



Viral Marketing: Power or Menace

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viral marketing, mass advertising, social networking

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ABSTRACT *In today's competitive world, firms are selling goods and services through a variety of direct and indirect channels. Mass advertising is not nearly as effective as it was, so marketers are exploring new forms of communication, such as experimental and viral marketing. Viral marketing is online marketing technique which involves creating an infectious excitement about a product so that people pass on information about it through emails, social networking sites, blogs and any form of online network. Viral marketing takes advantage of networks of influence among customers to inexpensively achieve large changes in behaviour. It's been estimated that a successful viral campaign can have 500-1000 times more impact than a non-viral campaign. Viral marketing, when successful, results in exponential growth. It definitely has a place in the business world today but as the name tells that this form of marketing can spread in uncontrolled way with has negative side effects also. Although there are some evidences on the usefulness of viral marketing from the marketers' perspective but little is known about dark zone of viral. Here, both positive and negative aspects of viral marketing are explored.*

1. Introduction

In today's competitive world, firms are selling goods and services through variety of channels. Mass advertising is not nearly as effective as it was, so marketers are exploring new forms of communication like viral marketing. Viral Marketing is somewhat of a new strategy, being coined within last twelve years. In past, people used to read company reviews and rely on what they heard on television and radio commercials. Today, consumers want to hear what "real" people have to say about products and services. In recent years, viral marketing has generated lot of excitement because people are constantly searching, following and networking.

Viral marketing is digital progression of word-of-mouth concept. It depends on high pass-along rate from person to person. As with all marketing, the key is the content and with viral marketing the key is "buzz potential." Successful viral marketing creates that buzz because the content is uniquely engaging & causes the urge of individuals to share with their nearones. In viral, there are two critical success factors, one is social object (quality of message) and other is viral mechanics (sharing features, choice of platform, digital extensions). Goal of viral marketing is to use consumer-to-consumer communications-as opposed to company-to-consumer communications to disseminate information about product or service, thereby leading to more rapid and cost effective adoption by the market.

Inspite the success of this concept, unfortunately, for every high-profile example of successful viral product like Flash-Mobs, StarWars Kid, there are many more attempts that fail. Viral effect is just the means to an end and not the actual goal itself. Means can go wrong and turn power into menace. Viral marketing is an innocuous form of advertising because it does not come directly from company's handlers, but rather, it comes as a direct result of company's practices. This is exactly why this type of advertising can either be the saving race or the downfall of a company.

2. Conceptual Development

2.1 Viral marketing

Viral marketing is the term which describes a type of marketing associated with the behaviour of virus in literal sense which induces websites or users to pass on a marketing message to other sites or users, creating potentially exponential growth in the message's visibility and effect.

2.2 Modes of Viral Marketing

Creation of technologies like PVRs, satellite radio & Internet

ad blocking software are driving fundamental shift in the way public consumes media. Highly effective viral marketing techniques are videos (youtube, metacafe), social media (facebook, twitter), article marketing (ArticleVideoRobot.com and Article2Video.com), tweet button, share widget(ShareThis.com), e-books, newsletters.

2.3 Viral Marketing Process

Viral marketing is process of promoting & selling products or services through use of messages that are self regenerative. It includes pass-along tag line that encourages recipients of message to send or forward the message to other people. It starts with a message that contains some valuable information element along with a referral message (viral message). It is sent to people who have likely interest in the information contained in it. When people receive this message, they are encouraged to forward it to their friends. This multiplies the effect of marketing campaign as many more people receive the message than was initially sent.

3. Review of Literature

Initially, the term viral marketing was developed by Juvertson and Draper (1997) which used to describe free email service which Hotmail was providing. Welker (2002), saw an analogy between viral marketing and living biological virus. Knight (1999) suggests that viral marketing is similar to "digitalized sneeze", one characterized by the release of "millions of tiny particles that can infect others who come into contact with them". Wilson (2000) defines it as "any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in message's exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions". Viral marketing has become an increasingly popular promotional tool (Kirsner 2005). The research of Ferguson (2008) indicates that through the "proliferation of broadband access and its attendant social networks, video-sharing sites and blogs, word-of-mouth now spreads at the speed of thought".

4. Viral Campaigns

An array of viral marketing examples have come and gone with varying degrees of success. There have been many memorable viral marketing success stories and memorable flops in the past decade. Some viral campaigns have become better known for driving people away from a commodity than to it resulting in worst impacts than regular marketing campaigns.

4.1 Successful Viral Campaigns

Hotmail and Indianpangaleague are classic examples of adopting viral marketing strategy. Monster.com and Naukri.com are also the beneficiaries of this form of marketing. Amway, Hindustan Lever and Tupperware have also implemented such marketing concept.

Angry Birds Space Video campaign was one of the most viewed viral videos. What was that which made the video so likeable? One of the chief traffic drivers was the authenticity of the video as it was shot in space trailer that showed NASA scientist's physics demonstration, making it relevant to online audience. Also, the lucid animations that showed how the game characters found their way into space helped a lot.

Vodafone ZooZoo ads which were series of 30 ads have also added to the success list of Viral Marketing. After launching the campaign, Vodafone's subscription rates increased.

P&G's "Thank You Mom" global campaign was released in April, 2012 to hype the Olympics. The ad went viral, amassing over 2 million views on YouTube shortly after its release. It was successful because of its sincerity, timeliness and universal appeal.

It's not just the hard core industries who are its beneficiaries but entertainment industry is also in the list. The song named Kolaveri Di & Gangnam Style is a perfect case of viral marketing, which had created a huge difference in the world of publicity. Films like Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na, Ra-One, 3 idiots, Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara and many more have added to their income with help of their viral campaigns.

4.2 Unsuccessful Viral Campaigns

SONY Company Entertainment in 2006 tried to increase the sale of their PSP video game system by hiring a marketing agency to start a fake blog called alliwantforxmasisp.com. The blog staged two guys trying to convince their friends and family on getting them PSP for Christmas. However, viewers caught on to the scheme and Sony took a negative backlash from the press and public for trying to trick their consumers with a fake market haven. Viral campaign ended soon with Sony pulling the blog altogether and posting an apology to everyone. The reason for failure was that Sony had failed to realize that consumers are smart and can figure out if message is authentic or not.

General Motors decided to have a contest on promoting their new Tahoe truck by having internet user create their own digital commercials for them. Entrants of contest could choose from range of clips and sound tracks provided on webpage and write their own text to create their own advertisement. The idea was to have the users generate buzz by sharing their own creations on channels such as YouTube. The campaign was successful in this aspect, but it was not what GM had hoped for. The user-generated advertisements that received the most buzz and views were the ones that slandered the brand and its gas guzzling truck, with many of contents being "offensive and inflammatory".

In May 2009, in case of KFC, Oprah Winfrey offered her viewers a free coupon for KFC's new grilled chicken. The promotion was successful & Oprah's KFC coupons were fifth most popular searched items on Google. The demand was too overwhelming to handle due to insufficient inventory. Then KFC CEO apologized to customers and gave discounts on future purchases.

Mc Donald's created "I'd hit it" campaign to target youth in US. They created a banner ad and put in ESPN.COM website in 2007. They incorporated youth slang in it to go viral. They didn't understand correct meaning and context of usage. The meaning of phrase was "I would love to have sex with her". They failed to attract customers miserably. Many companies like General Motors, Nokia, Starbucks have also

added to the list of viral flops making the list endless.

5. Viral Actions of Hamleys Toys

Hamleys is named after William Hamley, who founded a toy shop called 'Noah's Ark' in London in 1760. Hamleys is one of the world's best-known retailers of toys whose flagship store in London is considered one of the city's major tourist attractions, receiving around five million visitors per year. The first store in Asia was opened in Mumbai on 9 April, 2010.

The conditioning by children's toys and segregation of toys in shops is insidious. Gender stereotypes are highly influential and pervasive, and influence children's and parents' choices, aspirations and expectations. Instead of encouraging children to pursue activities according to their individual talents and interests, toy shops encourage children to pursue a narrow range of activities, consistent with stereotypes which one see in society generally. Initially, Hamleys used to label its floors in blue for boys and pink for girls. Hamleys' girls department was home to menagerie of fluffy animals, cookery sets and hair-and-beauty paraphernalia, including beauty salon called Tantrum, while boys floor was Bear Grylls-fest of cars, spaceships and construction sets. Its viral campaign was based on gender stereotypes which became winning formula for him.

Suddenly, a campaign on Twitter had accused the store of "gender apartheid" and one mother on Twitter told that her son would love a diary and craft kit this Christmas, but the only ones she can find are pink. Male child, know your place! Feelings are for women! Also macramé!

Viral video on YouTube: "Riley on Marketing" which was the rebellion against such gender apartheid shattered the image of Hamleys. It showed a little girl in front of a wall of pink packaging, asking, "Why do all the girls have to buy pink stuff and all the boys have to buy different-color stuff?" It has been viewed more than 2.4 million times.

It created enough negative noise via social media about Hamleys and by that time its too late and there is nothing to do, they acted earlier and sent message that "we listen and we care what people think in". Answer to these, it launched viral campaigns which brushed aside some hard-to-shift stereotypes with firefighter kits for girls and baby dolls for boys, toys are breaking down decades-old gender barriers.

Few years back, during Christmas, Hamleys launched viral marketing of discount vouchers. Its Christmas pricing errors attracted publicity. An internet voucher design error left Hamleys toyshop facing a retailer's nightmare - a shortage of toys for sale at Christmas. Users of the HotUKDeals website spotted a glitch in a voucher scheme which allowed customers to claim a cumulative 60% discount if they bought goods from the Hamleys online store. Within hours of details of the offer being posted on the internet, thousands of shoppers across the web had taken advantage of it - selling out most of the company's festive supplies for a fraction of the original price. The company admitted that it had fallen foul of the loophole and promised to honour any orders made as a result of the blunder. Customers who made "fraudulent purchases", albeit unwittingly, were offered 25 per cent discounts as a gesture of goodwill but that news hardly made the headlines. Hamleys is certainly not the first retailer to feel voucher pain.

Hamleys campaign to have live Reindeer and Penguins in store at the busiest times of the year was big flop as it was opposed by Animal Welfare groups and social elements. They claimed that wild animals will find themselves surrounded by throngs of shoppers and travel through central London to reach the store will cause them unnecessary stress.

Recently, Hamleys is trying to get positive word of mouth through various campaigns as it is entering in various mar-

kets. In one of its viral campaign it is rolling out in-store overnight slumber parties as a product package aimed at high-end customers. Previously, slumber parties were offered on ad hoc basis as competition prizes for charitable and fund raising events. This will continue, but now London's most famous toy store can be considered by parents who are looking for an extra special experience for their children's parties.

It is also planning to roll the campaign named "Slap on the face of childhood" which aims to raise awareness and rejection of the looming cosmetics market for children. Brands such as Disney Princess, Hello Kitty and Prinzessin Lillifee are the ones bringing make-up for children into toy shops. With time they have realized the responsibility to tell people – it's not healthy, it's harming children. People are slowly realizing that something is not right and the more people realize that, the more they will be able to influence the industry.

Since years, Hamleys have been into viral actions. Some of its actions were praised and it proved positive for the company in terms of image and reputation while some actions went against the store. Hamleys faced ups and downs in its viral campaigns but took all corrective measures in time. The question now arises is how will Hamleys use their social networking and Internet skills in future? Have they worked out that social networking in business in a two way street? Have they planned to tell their customers and clients what's happening and raised on-line profile and hope to reach potential new customers and clients? Are they planned to entertain the feelings of customers about their business and ready to listen to them? These are the questions which Hamleys really need to take into consideration while rolling viral campaigns.

6. Viral marketing ethicality

With use of viral marketing, ethical considerations play a key role. The prime concern is of spam. What initially began as people forwarding interesting or pertinent emails to their friends, turned into companies manipulating mail servers to transmit their messages to mass, uninterested audiences. Thus, the result became known as spamming or unsolicited emailing. Another threat that viral marketing poses is a person's right to privacy. As consumers gradually make an increasing number of business transactions online, the amount

of personal information transferred through online mechanisms greatly increases. Though there is legislation being created to protect consumers' right to privacy online, it is still being fashioned, and in the mean time, consumers need to take control and protect their own privacy. Furthermore, trust is a major factor at play when it comes to consumers feeling comfortable making purchases online.

The positive aspects of viral marketing can also turn into negatives over the time. Effective viral marketing campaigns can sometimes be easily mimicked by competitors because the plans usually don't require expensive resources to launch. Therefore, in certain circumstances, companies' viral marketing strategies do not provide them a sustainable competitive advantage.

7. Conclusion

The evolving nature of viral marketing demonstrates that no professional can get too comfortable with reaching audiences in one manner. Viral is one of the toughest platforms to crack, but provides a huge brand connection once you get it right. It's not about the amount of money one put into the work but the key thing is idea relevancy. The opportunities that surround the use of viral marketing are boundless. It is credible marketing tactic that can deliver positive ROI when properly executed. Marketers need to recognize that customers are an additional sales channel, a lead-generating channel, and an awareness-generating channel. Viral marketing is a powerful way to enlist customers in a marketing strategy, and when applied correctly, can boost sales for the right product into the stratosphere and speed the transition from the stage of early adoption to widespread use.

Viral actions are hit or miss. It can be power or menace. It is risky and if done improperly can backfire and create negative buzz. In spite of various memorable unsuccessful campaigns, the best part is that it doesn't require a product with a wow factor in order to raise awareness and generate buzz. Viral campaigns, whether ultimately liked or disliked, are often welcomed by the receivers and with a successful technique, merged with loyalty marketing efforts, marketers can identify prospects and build advocacy with high value segment.

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