



How to Stop Your Viral Going Spiral

[Expert's Column](#)

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Keywords : Viral marketing 101, web 2.0, viral marketing success story

Date : 7-10-2009

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Everyone loves viral marketing - except when the laugh is on you. We look at the background to marketing's most contagious medium, and offer some basic rules for avoiding fatal infection.

'Viral' has established itself as one of the must-have adjectives of marketing in the cyber age. What better way of spreading the word than to have all your potential customers do it for you? If you can show that you have created a video, image, promotion or cute little game that 'went viral', then you have earned your ticket of admission to the top table of marketing success.

It's not called 'viral' for nothing, however. For every one viral success planned and rolled out by the agency and marketing department, there are at least ten more that bring nothing but bad news and a worse image to the brand concerned, along with a lot of raucous laughter for the gleefully awaiting public; and once they start spreading, there is nothing you can do to stop them. No quick-fix antidotes from your cyber-doctor and by the time you do find one, a lot of damage has already been done.

In this edition, we ask some key questions about viral marketing and how to handle it professionally.

1. *Shouldn't we just leave the viral effect to chance? Don't the companies that try to manipulate a viral buzz more often get their fingers burned than not?*

Viral marketing can be one of the most cost-effective sources of new customer acquisition, but you have to be extremely careful when managing offers and incentives: consumers will react negatively and even aggressively if they think they are being 'invaded' or manipulated.

Viral marketing is also second to none when it comes to building kudos for a brand, and the key to that is that the impact has to be creative, amusing and informative. But if you get it wrong, the backlash can be virulent - the infamous recent Langham Hotel campaign is one of the best - or worst, if you prefer - examples of that effect.

Your customers are your greatest marketing resource so if executed correctly viral marketing can work really well, but it shouldn't be viewed in isolation; it has to be

part of the overall marketing mix.

2. *How did viral marketing begin and evolve? When did it first start to attract the attention of professional marketers?*

Viral marketing began when people starting spotting 'cool' stuff on the Internet and sending it to all their pals by email. To a very large extent that's what it still is and before long there were whole sites set up whose sole purpose was to collect all that cool stuff for all to see (check out, for instance, the long-running www.b3ta.com). Not surprisingly, marketers cottoned onto the huge potential (and very low cost) of this effect very quickly (Amway, Avon, etc.)

The main difference now is that the platforms and channels for sharing the cool stuff have moved on to embrace social networks, SMS, YouTube and so on. If it increases awareness of a brand or product (for better or worse) through forwarded replication, it's viral.

The simple "forward" button in email is still a powerful vehicle to advocate and expand the reach of your brand. According to the latest Epsilon Global Consumer Email Study, over half of the respondents in the Asia Pacific region (51%) said they frequently/occasionally forwarded commercial emails to friends.

It's worth noting, too, that the proliferation of broadband infrastructure and technology has led to the evolution of a greatly expanded range of viral formats, from the simple text links, games and screensavers popular in early 1990 to today's high-definition videos and additional content contributed by the network of sharers.

3. *What difference has Web 2.0 made to viral marketing? Have applications such as Facebook and YouTube made a critical difference? What other applications have influenced this?*

Web 2.0 endows users with enormous power to generate and publish content to pass on to their network of friends and fans. Everyone now has the power to influence. Today, everyone is part of the media process if they want to be. It's fluid and, for the consumers, it's no longer passive.

That fluidity brings with it major challenges, which most marketers are still not prepared for and trained to deal with. Negative comment and misuse of the viral creative by users make it very difficult for brands and marketers to control the messaging. Should it go wrong, its most immediate and worst damage is on the brand equity and the PR front, yet few companies are experienced and quick enough to deal with negative PR effectively.

4. *Is email still the channel of choice for viral marketing, or has this now transferred to the social networks?*

It really depends on the message. Email is still more personal, 1 to 1, and relevant. However, it's clearly faster to disseminate information to people in "segmented groups" via social networks, especially if you haven't built up the personal relationship yet.

Email and social media are not in competition. They complement each other and are both important parts of the marketing mix.

5. *Can you give examples of successful viral marketing campaigns that were intentionally originated by marketers? Unsuccessful ones? What were the critical factors at play here? What are the risks?*

An increasing number of brands are building platforms on Twitter, Facebook, blogs or other SNS to create a direct conversation with customers and fans. Some brands are seeing success in terms of engagement in customer relations and promoting active participation. However, the most celebrated success story is definitely what [DellOutlet](#) has achieved on Twitter. It has generated [over \\$2 million in sales of Dell computers and products](#).

As for the critical success factors: play by the same rules as the people you're talking to in these networks. If there's an offer, make it easy and instant. If it's a service, make it transparent and non-manipulative. The moment you take the decision to go onto an SNS you've effectively abandoned the right to privacy, so don't try to protect something nobody in that world thinks is a negative value. Create an environment for your SNS presence that allows you to be open, transparent and sharing (look at the [Comcast example](#) in our main article for a good example of this).

As for the risks, in Australia a video showed up in January that was ostensibly posted by a girl about a mystery man who had left his jacket behind after meeting her. In the video she made a request for the man to find her and contact her.

The video went viral and numerous radio stations, newspapers and current affairs news programs interviewed her. A few weeks later it was revealed that the video was staged. It was a fake, part of a campaign to launch a new men's brand in Australia. [The publicity was very negative](#): a large number of people and the media had been duped by the video and they resented it. Many voiced out their contempt and advocated boycotting that brand.

Clever? Yes, too clever or self-satisfied for its own good? Probably! However, the agency that produced the video carried out a survey that showed 58% positive brand perception among respondents. But then, they would say that, wouldn't they!

6. *Viral marketing 101: what do you need to remember? Success criteria and basic rules for running intelligent viral marketing campaigns.*

- Firstly, is the viral effect planned or not? Upon designing your branding or marketing campaign, be critical when deciding whether or not you want to have a viral effect and make sure you are ready to respond if things do not go according to plan.
- Control branding consistency: image, style, corporate and social message.
- Check capacity – if you plan to have a viral effect, ensure you have enough

capacity to deal with that. If viral is not planned, you still have to have a contingency plan that if the campaign did go farther and wider than it is planned, what effect it will have on the success of the campaign and the audience you originally meant to target.

- Don't over-complicate. Stick to simple & sound implementation.
- Make sure you have the resources in place to monitor and respond quickly.
- Measure success – establish clear metrics to benchmark the activity and investment. ■