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Present

Viral Marketing Made Easy

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AN INTRODUCTION TO VIRAL MARKETING

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INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW

Let's say that you are selling Product X. In order to start moving boxes of Product X out of your warehouse and into the hands of happy consumers, you must get the word out. There are a million and one ways to market Product X. You can buy advertising space in newspapers, magazines, or online. You can rent a billboard. You can create an infomercial. You can run traditional thirty-second spots on television or radio. You can send out press releases in hopes of garnering media coverage. You can joint venture with the producers of Product Y. You can pay some crazy guy on eBay \$100 to write Product X on his forehead with a Sharpie and to run around as a human billboard. You can devise an infinite number of marketing strategies.

Many of them could be effective. Most of them, however, suffer from some similar weaknesses. You pay or work, your message goes out, and it ends. If you want that billboard to keep sending you new business, you will need to continue leasing it month after month. If you want to drive people to Product X with a radio ad, you will be buying time repeatedly.

Not only are most of the techniques "single shot" strategies, there is also the fact that your costs will go up based on how many people you can reach. Your TV spots will cost more when

audiences are larger. A display ad in the paper will cost you a bundle if circulation numbers are huge. In order to reach many people, you will need to spend a lot of money.

That puts smaller operations at a distinct disadvantage. Nike or McDonalds can afford a massive advertising blitz. They understand that for every \$X they spend on marketing, they can expect a return of \$X+Y, emboldening them to attack marketing media of all types. They have deep pockets and are ready and able to leverage that power to increase profits, even if they have to pay a fortune in marketing costs to get the job done.

If you, as the maker of Product X, aren't able to spend millions, you have a problem. You have to take a series of baby steps and build your business with a quality product and smart, smaller scale, marketing moves. In time, if you can string along enough smart moves, you might be able to move up into the ranks of the big boys who can really sell a product on a large-scale basis.

Wouldn't it be nice if there were a way to shortcut the process? What if you could find a way around the usual limitations of marketing techniques and use a simple strategy that would effectively broadcast a message on a larger scale without the costs usually associated doing so?

Every day, thousands of smaller businesses are searching for that shortcut strategy. They want to sell their version of Product X without incurring massive marketing costs. It's the Holy Grail of business, and everyone is after it.

Some have actually found a way to make it happen.

Over the years, this "magic bullet" has been referred to by acronyms like WOM, and later, EWOM. It's something with which we are all basically familiar, and that we have personally seen work. Whether you call it word-of-mouth, electronic word-of-mouth, stealth marketing or use the most common current expression of the concept, viral marketing, this strategy has the power to take a small initial marketing investment and transform it into a far-reaching phenomenon.

You may not be able to get the same level of exposure for Product X with a great viral marketing strategy as does McDonalds with its expensive multi-faceted approach, but you can certainly experience a massive increase in brand awareness and product interest with a good viral effort.

This ebook is designed to break viral marketing down into simple concepts you can use to both better understand the strategy and to implement it on your own. Viral marketing is a powerful means of promotion, and one that every business operator must consider.

WHAT IS VIRAL MARKETING?

A BASIC DEFINITION

There is no universally accepted definition of viral marketing. However, there is a consensus, of sorts, regarding what it means to be viral.

Viral marketing refers to any marketing strategy that is designed to inspire individual message recipients to share the message they have received with others. This creates a chance for the message's transmission to grow exponentially.

In traditional business contexts, this strategy is referred to by a variety of different names. It's been termed buzz creation, media leveraging, network marketing and, of course, word-of-mouth advertising. When applied to the internet, it is usually termed viral marketing.

The use of the term "viral marketing" is apt. Successful campaigns of this sort have many similarities with traditional medical viruses.

The most obvious similarity, and the most important one in terms of results, is the rapid replication and transmission of a

message. Another is the fact that both use a third party “host” to transmit the message/virus after “infection.”

ELEMENTS OF VIRAL MARKETING

There are six basic elements common to most viral marketing strategies. We will be looking at each of these elements in isolation as this ebook progresses.

No single marketing strategy must employ all of the elements to be considered “viral.” However, most experts will argue that those attempts that do embody all of these elements have a higher chance of being successful.

- The strategy gives recipients something at no cost.
- The strategy makes it easy to share the message with others.
- The strategy can move from a small scale to a large scale easily.
- The strategy relies on proven motivations and reactions.
- The strategy uses existing structures of communication.
- The strategy utilizes recipient resources.

GIVING IT AWAY

The first noted element of the successful viral marketing campaign is that something must be offered to message recipients at no cost.

The “free” item does not necessarily have to be a tangible good or expected service. In fact, many of the most successful viral marketing campaigns have centered upon giving away a free experience through entertaining material as a way of encouraging message replication.

Whether one is literally giving away something tangible or providing free entertainment or information, a few factors can guide building a free viral giveaway.

First, one should offer something that their message targets will want or enjoy. Although any free offer may attract some attention, those that actually give something of value away will be far more successful. One cannot hope to kick off a successful viral marketing campaign by offering a “freebie” to which no one is attracted.

Second, the item or experience offered should be one that message recipients will want to share with other people. Remember, converting original recipients into customers may be great, but the true power of a viral marketing campaign is in the

exponential growth of the message's reach. In order to realize that goal, you will need to offer something that others will feel compelled to share with those in their social networks.

Obviously, the decision to give something of value makes this more likely, but aspiring viral marketers will want to spend a great deal of time making sure their choice for a giveaway is the kind of thing that will be readily passed along.

Offering the right free item, service, or entertainment experience and making sure that the "freebie" is the kind of thing people will want to share with others is critical to the success of many viral marketing campaigns.

MAKING IT EASY TO SHARE

Viral marketing only works when the original message is shared with subsequent "generations." If it's not incredibly easy to share the information with others, there is little or no chance of experiencing the kind of massive growth that can make viral efforts so attractive.

Let's return to real viruses for a moment as a way of illustrating this. The flu virus is a major medical issue every year. Why is it such an aggravation and danger? In large measure, because it can be transmitted so easily. No one would really care about the flu if it just affected a few people who were particularly

susceptible. However, its ability to hop from person to person indiscriminately through simple acts like coughing, sneezing, shaking hands, sharing food or drink, or even breathing makes it far more powerful.

You want your online viral marketing strategy to work like a real virus. You want to infect those first recipients with your message and you want them to infect as many of the people with whom they make contact as possible.

That means your virus has to be very easy to pass along. This is one reason why viral marketing seems so well suited for the internet. Cheap, rocket fast communication allows for fast transmission of the viral message to person after person.

Some viral marketing approaches utilize email, which can then be quickly and easily forwarded by recipients to others within their social networks.

Others rely on web sites and try to use word of mouth and emails generated by message recipients themselves to generate traffic to the pages.

Others piggyback on existing networks and use some additional seeding to generate the initial interest necessary to create a viral effect.

No matter what strategy you employ, you must be sure that your message can be sent to as many people as possible as quickly as possible by every person who is exposed to it.

This might involve adding “tell a friend” buttons or forms to your page. It might require being certain that your email won’t trigger common spam protection devices. You may need to invest in an easy-to-remember domain name in order to encourage message sharing.

Hopefully, the nature of your message and the free item or experience it provides will inspire recipients to share the good news. Making it very easy for them to do so will help produce optimal results.

Viral marketers should remember that each individual exposed to the message might eventually lead to thousands of others seeing it. That is why it is so critical to make easy message sharing a primary consideration. You want to encourage distribution and to make distribution as simple as humanly possible.

INSURING THE ABILITY TO GROW

In any business endeavor, one must be ready to handle failure but equally prepared to manage success. A successful viral marketing campaign can grow quickly and those who aren't prepared for that growth may be forced to watch a potentially great moment in the history of their business disintegrate.

The most commonly experienced problem with regard to managing a tidal wave of interest is the presence of technological limitations.

Too often, business owners will base a viral campaign on a website ill equipped to handle a massive influx of visitors and the resource use associated with each of them. If a server crashes, pages load too slowly, or the primary "headquarters" of your viral campaign are inaccessible, you can short circuit the whole strategy.

Again, it is important to remember that viral marketing works because each and every person involved can cause the message to grow in its reach. The one person turned away from your strategy by a technological glitch may have transmitted your message to an extensive list of hundreds of friends and associates, each of which may have done the same. You cannot afford to miss recipients because of inadequate resources.

Additionally, you don't want to miss opportunities to actually make sales because of limitations of this sort. If your campaign takes off, you can expect to see a rapid spike in business. After all, that is what led you to marketing in the first place. Be prepared to handle the customers produced by your viral marketing strategy, too.

Creating an irresistible message and an easy means by which to share it are both wonderful. However, either of those factors are rendered completely useless is the message itself, or the business the message is meant to buttress is inaccessible.

This is one reason why piggybacking on other resources is attractive for many viral marketers. Placing a viral video on YouTube, for instance, allows others to access and view your message without having them use your resources, too.

If you opt for third party hosting of a viral message, choose the location(s) wisely. You need to be sure they meet the requirement of easy transmission and that they are sturdy enough to support a traffic increase.

USING PROVEN MOTIVATORS

If you take the “viral” out of “viral marketing,” you are left with “marketing.” That isn’t just a silly exercise in wordplay. It’s important. At the core of any viral marketing plan, one must have good, old-fashioned marketing principles at work.

Using proven motivations to your advantage is a perfect example of this. Marketers have long worked to discover just what makes a person take action. Those time-tested and proven motivators must retain an important place in your viral marketing strategy, just as they would in a more “traditional” approach.

People are motivated by a host of emotions and other factors. They want to be wealthy. They want to be happy. They can be seduced. Emotional appeals can be enticing. They like the idea of power. They appreciate being the “first to know.” All of those marketing techniques have been used effectively in other genres for decades, and they have an important position in viral marketing, too.

An otherwise perfect viral marketing approach will fall completely flat if recipients aren’t motivated to take interest and action. Using proven motivators may feel “old school,” but it does work.

There is an interesting wrinkle here, however. There is one type of motivation that seems to work particularly well for viral strategies. For want of a more descriptive term, we can term it the “cool” factor.

The internet is populated, to a large degree, by information connoisseurs who view themselves as being on the cutting edge. Even those who don’t necessarily think they are ahead of the proverbial curve like the idea of finding there way to that spot.

This is why those viral marketing strategies based on showing or telling about something very new and unique tend to do so well.

Of course, being “cool” is easier said than done. What might seem incredibly cool to a marketer may be viewed as lame, passé, silly or otherwise unacceptable by those looking for the next big thing.

If there were a way to determine what the next “cool” thing would be, that information would be worth a large fortune. Major corporations spend billions in the quest to determine what new things people will find irresistibly hot, and even the best research in the world often ends in disappointing results.

Nonetheless, if your idea is fresh, your presentation unique, or your idea is just plain, flat-out, “cool,” you can expect a great response.

Another powerful viral marketing strategy motivator is humor and entertainment. Traditional marketing uses these elements, as well, but their power seems to be multiplied with respect to online viral campaigns. Some have even gone so far as to insist that effective campaigns need to be funny to succeed unless they are offering something incredibly valuable.

As with “cool,” the idea of funny is hard to pin down. The French love Jerry Lewis to this day, even though American audiences tired of his brand of humor decades ago. “Blue collar” comedy tours leave audiences in stitches, but many of the folks at home wouldn’t crack a smile in the face of a million “redneck” jokes.

In other words, it’s hard to construct a humorous campaign that will appeal to everyone. Even though a particular brand of humor might compromise the maximum potential spread of your message, the increase in distribution by recipients who “get the joke” might make up the difference.

If one can dovetail a great joke with an innovative sensibility, the viral marketing message is likely to explode across the net in record time.

USING EXISTING COMMUNICATION STRUCTURES

With whom do you communicate regularly? How many people are regular contacts? How do you communicate? What channels do you use?

The answers to those questions are an interesting component to successful viral marketing. The idea behind the viral approach is to create a self-replicating message. Person A gives it to persons B and C. B gives it to D, E and F. C gives it to G, H, and I. It continues to grow. And grow.

In order for it to grow, it must be inserted into the regular stream of communication. It needs to transmit itself quickly across social networks.

We've touched upon this briefly with respect to ease of transmission issues, but it actually cuts much deeper. Not only must it be easy to transmit, it must be the kind of thing recipients would transmit to others within their social circles.

That is a partially a byproduct of crafting the right message for the audience. It is also an understanding of whether the nature of that message will be consistent with recipient communication network members' expectations and desires.

It also means that it pays to target individuals with active social networks.

USING OTHERS' RESOURCES

Viral campaigns are efficient to marketers because they need not over-rely upon the marketers own resources. In fact, campaigns that make extensive use of others' resources are often among the top performers.

We can again revisit the idea of real viruses as inspiration. A virus doesn't come to visit with a suitcase in hand and a bag of food. It finds its way in to the host's body and literally feeds off that host. It builds strength using the resources of the infected party to help fuel its own growth and to allow it to spread to others.

Smart viral marketers look for ways to decrease their own burdens and to allow others, particularly the recipients themselves, to expend resources in order to make the message grow.

How many times have you found a copy of something originating from a viral campaign on someone else's blog or website? Each and every one of those instances is a perfect example of how good marketers can actually convince message recipients to transform themselves into the marketer's helpers.

Article marketing is another great example. One writes an article and provides it, free of cost, to a site webmasters frequent in search of quality content. They then take the article and publish it on their own site. Over time, that single free article may have found its way onto hundreds of sites. Each time, a backlink to the author's site is also provided. In the end, one may get hundreds of valuable backlinks for that one article and, to make matters even more attractive, the author will never have had to even host the material himself or herself.

Get others to provide you with links. Have others promote for you. Instead of relying on your own resources, you are allowing others to provide your infrastructure.

VIRAL MARKETING CASE STUDY: HOTMAIL

Many readers may be intrigued by the idea and potential of viral marketing, but might find it easier to get a grasp on exactly how viral strategies can work by analyzing a real-life example.

The story of Hotmail is probably the most cited example of successful viral marketing in action. The Hotmail story receives a great deal of attention because it so clearly illustrates just how powerful a well-designed viral plan can be.

A year and a half after its launch, Hotmail (a web-based free email service) had over twelve million users. Each of those twelve millions users supplied Hotmail with an extensive demographic profile. It created what many internet marketers might consider the “perfect list.”

The managed this amazing feat efficiently and relatively inexpensively by offering a good, free product with an incredibly viral element.

Every email sent out using a Hotmail account featured a line saying, “Get your free private email account at www.hotmail.com.”

Every time someone read an email from a Hotmail user, he or she saw that simple message. It encouraged millions of people to investigate the offer and to sign up for their own account. Each message they sent out then bore that same message.

The results, obviously, were stunning. Hotmail gained market share everywhere as people sent messages that told others about the free service. Hotmail became the largest email provider in many parts of the world without even spending a single cent in some of the markets in which they were most successful!

A few initial free accounts multiplied, and multiplied again. The result was a massive user base in a short period. Hotmail is considered the greatest example of viral email marketing to this day.

Why did it work so well?

- Hotmail provided a quality free service. It provided a true value to users.
- Hotmail facilitate easy transmission of their message. Every Hotmail email spread the word.
- Hotmail was prepared to handle the rapid increase in users and didn't experience significant problems with supplying the service

to new referrals.

- Hotmail gave people a chance to get something they wanted (and email account) free in an era where personal accounts generally cost money and required use of a paid ISP. They were “cutting edge,” while being valuable and free.
- Hotmail relied upon existing communication networks to spread the word. The message inserted itself into people’s daily interactions and within their existing social circles.
- Hotmail used its own users to handle distribution of its message. Although it did host the service and provide the technology that sent out the emails, users were the “muscle” that drove the marketing operation.

In other words, Hotmail made use of all six of the elements of viral marketing we have discussed here, although they did bear more of the resource expenditure than other methods have. However, that use of their own resources was integral to the specific nature of the project. Overall, it is a textbook example of building a viral marketing strategy and the results speak for themselves.

FORMS OF VIRAL ADVERTISING

The most obvious and recognized examples of viral advertising might be the funny video. These are passed from person to person at a remarkable clip, and sites like YouTube show just how many people will look at a funny short. However, although these are an effective solution in many cases, they might not be feasible or desirable in others.

If you have a limited perspective of what constitutes a viral advertising campaign, an examination of the many forms this strategy can take may help get your creative juices flowing.

Free reports are a great viral tool. They might be a condensed version of an ebook you are selling or a “teaser” version of the publication to pique interest in your offering. You might give away a free report of some sort in support of your overall service or product offerings, too. If your target audience is after information, giving them a taste of some valuable insight can be very attractive and can lead to quality information dispersion within a social network.

Handing out referral rewards is another great idea. If you have spent more than a few hours online in the last year, you have undoubtedly encountered at least one “free giveaway” of an iPod or some other valuable consumer good in exchange for sending

multiple referrals to the advertising party. If you want to use a viral technique to increase the size of your list or to create increased exposure, the referral reward strategy might be a perfect strategy for you.

Video may be big right now, but audio can be great, too. If you can produce an entertaining audio piece, you may be able to use it as a means of staging a great viral marketing campaign.

Graphics and photos are another way to get attention and to encourage people to send others in your direction. Whether amazing, beautiful, funny or strange, the right picture can attract a great deal of attention. Make sure you watermark your graphic with some indication of who you are, because it will undoubtedly be picked up and used elsewhere if it is a winner.

Free re-brandable products can also be powerful. An information product in PDF form, for instance, that the recipient can brand with his or her own identity and then send to others can increase your exposure. Just make sure your product or service is sufficiently promoted within the text of the informational product and you will see results as others take it upon themselves to distribute the guide or report.

You can also add a viral component to existing information by adding a simple script to your pages. By implementing a “tell a friend” feature, you can encourage viewers to immediately share

information with others, which can be a great way of passively increasing the power of your effort by harnessing some of viral marketing's power.

In that same spirit, doing everything possible to make it easy for social bookmarking networks to add your page to their indexes and lists is also a great idea. Insertion of the proper "chiclets" can encourage others to make the visit over to your offerings.

There are as many ways to "go viral" as there are viral marketers. Don't limit yourself to consideration of one particular form of marketing. By looking at a variety of choices, you just might find yourself stumbling upon the perfect match for your enterprise.

ADVANTAGES OF VIRAL MARKETING

Now that we've determined exactly what viral marketing is and have briefly touched upon why it is so successful in terms of getting a message out, let's review some of the reasons viral techniques are so valuable to marketers.

COST EFFECTIVENESS

What would you pay to reach 1,000 people with a potential interest in your product? How about 10,000? What if you could do it virtually free of charge?

Consider this hypothetical example.

You write a clever email. Maybe it's a joke or a fun story. It somehow either indirectly supports your product or, perhaps, simply contains a line of text with your product site's URL.

Let's say you send that email to 20 people and it's a hit. People enjoy the message. They then forward it to an average of 10 people each.

At this point, your email to 20 people has already generated 220 transmissions. Now, let's assume that each of the people

contacted in the second-generation forward the email to another 10 people each.

Suddenly, you are at 2,220. If the third generation can maintain the pace of the first two, they will send the email to 10 people each. Your total exposure will then hop to a remarkable 22,220.

One email, over twenty-two thousand recipients. It's hard to imagine a better way of efficiently building brand recognition and getting attention, isn't it?

And when you think about how quickly information moves on the internet, you can reach those folks in a hurry.

You may not be able to write a spectacular email that gets that kind of instant response. Then again, you might come up with something that does even better.

That isn't really the point. What's important is that you can leverage social networks via viral marketing in a way that allows for an incredible message reach without most of the expenses usually required of such efforts?

Viral marketing, especially when it works well, is a dirt-cheap way of getting mass exposure in a hurry.

ADDITIONAL EFFICIENCY

Not only is it cheap to get the word out using a viral strategy, it is also incomparably efficient.

Viral marketing isn't unlike the idea of rolling a small snowball down a mountain. As it grows, it picks up more snow and gets bigger. It rolls faster and faster, growing constantly. All you needed to do was pack a fistful of snow and give it an initial shove. Other forces did the rest of the work for you. Had you tried to build a massive snowball it would have taken days or more. Rolling a little ball down the hill accomplished the same goal in a matter of seconds.

Viral marketing does this. You create the message, set it loose, and everything else takes care of itself. Assuming your message was appropriately crafted and contained the necessary elements for success, it will grow without continued effort on your part.

Recipients will do the "dirty work" for you, passing it along without any expectation of compensation. Your message reaches thousands as an all-volunteer force insures its rapid growth.

IMPROVED CREDIBILITY

In our consumer society, we have learned to become more than a little jaded with respect to marketing materials. In fact, many people are automatically cynical of advertising. They don't believe what they hear and see and they distrust anyone who is trying to make a sale to them directly.

Additionally, many people are tired of being sold to at all. No-call lists are limiting telemarketing efforts. Spam blockers are decreasing the range of email marketing. Pop-up blockers keep ads away.

It can be tough to get your message out, and if you do, you need to be ready for some hostile treatment by certain segments of the population. Fortunately, viral marketing helps sidestep some of those problems.

When information or direction comes from a friend, we tend to take it more seriously. If you see an ad for a particular brand of automobile on television, you might be interested, but you aren't going to take National Motor Company's word that it truly is the "best car on the planet."

However, if your best friend buys a new car from National Motor Company and absolutely loves it, that is going to have some

influence on how you perceive the manufacturer and its products.

Put simply, we believe the things others share with us. We don't look for ulterior motives and we are more receptive to the messages.

If Product X sends you an email that says, "Check out this great video," most of us won't. We will see it as a marketing piece from the get-go. We will have strong doubts as to whether the video is likely to be great. We might be distrustful of the link itself.

If, however, your best buddy sends you an email that says, "Take a look at this--cracked me up," you will probably be checking it out within seconds.

That's part of the power of viral marketing. Instead of having to crack the market as a seller, you allow others to get your message out there with the entire credibility attendant to friendly emails within social networks.

Viral marketing uses the trust people have in their social contacts to spur increased dissemination of the message.

However, that does not make viral marketing a sleazy proposition. It is an end-run around cynicism and public distaste

for marketing, but it isn't an ethical compromise. After all, you are providing something of value and you are not forcing anyone to send the message. It is happening organically. If your message is lousy or your technique is otherwise poor, people won't pass it along.

SUPERIOR TARGETING

Getting your message in front of people is great. However, getting it in front of those who are likely to either be buyers for the product or who might influence potential customers to make a buy is even better.

If you sell handgun silencers, getting your message in front of 200,000 gun control activists probably won't help business. If you sell a particular hydraulic adapter part, broadcasting an advertisement to a general population is unlikely to help your sales figures.

However, if you are selling those same silencers and have a message that gets to gun enthusiasts, the results could be great. If your message about hydraulic adapters goes out to those responsible for maintaining heavy machinery, you could get some traffic.

That's targeting. Getting the message in front of the right people is extremely important.

Viral marketing strategies allow for very targeted exposure, which makes them even more valuable.

That's because individual recipients decide to whom to share the message. They know their own personal contacts and the interests and expertise of those people. For the most part, they won't share the news with those who won't have an interest.

Viral marketing takes the guesswork out of targeting. By relying upon a network of people who know one another intimately, your message isn't wasted on the uninterested and, instead, finds its way to those who are most likely to care about what you are doing.

Many successful online entrepreneurs will tell you that targeted, pre-qualified traffic is the ticket to wealth and success. Viral marketing's very nature seems to insure precision targeting.

THE FUTURE OF VIRAL MARKETING

Few, if any, marketing techniques hold the kind of promise that viral strategies do. Multiple trends and forces are converging to make viral marketing even more successful in the future. Let's look at a few of the reasons why viral marketing will continue to grow in value in the near future.

THE GROWTH OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

One of the most interesting recent developments in internet usage is the growth of social networking. People are relying on one another for information and direction more than ever before. Instead of accepting top-down models of information distribution and access, they are consulting with one another in order to find exactly what they want.

We can see this in the growth of social bookmarking, the increased use of services like Technorati and Del.ici.ous, and elsewhere. There is a fundamental shift underway with respect to how people use the internet, and that shift is leading them to a grassroots method of finding new material and ideas.

This environment is very well suited for viral marketing. Instead of relying on the old "business to consumer" strategy that is

increasingly being ignored by computer users, viral marketing works on a “friend to friend” basis.

We discussed the credibility value of viral marketing already, and that is important. However, the fact that this methodology also avoids many of the trappings of increasingly outmoded information-sharing models and instead relies upon electronically enhanced “word-of-mouth” to get the job done is probably even more important.

ESCAPING A SATURATED MARKET

How many pieces of email do you receive every day trying to sell you something? How many ads do you see every day as you browse the web? How much more of each would you see if you weren’t doing your best to filter your mail and if you weren’t using pop-up blockers or other tools?

When you think about it, the amount of commercial advertising you encounter is mind-boggling. The information superhighway seems to have billboards lining both sides of the road at all times.

It’s easy for messages to get lost in the noise. Competing for attention in such a wildly saturated market requires a great deal

of effort and more than a little luck, not to mention the financial resources you need to throw behind the effort.

This makes viral marketing a uniquely valuable technique. It allows the marketer to bypass the overcrowded marketplace where every Blog runs AdSense ads and seemingly fifty percent of every other web page is devoted to marketing material. It allows the marketer to take a message, or at the very least something that increases brand recognition and product excitement, directly to prospective buyers.

By leveraging the power of social networks and the individuals who populate them, one can escape the war or marketing attrition found elsewhere.

As the commercialization of the web continues, finding a way to differentiate you and to announce yourself without being forced to build a bigger and more expensive soapbox will be one of the most rewarding discoveries a marketer can make.

AVOIDING BECOMING JUST ANOTHER FACE IN THE CROWD

Even if you could horn into more crowded marketing areas at a reasonable price, you would have a hard time making your product or message stand out.

One of the first lessons in Marketing 101 is to distinguish yourself. Standing out is an essential part of branding and creating immediate recognition is important to anyone's success.

There are many ways traditional marketers have tried to accomplish this goal. Catchy tag lines, exclusive celebrity endorsements, eye-grabbing logos and other techniques can help separate a business from the pack.

Unfortunately, many of the best ways to create a distinguishing presence are hamstrung by the nature of online advertising. A banner ad offers very little space. Text link advertising gives you a limited string of characters in which to make a statement, and they will blend right in with other advertisers hoping to get results with blue hyper linked text. Pricier "display" ads on popular sites may offer a way out of some of those limitations, but the costs can be prohibitive and you still have limited space with which to work. Pay-per-click solutions give you little more than a few lines of highly regulated text with which to work.

Viral marketing is a way out. You don't have to blend in with the crowd. You can create something creative and unique that will separate you from the herd.

A logo and a tag line might work in some cases, but in today's marketplace, flooded with others competing for prospective buyers, the people who can develop and implement truly creative solutions will have a leg up on the competition.

You can create a viral message that showcases your creativity and understanding of your demographic. You can create something that will truly appeal to them. In the process, you won't disappear into the crowd. Viral marketing gives you a chance to loom above the crowd as something different, more interesting and (in the eyes of potential buyers) better.

USING THE VIRAL APPROACH TO EMPOWER INTERNET MARKETERS

In marketing circles, everyone is constantly on the lookout for improvements. The old idea of building a better mousetrap is certainly alive in marketing circles!

Although it may seem difficult to improve upon the viral marketing model, there are some ideas that can allow marketers to make use of proven viral strategies while enhancing the process.

Any serious student of recent marketing trends will advocate the viral model. Bringing new ideas and new services to others at no cost not only increases exposure, it also encourages others to become a part of the advertiser's marketing team. For those in the affiliate marketing industry, that can be incredibly valuable.

The web is awash in complicated and suspicious multi-level marketing schemes. More than one marketer has also fallen victim to list-building plans that do nothing more than share the names of other plan participants.

The internet marketing community has a great deal of potential, but too often becomes a closed circles of marketers doing very

little but selling to one another. Those closed circles may produce some initial activity, but they inevitably disappoint.

One way to revitalize the IM community by using viral marketing would consist of developing a strategy that invites and rewards participation by marketers while truly embracing the viral model. Such a program would work as a “ladder” with different rungs.

First, one could simply send traffic to the service with no other reward than providing a service to his or her own network. In other words, you could refer people to interesting new free offers and services for no other reason than to provide something of value to your own community of contacts.

Second, one could actually register with a service and then send traffic to it. Again, you would be providing something of value to your list, but would simultaneously earn rewards for doing so, based upon the volume of referred traffic.

The rewards for participation in this unique viral opportunity could take many forms. You could receive monetary rewards, free products or services, a commission on subsequent sales to referred traffic, additional free advertising in other venues, or various account upgrades entitling you to even greater benefits.

This approach would take viral marketing and elevate it a new level. Instead of simply being a means by which ideas are shared, participants in the sharing could receive a direct personal benefit.

Viral marketing rests on the premise of offering something of value. That, in turn, encourages message recipients to share the information with others. However, the motivation for doing so rests primarily on the idea that they simply want to help others in their social network and feel a compulsion to pass along interesting items. As the internet continues to grow, relying on that primary motivation for information dissemination may be less practical.

By providing an incentive to share the information, one can expect more message dissemination and increased overall effectiveness for a viral campaign. Talk about a better mousetrap!

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