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Viral Marketing: How to Make Customers Work for You

Viral marketing is one of the hottest trends in the advertising business. Find out how you can create and control word-of-mouth campaigns that will have customers doing your marketing work for you.

By Julie H. Case



It's 4:30 in the afternoon and the entire office is hunkered down at their desks. The receptionist is glued to his computer screen. The senior ad sales person has taken an intense interest in something on her monitor. The marketing director has his door closed and the volume on his laptop turned down low. The only ones working, it seems, are the IT folks, who are scrambling to figure out why there's a sudden surge in server traffic. And then, the address for YouTube pops up. It's 4:31 and everyone in your office, along with about 4 million other people around the world, is opening an e-mail video clip, logging into Metacafe, plugging in their headphones and clicking through to YouTube to see the newest Weezer song, "Pork and Beans"—perhaps the

ultimate viral video for their relatively viral new song. And then, your esteemed colleagues are sending the video link to their friends.

Welcome to the wildfire world of viral marketing.

Pssst! Pass it on...

Call it social media marketing, call it word-of-mouth advertising, call it what you like, viral marketing is probably the most complex and tantalizing marketing tool today.

If its definition is relatively easy to pin down—advertising or messaging that propagates itself, often without overt assistance from the marketer, by being shared between audience members—the means of achieving a viral campaign are far more intricate. The tools used to achieve it are broad. In today's world, the outlets for dissemination are diverse and almost limitless.

Viral campaigns live online and off. They happen in real time, in the real world. They're executed in e-mail, on social networking sites and on blogs across the net. Some employ videos. Some, such as Sheraton's "wave" campaign feature uploaded videos of stadiums full of real people doing the wave. Some rely on the right person being in the right place at the right time—as simple as a person taking a picture of himself wearing a giant sandwich board, then sending that picture to his four best friends, who send it to their four best friends, who begin talking about it on their blogs and posting the photo on their MySpace pages.

And that's the goal of viral marketing: for a message or brand presence to infiltrate a culture—be that a niche group of customers or society as a whole—seemingly without effort. For something to get adopted by one person, blogger or group and passed on to others with similar interests, without the message owner speaking directly to the target audience.

Many, though not all, campaigns go viral because they are subtle—so subtle you sometimes have to wonder how anyone could know there's a message in the marketing. The brand may not be mentioned once in the whole video or in the entire widget that's passed along. How can a campaign that is seemingly unbranded succeed? Because it encourages recipients to discover for themselves the source behind the entertainment.

While most traditional advertising is focused on direct messages, viral campaigns disseminate narratives and leave it to the audience to discover meaning for themselves. Which explains how a video that seems to have no reference to the brand it is advertising can be successful.

"The real thread that ties all great viral marketing campaigns together is that they provoke questions, and leave questions unanswered," says Devin Liddell, a brand expert for Seattle's Phinney Bischoff Design House.

Not all great campaigns are so stealthy, however. Some wear their brand on their digital sleeve. These campaigns go viral because the branding is part of the content. And that content is so funny, so entertaining, so engaging that it compels the audience to pass it along by talking about it at work, writing about it on a blog or uploading it to a favorite social networking site.

Social media outlets—including blogs, message boards and social networks such as MySpace, YouTube and Facebook—are primary channels for viral marketing campaigns. Whole groups of people worldwide can converge in small communities on the web to share their passion for a subject—be it soccer or chewing ice. Yet getting a viral marketing campaign right can be tricky. Making a video and posting it on YouTube doesn't ensure traction; if the spot does not immediately grab attention, maybe 200 or so people will see it before it descends to the depths of the YouTube lists. For a viral campaign to actually work, experts argue, it has to have meaning. It has to be about an idea, and the execution must be about the message, the content.

"Great ideas are viral by their very nature," says Dave Remer, creative director and CEO of Seattle-based Remer Inc. He cites the 1984 Super Bowl commercial introducing the Mac. "It didn't have viral media, but it had a driver, it had an amplitude, it had meaning, it was worth telling friends and it became the single most important television commercial ever run on the planet," he says.

True, the commercial was overtly branded, but the content was so startling and the ad so mysterious (it was aired by Apple just once, during the halftime show), it had people talking. So much so that TV stations rebroadcast the ad during the evening news. The commercial raised questions and left them unanswered. The experience was the real content; the brand merely brought the content to the audience.

Remer also argues that while viral campaigns can be planned, the results are largely determined by the public.

"You can create an idea that's powerful, you find a target by doing good due diligence, you can place it in the appropriate media so it has a chance," he adds, "but viral is what viral does."

Yes, viral is one part luck, one part entertainment, but it's not all chance. "If you're any good at this, you create something that takes on a life of its own," says Cal McAllister, creative director and co-CEO of Seattle ad agency Wexley School for Girls. "If you're really good at this, you can steer that life and you can make sure you're still accomplishing what you tried to accomplish with marketing."

So, how does a brand get its video to go viral? Forget the dumb-luck aspect. The best campaigns are incredibly well researched and as tightly managed as any traditional advertising effort. Here are some general tips to make your next viral campaign a sensation.

One: DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Jeremy Lockhorn, director of emerging media at Avenue A|Razorfish argues that the best strategy to take a campaign viral is to listen first. You might start by monitoring blogs and websites to find out what the community is saying about your brand, and from there, figure out what the community wants or needs.

"If I were to advise a marketer on the way to approach viral marketing, it's not to 'spray and pray,' it's to make a calculated plan, just as you would anything else," Lockhorn says.

Doing the research, finding those really targeted social niches and marketing to them, then letting those people do the work of spreading your message for you, reduces the need for the kinds of massive, broad advertising and marketing campaigns and media buys of yore. Focusing on the niches allows marketers to reach very targeted audiences, instead of everyone on the web.

Two: MAKE IT COMPELLING

Still, in order to go viral, a campaign has to have great content. Putting a video online and assuming it will go viral is a pipe dream. For a campaign to go viral, the content absolutely has to resonate with the audience. So, you create really great content and hope it will become viral, McAllister says, but the video still has to stand on its own.

"If the most important thing for you in your viral marketing communication is the message, then the message has to be something people are going to want to talk about at a cocktail party or with their friends," McAllister says.

It's the rare but interesting piece of marketing that gets the kind of pass-along status that, say, Improv Everywhere's "freeze-in" at Grand Central Station acquired. The (non-advertising) art-and-culture experiment—which has since been replicated on an episode of the TV show "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit"—has been viewed more than 12 million times since being uploaded to YouTube on Jan. 31 of this year. Why? Because it was entertaining to watch.

You can't move your 30-second TV commercial to YouTube and expect it to become viral just because you put it on a viral site, says Brian Marr, managing director at Wexley. The outlet can't help—it's the idea that matters. You have to give the audience something to engage in, something to be entertained by.

"You don't make a viral video," Marr explains. "You make content that you hope people will share socially. If they do, it can take on a life of its own in a way that no media planner can buy—that's viral."

So, how do the Wexley wizards recommend avoiding the trap of convention with a film or video? They say marketers either have to be really blatant with the brand and build something really entertaining around it or be really subtle with the brand, but entertaining.

Blatant? Think Smirnoff's "Tea Partay" mockumentary-style video which features a sweater-clad character named "Prep-Unit" rapping from the tennis courts of Martha's Vineyard. ("P-Unit, what's up fellas?" "Yo, yo, where my WASPs at?!")

While the video was overtly branded, it worked. Not only did Smirnoff deliver an entertaining experience to the audience, the brand—which did not take itself too seriously—became part of the content.

"The brand was so seamless in playing a role in the entertainment that it didn't sour people to it," Liddell says of "Tea Partay." "The experience they got out of the video was worthy."

In the end, humor—and the experience—vaulted that video over the "obviously advertising" moat: Sure, it's two years old, but it has been a rated a YouTube "favorite" nearly 18,500 times.

Subtle? Marr cites Levi's "jumping into pants" commercials, which first appeared on YouTube on May 5 and has been seen by more than 3.8 million viewers. The ad is shot with that sort of shaky, filmed-on-a-camera-phone quality and appears to be three guys doing progressively more difficult tricks—such as vaulting over fences and doing back flips off teeter-totters—to get into a pair of oversize button-fly jeans.

Never mind the question of when men stopped trying to get into women's pants and into their own, the video hides its commercial nature fairly well. The message is restrained: Nowhere in the 1-minute, 46-second video is Levi's brand clearly exposed. Many casual viewers may never notice that this was "advertising" or that it was agency produced. There are no obvious logos (unless you're really looking hard at one shot) and no tagline, though at least one blogger caught the "at least there's no zipper" line—the only dialogue in the video. The blogger also recognized the Levi's video as a mimic of a popular Ray-Ban ad that had run a year prior, showing two men tossing sunglasses at each other and apparently catching them on their faces.

Subtle or overt, content is king for marketers who are hoping to go viral. "It will fail miserably if it doesn't have that natural 'I want to tell somebody else about this' element," McAllister says.

Viral videos offer one more opportunity: the chance to let consumers react and respond to the content, even if the brand wasn't the original source of the video.

For instance, when the video of two guys setting off a choreographed Mentos-fueled-Diet-Coke-fountain swept across the web, Coca-Cola and Mentos both seized the moment. Instead of just sitting back and watching their brands explode, so to speak, both companies engaged the online viewers. They sent packets of Mentos to people around the world and hosted competitions for other "netizens" to create their own videos of Mentos-Diet-Coke-fountains, which viewers could then upload to a site for judging.

Three: RELINQUISH CONTROL

Great viral campaigns work because a brand lets its customers speak for it. "It's about setting the tone to let your consumers talk about your product for you," says Kelli Koenig Horner, a marketing consultant with Zebra Partners and the former director of corporate communications at Nintendo of America.

Liddell agrees. "Your brand doesn't belong to you; it belongs to your customers." Companies that can't get past the control issue don't do viral marketing, or they don't do it well, he argues. "A viral campaign doesn't belong to you. You're setting it loose."

Letting your customers create their own messages about your brand doesn't always work. Especially if you aren't listening to what your consumers are saying about you in their blogs, in group sites or on their MySpace pages. Consider the Chevy Tahoe campaign of 2006. In partnership with the TV show "The Apprentice," Chevrolet hosted a make-your-own-ad contest for the Tahoe SUV. Chevy provided the footage and music and netizens created the ads—to disastrous effect. There were commercials with taglines about the SUV contributing to global warming and worse. Likely this response could have been avoided had Chevy paid attention to what was being said about its product in the market. No marketers with any sense are going to hand the keys to their message over to dissatisfied consumers.

Some advice? Know your reputation. "Be really aware of what people think about you before launching a

campaign, and use that knowledge to develop a campaign," says Liddell. "Great campaigns are a product of confidence. They know what people are saying about them in the market already."

The more unanswered questions you have about your brand and what people are saying about you, the more unlikely you are to do viral marketing. And, the more reason you have for not doing a campaign.

Four: DON'T EXPECT TO SAVE MONEY

Choosing viral as a way to save money on advertising is often a mistake. Believing that you can reduce your marketing budget because it costs less to disseminate a video on the web than to run a TV ad is a common misconception. For starters, there's a certain element of luck to viral marketing. If you're using video, you have to hope you're smart and funny enough to be the hot thing for the moment. You could be usurped by some other bigger, more interesting piece of content right when you launch your campaign. And because there's no media buy with viral campaigns, you can't be guaranteed distribution.

Plus, viral video doesn't mean haphazard or cheap. Unlike those user-submitted pieces—like Chris Crocker's "Leave Britney Alone!" video, where he holds a sheet over his head and cries about the media's treatment of Britney Spears—commercially produced videos aren't inexpensive, even if they're made to look that way. And, according to Marr, anything on video that has attained huge viral success has generally had significant amounts of writing, production and planning built into the release.

So, instead of reducing your advertising budget in response to viral's "cheaper" price tag, Lockhorn and the Wexley guys argue that the funds left over should be used to support your campaign in other forms of marketing, such as live events and conventional advertising.

Five: USE MULTIPLE PLATFORMS

When client Levi's partnered with TV show "Project Runway" for an episode, Avenue A|Razorfish spun the idea out beyond the airwaves. Instead of relying on the buzz from a single "Runway" episode, the company created a community site that invited people to submit their own designs for a contest. And because the message provided that target audience a way to get involved with the brand creatively and to share in a collaborative way, it was highly successful: More than 3,000 designs were submitted and more than 19,000 comments were posted by other users about the designs.

What are the other "viral media" marketers use? Largely, they're social media outlets—such as blogs, badges, widgets or gadgets—and groups that people join (see Glossary, page 33). These are the individual tools you can use to express yourself.

Take, for example, Facebook, which receives the lion's share of the social network market. According to Wexley's estimates, about 12 percent of all users of the major social networking sites belong to Facebook. There, advertisers can make their own Facebook brand page and other users can become their "fans." Marketers also regularly make applications that can be downloaded for business or entertainment.

The "Sex and the City" website, for example, lets users determine if they more closely resemble, say, the Samantha or Carrie characters. "Micro-loan" organization Kiva has an app that helps users keep track of their loans and encourage other Facebook friends to donate as well.

Recently, Coors launched a MySpace app, "Coors Light 4:53"—a reference to seven minutes until happy hour—that allows users to plug in their zipcode to find a map to nearby happy hours and invite their friends. Users can also copy the code for the "4:53" page, add it to their MySpace profile, copy the html code and install it as a widget on their own home pages or add it as a gadget on their iGoogle pages. Not only do these kinds of gimmicks keep consumers in touch with a brand on a regular basis, they also give social network members a way to show an affinity for, or affiliation with, a brand.

Six: DON'T BE AFRAID TO GO OFFLINE

Where viral marketing gets really cool, according to McAllister, is when it goes beyond the web, where viral tactics are less expected. For example, a Wexley campaign for tennis shoes might start by going in search of bloggers who talk avidly about running. They'd seek out running groups with community pages on the web. They'd look at what kinds of widgets they could create for runners—for instance, a gadget that lets runners design their own shoes. They'd develop ways to let runners create their own experiences, be they viral videos or blogs, and they'd create a place where all of these things can live and be reached by other people.

Then, Wexley might put together an event—a sit-in, a parade, maybe a race in which you have 30 minutes to design the artwork for your own shoes and 15 minutes to run the race—giving everyone the chance to get involved in real time.

And, of course, someone makes a video. And someone posts it on the web. And someone says, "Look what these nuts in Seattle are doing." And the video gets passed along. Suddenly, your offline campaign becomes part of your online campaign, and people are forwarding it to each other and your campaign is viral.

"That's the goal for anything viral," McAllister adds. "In anything we do, we want someone to have that 'you've gotta check this out' moment."

CHECK THIS OUT...

Which gets back to that Weezer video, "Pork and Beans." Why is it perhaps the ultimate viral video? Well, the tune is smart and catchy, and the video is entertaining. Both of these qualities might be enough to get people to forward the video to their friends, but there's more. The director took things a step further: he incorporated viral videos into the video. Playing behind the song are mash-ups of famous viral videos. The band plays in front of a Diet-Coke/Mentos fountain. Chris "Leave Britney Alone" Crocker cries and lip-syncs a line from the song. A G.I. Joe character, who appears in one of the mock remakes of the old PSA advertisements, catches a pair of sunglasses on his face, à la the Ray-Ban video.

Meanwhile, across the web, 7 million people have already downloaded the video. They are watching it over and over again, trying to figure out which viral videos are being mashed together to create a scene, singing along with Weezer as they compose an e-mail.

"You have to see this," they write. And then they pass the video along to their friends.

Photo by John Keatley