campaigns can be seeded in a number of ways, including online advertising, to ensure maximum audience.

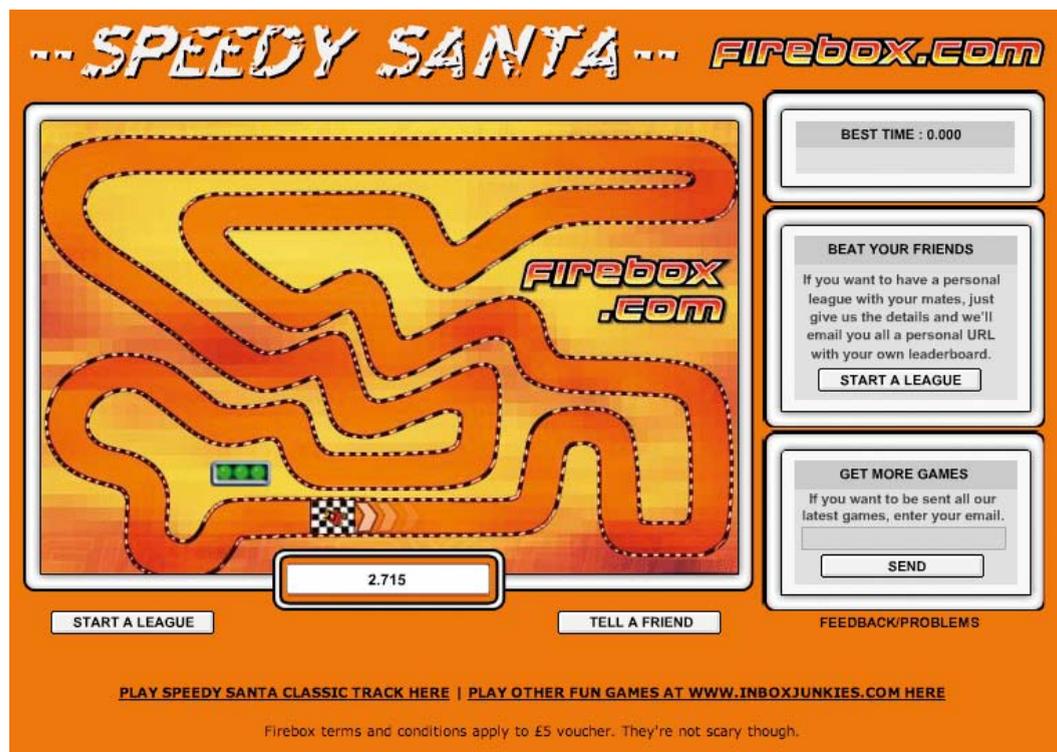
ORM provides plenty of tools for establishing the success and reach of viral campaigns.

case study: Firebox.com and Speedy Santa

[Firebox.com](#), a leading UK gifts and gadgets retailer, briefed agency Inbox.co.uk to create the most popular Christmas viral of December 2004. The viral concept also needed to drive traffic to the [Firebox.com](#) site to boost sales of toys and gadgets. [Inbox.co.uk](#) created an addictive game based on a simple idea: drag Santa around his Lapland track in the quickest time.

Players were given a global position at the end of each lap, and every player who completed a lap of the Firebox track won a £5 Firebox voucher.

The hook: a system of private leagues was devised where players could invite four friends or colleagues to join a leader board. Everyone in that league was emailed a personal URL and scores were updated in real-time.



These leagues proved a big hit and created a lot of office buzz. Within four days, the game was number one in the FHM Top 100 games. The Speedy Santa game was played over 22 million times in the run-up to Christmas. On average, people played the game over 60 times each. 87% of people who played the Firebox Speedy Santa game clicked through to the Firebox.com site, at a cost to Firebox of under 4p per click-through. And they each had a £5 Firebox voucher to spend right before Christmas.

Christian Robinson, MD of Firebox.com, said, "It has definitely been one of the most successful promotions we have ever run, generated hundreds of thousands of pounds in revenue and bringing the Firebox brand to tens of thousands of new customers."

case study questions

1. Why do you think leader boards were an important contributing factor to the success of this campaign?
2. How did Firebox.com capitalise on the success of the game?
3. How was the game suited to its target audience and time of year?

chapter questions

1. Using the right medium to reach your audience is important. How does the Threshers voucher case study illustrate this?
2. Why is transparency so important in viral marketing?
3. Are viral campaigns better suited to a niche audience, or a mass audience?
4. Why is planning so important to viral marketing campaigns?

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further reading

www.gottaquirk.com

– the blog from Quirk eMarketing regularly posts the latest viral marketing buzz from the Internet.

www.adverblog.com

– Adverblog posts interactive marketing and other great advertising from around the world – great inspiration

10. online reputation management

What's inside: The **introduction** to ORM gives an insight into the topic and the **key terms and concepts** are outlined for this chapter, followed by an example of what can happen **when a company does not listen** and manage its online reputation. We discuss **how it works** outlining the significant steps of **listening, analysing and influencing**. The **10 rules to recover from an online brand attack** are a practical approach to ORM, followed by a **summary** and **the bigger picture**.