

To Pass Or To Pass It On: That Is The Viral Question

It's hard to resist an offer to get something for nothing, even if our better judgment suggests "you get what you pay for." Could it be the irresistible appeal of a free lunch, combined with envy at the success achieved by a few notable viral marketing campaigns, that is behind advertisers' current rush of interest in viral marketing? Or is viral really the next big innovation in online marketing?



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Viral marketing seems to offer advertisers a way to reach their target consumers for little or no cost. Advertisers need only produce a clever ad, invest a small amount in seeding it, and then sit back and watch Web videophiles spread their message for them. At least a few companies have made it look this easy. Smirnoff Vodka North America simply posted its music video *Tea Party* onto one of its own Web sites and, before long, the ad featuring rapping New England yuppies touting Smirnoff Raw Tea was posted on YouTube, where it is reported to have generated over 2 million views to date. Yet for every *Tea Party*, there are dozens of weak viral ads that garner relatively few views. Will marketers learn how to control viral campaigns well enough to get consistent, predictable results?

Using viral marketing, advertisers take advantage of social networks to disseminate their messages. Either an ad or a link to an ad or microsite is distributed from one individual to another, in a way that's analogous to the spread of pathogens and computer viruses. The reach of a successful viral ad increases rapidly as each individual passes the ad on to new transmitters. The potential to reach large numbers of people for little or no cost makes the viral approach a very appealing one to marketers.

What Makes Viral Work?

If a viral campaign is to be effective, significant numbers of people must view and spread the content. People must be willing to work on behalf of a brand. Therefore, marketers must understand what motivates someone to send an ad or link to another person.

Sending a viral ad that's considered stupid or offensive is rather like telling a joke that falls flat

People pass along ads for the same reasons that they pass along jokes, stories, and recipes. It is a means of staying in touch, of making a connection, of sending the message "I'm thinking of you, and I hope you'll enjoy this." Ads, however, can have value that goes beyond the personal connection represented by a photo. An ad can become a unit of "social currency," transmitting the message "I'm cool and special because I'm hooked into this new, fun, interesting stuff." But if either of those messages, especially the second one, is to register and resonate with the recipient, the content (i.e., the ad) must be appreciated by the recipient, thereby reflecting well on the sender. Sending a viral ad that's considered stupid or offensive is rather like telling a joke that falls flat — embarrassing for all involved and something to be avoided!

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What Drives Pass-Along?

Millward Brown conducted a study in the U.K., testing 32 different ads among more than 3,000 people, in order to understand the properties of a successful viral ad. Not surprisingly, there was a strong relationship between the degree to which an ad was enjoyed and the likelihood that it would be forwarded on. But enjoyment alone was not sufficient to inspire viewers to share. The ad had to offer some additional dimension beyond being merely nice or pleasant, and most often that dimension was humor. Ads that were really funny — “laugh out loud” funny — were most likely to be passed along. Of all the ads tested, Budweiser’s *Magic Fridge* achieved the highest potential pass-along score because of its amusement value.

This ad, which first appeared during the 2006 U.S. Super Bowl, features a smug young man showing off his method for safeguarding Bud Lite: a refrigerator that hides behind a rotating wall. Little does he know that the slackers next door eagerly await each appearance of the “magic” fridge.

Though it was often present in ads that were passed on, humor wasn’t absolutely essential for pass-along. Ads with some shock value, or ads that generated a high degree of involvement, also scored highly on potential pass-along. Of all the ads tested, IKEA’s *Pig Hunt* was one of the most riveting, as well as one of the most polarizing in terms of humor. The ad features a near-naked couple caught playing “farmyard” by their children. The juxtaposition of the kids’ embarrassment at catching their parents in a sexual romp with the lighthearted message — “If you need to leave home, go to IKEA to furnish your apartment” — tends to defuse the tension, but not enough to make it comfortable for everyone. A substantial minority found the ad humorous enough to pass on, but many found it disturbing, shocking or repelling.

The ingredients in this “viral recipe” — enjoyment, involvement, humor, edge — may sound familiar. Advertising agencies have always sought to create engaging advertising using these elements. What’s different about viral ads is that viewers must feel a need to

share them which becomes contagious. This does not mean, however, that the ads must be shocking. They can also be compelling by challenging convention or publicizing a good cause.

For example, the *Evolution* film created by Dove was viewed an estimated 2 million times once it was placed on YouTube. The ad, which portrays the transformation of an ordinary-looking woman into an archetypal beauty by use of makeup and computer enhancement, is not “laugh out loud” funny or edgy. It does, however, address an issue of importance to many women — the concept of beauty projected by the cosmetics industry, and its effect on their self-esteem.



The provocative content helped to disseminate the film well beyond the usual YouTube crowd. When prompted with scenes from the *Evolution* film, 15 percent of American women aged 15 to 64 recognized it. Comparison with other ads suggests that it would take about 150 broadcast TV GRPs to achieve this reach.

While success stories such as *Evolution* exist, viral marketing is not for everyone. Success in this arena is far from guaranteed. On the surface, viral might appear to sit somewhere in the middle of the “control” spectrum — between traditional TV advertising campaigns



on one end, and strategies relying on consumer-generated content on the other. But after a viral ad has been created and seeded, advertisers are completely dependent on viewers who are willing to distribute the ad. Thus it is important to have some realistic sense of what reach might be achieved.

The properties needed to make viral campaigns successful are not compatible with every brand

Viral Reach

Broadband Internet access has increased dramatically in recent years, and in some countries more than half of all Internet users subscribe to a broadband service. However, on a global basis, only about one in three Internet subscribers has the high-speed connection required for sending and receiving video, and studies suggest that only a fraction of broadband users are prepared to transmit viral content. A 2006 study conducted by Forrester Research found that 40 percent of U.K. Internet users regularly received viral e-mails. But only 20 percent of that group — 8 percent of all Internet users — passed viral material on. The Millward Brown study yielded similar results, with 35 percent of respondents claiming to have sent or received ads via e-mail. And across all the ads tested, the average percentage who said they would definitely pass the ad on was only 13 percent. Only two ads (Bud Light's *Magic Fridge* and IKEA's *Pig Hunt*) achieved more than 20 percent on that measure. Not surprisingly, people are quite selective about the material they will pass along when their status in a relationship is at stake.

Dove's *Evolution* ad is reported to have generated more traffic to Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty site than the *Little Girls* spot that aired during the 2006 Super Bowl. However, this is probably the exception rather than the rule. Viral campaigns rarely reach significant numbers of people unless prominently featured in traditional media, packaging and other promotional materials. Therefore, viral ads need a clearly defined role in the overall marketing plan, and

it may be difficult to evaluate these ads fairly unless they are considered in their overall context.

Viral Side Effects

Viral does have a downside: the potential to damage brands. In trying to develop ads with sufficient shock value to capture attention, agencies may stray too far over the line of acceptability. For example, an ad for Ford SportKa portrayed a cat being decapitated by the car's sunroof, with the tagline "Ford SportKa: The Ka's evil twin." Ford denied authorizing the release of the ad and claimed to have rejected the concept. A partner ad, which featured a pigeon getting whacked by the Ka's hood, did make it on air in the U.K. but was pulled because of viewer complaints. Without doubt, these two ads differentiated the SportKa from the Ka, which was perceived as a mundane little runabout. But many potential buyers, even those not in the market for a SportKa, may have taken exception to the ads and been put off the idea of buying a Ford.

Viral — the Right Prescription?

The easiest route to pass-along success may not be in the best interest of your brand. Here are three questions to consider before embarking on a viral strategy.

Does viral fit your brand's positioning?

The properties needed to make viral campaigns successful are not compatible with every brand, and might actually insult or offend potential buyers. But viral advertising does not have to be shocking. For example, paper towel brand Brawny achieved success with its Brawny Academy site, which features the rugged but sensitive Brawny man helping to transform eight slobs into more thoughtful, helpful and romantic husbands. The story makes amusing watching and provides enough depth to the site to get past the "one-time-only" syndrome that afflicts many viral ads.

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Will it focus attention on the brand?

While the SportKa ad may have offended many people, it did succeed where many viral ads fail. The brand was the focus of attention (although in retrospect Ford might have wished otherwise). Remember: People don't pass along an ad because they love the brand. They pass along an ad because they love the creative idea. If the ad is to benefit the brand, that idea must be remembered in relation to the brand. Analysis of Millward Brown's Link™ database suggests that the ads that are most likely to be talked about (the top 20 percent) are almost three times more memorable than those that are least likely to be talked about (the bottom 20 percent). But there is little difference between the two groups in terms of persuasion or brand appeal. This suggests that viral ads, when well-branded, are more likely to improve brand saliency than to shift brand image. Poorly branded viral ads, while they may generate PR for their creators, will do little for the brand.

Does it matter where and when people see the ad?

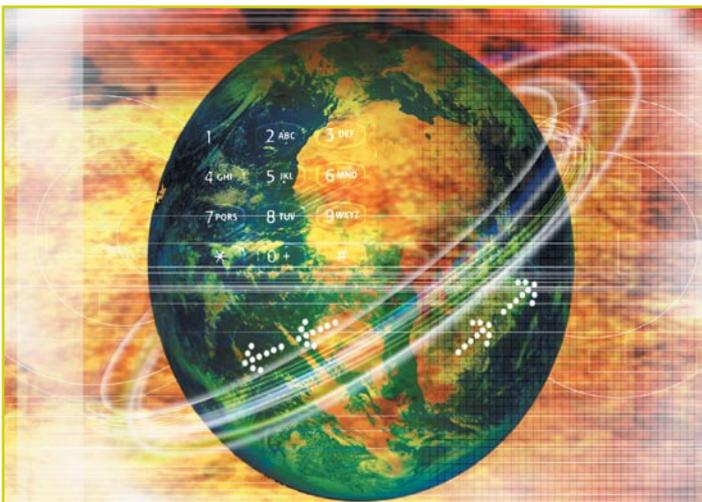
One in 10 people in the world is now thought to have access to the Internet. For truly global brands, this presents an opportunity, but it also creates complications for brands that are positioned differently in

Cannes in 2003, is currently making its way around the United States. Zazoo encouraged the spread of the ad by making it available for download on its company Web site. Ford, on the other hand, probably wishes that the SportKa ads, still readily available on the Web more than three years after they were first seen, would just go away. Culture may also mitigate against certain types of viral advertising. Consumers in developing countries are likely to be less marketing-savvy than their counterparts in the United States and Europe, and may be confused or worried by provocative content.

Is Viral the Free Ride Your Brand Needs?

For the right brand, viral advertising offers a powerful means to reach target consumers for little cost. But despite the growing interest among marketers, viral may not be the right strategy for every brand. Unless carefully thought through and executed, these "experiments" may do as much harm as good. Free exposure online will be valuable only when the execution fits brand objectives, resonates with the target audience and does not offend viewers outside the target group. If a viral campaign can't work within those parameters, an advertiser would be well advised to pass it up rather than pass it on.

To find out more about viral advertising, and to view the ads mentioned in this POV, please visit www.mb-blog.com.



different regions. Once a viral ad is released on the Web, there is no telling how far it might travel, and, like real-life viruses, the ads can be impossible to eradicate once they take hold. For example, an ad for Belgian condom maker Zazoo, which won a Silver Lion at

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