

5-2005

Viral Marketing: What It is and Where It is Going

Laura Ashley Aucion

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Viral Marketing: What It is and Where It is Going

By

Laura Aucoin

Undergraduate honors thesis under the direction of

Dr. Stephen Banning

Department of Mass Communication

Submitted to the LSU Honors College in partial fulfillment of
The Upper Division Honors Program

May, 2005

Louisiana State University
& Agricultural and Mechanical College
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the relatively new phenomenon of viral marketing, or marketing that advertises through consumers and word-of-mouth communication. Viral marketing has become popular in the advertising and marketing industries and is consuming a larger segment of global advertising budgets each year. This thesis describes the different forms of viral communication, references popular viral campaigns, and discusses the reasons for the phenomenon's recent growth. In addition, analysis of the research is used to discuss ethical and legislative issues and offer future expectations.

Introduction

This thesis will examine the phenomenon of viral marketing. It has many definitions but is most comprehensively defined as any approach that utilizes individual consumers to pass on marketing messages to others through word-of-mouth recommendations. Though viral marketing is an umbrella term that refers to all customer interaction including processes of production and distribution (as shown in Figure 1 on page 16), viral *advertising* is the most popular version of viral communication. In its most widely understood form, viral advertising is Internet-based word-of-mouth—often referred to as “word-of-mouth”—advertising, including banner exchange programs, affiliate programs, controversial and banned advertisements, chain e-mails, bulletin board advertisements, and “send a copy to a friend” buttons (Peachey, 2000). But on a larger scale, viral marketing can include anything that purposefully creates word-of-mouth recommendations, often referred to as “creating a buzz” or “network marketing.” These offline viral campaigns range from banner advertisements on cellular phone messaging services to fake tourists asking for a “vacation snapshot” with their new camera phones (Safer, 2004).

This purposeful buzz is nothing new in the advertising environment: word-of-mouth recommendations date back as far as human existence. But modern viral advertising is becoming an integral part of more advertising campaigns each year (Kharif, 2000). This recent boom can be attributed to the desire to reach an advertising-savvy youth with a high purchasing power that is blocking spam, spending more time away

from the television, and becoming more suspicious of traditional advertising messages. Plus, ever-growing conglomerates are forcing smaller companies to “think outside of the television box” and pursue cheaper ways of cutting through advertising clutter (Peachey, 2000). Some companies and industries are so immersed in the viral wave that they employ viral “street teams,” or traveling marketers that advertise in public places, as permanent parts of their marketing staffs.

This thesis will also explore the impact and effectiveness of viral campaigns and the future and implications of the viral phenomenon. Viral advertising is both comparatively cheap and effective. Advertisers exert little significant labor with no significant media cost, and consumers appear to be accepting the message with less of the suspicion inherent in traditional marketing (Harvey, 2003). Consumers respond to the implied—and often overt—praise of friends, family, and even strangers more than they respond to advertisers (Kharif, 2000). A recent McKinsey & Company survey revealed that 67 percent of the United States’ consumer goods sales are based on word-of-mouth advertising (2003). And with Internet viral advertisements, even if a recommendation does not culminate in an immediate sale, the company has achieved higher frequency of its brand message and now holds the e-mail addresses of both the sender and the receiver for direct mail advertising.

The benefits of viral marketing currently exceed the rarely discussed potential negative effects. As its popularity spawns agencies concentrating specifically on viral campaigning, ethical implications are commonly overlooked because legislative regulations are nonexistent (beyond rules for unsolicited direct e-mail). But many

consumers have reservations about the use of an advertising message that is often undistinguishable from pure entertainment, especially with regard to young children who have little ability to objectively respond to even blatant advertising messages.

Legislation could severely inhibit the ability to advertise virally in the future. But will enactment of legislation occur in time to have any real effect? As the novelty wears off, will viral marketing even remain a significant marketing tool? The use of viral techniques could be a temporary instrument that faces extinction by both regulations and overuse.

This thesis is justified by the impact of the relatively new phenomenon of viral marketing on the advertising industry and society. While the term *viral marketing* was non-existent before the founding of Hotmail in 1996, viral advertisements now represent a growing segment of a growing online advertising budget. Industry research company analyst Rudy Grahn projects that online advertising will represent between seven and nine percent of all advertising budgets by 2007 (Harvey, 2003), and recent figures suggest that 50 percent of all email messages are now advertising-based (Peachey, 2000). Within the expanding use of the Internet as a medium, 80 percent of surveyed companies claim to use some form of viral marketing as a tool for reaching consumers. In fact, for many of these companies, up to 25 percent of new member acquisitions are a result of viral advertising (Kharif, 2000). In addition to presenting the growing importance of the viral marketing phenomenon, this thesis will present the benefits and problems of this marketing technique and offer expectations for the future.

History

Though the term *buzz marketing* is relatively new, the process it describes—the process of marketing a product or idea through personal recommendation, or word-of-mouth—has been utilized for centuries, since the beginning of personal communication. “The foundation of [word-of-mouth] marketing was laid when Cro-Magnon recommended a bear femur as a club to his neighbor” (Trager, 2000). In fact, forms of buzz marketing are mentioned in annals of Greek Athenian histories and in the Bible (SourceWatch, 2005; Boase & Wellman, 2001). Centuries later, Pythagoras generated word of mouth to advertise his mathematic theorem. “From barns to bath houses, Pythagoras posted parchments and scrawled notes with one simple question, designed solely to increase interest in his [theorem]: What is A^2+B^2 ?” (Dafforn, 2001).

Until the 1900s, this buzz tactic was primarily used to generate discussion and increase exposure to a personal idea. But after World War I, competition among tobacco companies gave buzz marketing a new venue: business communication. Competitors of the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Company sent employees posing as customers to pharmacies in order to create negative buzz about R.J. Reynolds’ Camel Brand, to spread rumors that factory employees were catching syphilis from Camel cigarettes. The negative publicity was so influential to sales that R.J. Reynolds offered a \$10,000 prize to anyone who could expose the perpetrators (SourceWatch, 2005).

In response to their success, R.J. Reynolds’ competitors began to directly market their own cigarettes by offering a free cigarette, the use of a match, and a personal

recommendation to strangers. In imitation of this successful buzz, liquor companies began to send employees into bars with “walking-around-money” to buy drinks for patrons in an effort to encourage personal, word-of-mouth recommendations for their brand (Taylor, 2003).

But it was not until the 1940s that buzz campaigns were officially introduced into commercial marketing efforts, and only recently that these campaigns have begun to appear as primary strategies within complete marketing plans (Boase & Wellman, 2001). In 1963, Mary Kay, Inc. formed an entire brand based on word-of-mouth advertising. The company offered—and still offers—the chance to earn commission by creating a buzz among personal social networks. The website encourages those interested to “Make a list of every woman you’d like to share the products with and schedule some classes!” (Mary Kay, 2004).

And in the early 1990s, MCI created a successful campaign that relied almost entirely on buzz advertising. Because the MCI “Friends and Family” plan offered customers a lower rate for calls made within a calling circle of up to twenty other MCI members, customers had an incentive to recommend the program to friends and family. As a result of the campaign, MCI experienced a two-point share increase in 1991 and earned more than 1.2 billion dollars in incremental revenues (Rosenfield, 1992). But word-of-mouth tactics like these were used primarily offline until the late 1990s.

In 1996, buzz marketing made its first widely successful debut on the Internet with Hotmail, a free e-mail service with taglines on all e-mails to spread the Hotmail message (Peachey, 2000). In response to Hotmail’s success—a sign-up of over twelve

million subscribers within the first eighteen months—and industry interest in its online buzz campaign, investment firm Draper Fisher invented the term *viral marketing* to describe the newer, faster-paced word-of-mouth made possible by the Internet (Bannan, 2000).

By 1998, online viral campaigns were becoming so popular that Internet marketing company Iconocast gave viral marketing the award for Internet Marketing Buzzword of the Year (Peachey, 2000). But in today's marketing vocabulary, the term *viral marketing*—also known as network marketing, Trojan Horse advertising, leveraging the media, guerilla marketing and stealth advertising—encompasses any strategy that encourages consumers (often unknowingly) to become personal product endorsers.

What is viral marketing?

“Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence” (Wilson, 2000). Essentially, viral marketing uses consumer communication networks to convince “people to promote [a] product or service without compensation” (Internet Marketing Center of California, 2002).

This process of viral communication depends on a high pass-along rate, or a mass transfer of information (Marketing Terms, 2004). To encourage this transfer, most viral campaigns offer either free products and services or a high level of entertainment. But the desire to forward a message—even if it is funny or entertaining—is only enacted if the

transfer is quick and simple. Therefore, to further the spread of even a highly entertaining message, the message must exist within an easy-to-use communication system that has the ability to scale from small to large as the viral message multiplies (Wilson, 2000).

The use of viral marketing is widely discussed today because it represents the move from “marketer-to-consumer communication” to the cheaper, easier, and often more effective “consumer-to-consumer communication” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). It is effective in any medium infrastructure—telephone, physical mail, the Internet, etc.—as long as it offers an infectious message within a communications system in which messages are easily transmittable on a personal level (Welker, 2002).

The Viral Pyramid

Viral communication depends on a high pass-along rate, which itself is dependent on message interest. To achieve the high message interest essential to any successful viral campaign, viral marketers target specific types of consumers to form a “viral pyramid.”

Because “the structural position of people in networks affects how information will flow,” viral pyramids are created based on these structural positions and their “personal degrees of importance” (Boase & Wellman, 2001). People who are structurally “well connected” are considered *high degree* consumers because they spread information most rapidly. Opinion leaders—who are regarded as role models, either formally or informally, within their communication networks—are targeted first both because they are well connected to a *high degree* and because they influence the opinions of those to whom they are connected.

In addition to those who have a “high degree” of structural importance are those who have what is considered a *high betweenness*, or those who connect different social and communication networks. Opinion leaders who have a *high betweenness* are particularly beneficial because they spread the viral communication to high degree members of other communities. Therefore, “diffusion campaigns are more likely to be successful if change agents identify and mobilize opinion leaders” (Boase & Wellman, 2001).

In an effort to take advantage of opinion leaders with a *high degree* and a *high betweenness*, marketers often invest in a process called *leapfrogging* in which they give these opinion leaders free products or services. “One of these exceptional people [finds] out about the trend and, through social connections and energy and enthusiasm and personality, spread the word” (Boase & Wellman, 2001). These *leapfroggers* spread buzz about a product or idea through their “personality, social capital and structural position” (Boase & Wellman, 2001).

Forms of Viral Marketing

Basic Viral Marketing Categories

At its most basic, viral marketing strategies can be either unobtrusive or aggressive. An unobtrusive strategy leaves “bread crumbs” for customers to spread to other potential customers within their social network, such as the tagline “Do you

Yahoo?” on the bottom of a Yahoo-based e-mail or “best viewed with Netscape” at the bottom of an e-mailed video clip (Symantec Corporation, 2004).

An aggressive strategy, on the other hand, requires the active participation of consumers. A popular example of an aggressive strategy is the offer of a two-party-required product or service only available to members, such as a messenger service in which both parties need the software in order to converse (Symantec Corporation, 2004). Because the product requires adoption by other users, product owners will more actively endorse the product.

Varieties of Viral Marketing Strategies

Within the two major distinctions of unobtrusive and aggressive marketing are five specific categories: *value viral*, *guile viral*, *vital viral*, *spiral value*, and *vile viral*. Though all viral marketing campaigns focus on providing users with a tailored experience to encourage personal recommendations, each of these categories “operate for different reasons and by different mechanisms” and thus have different effects (Rohrbacher, 2000).

In *value viral* campaigns, companies provide an experience that their users want to share with other potential users. For example, a consumer may try a product and find the product experience so positive that he/she chooses—with no other incentive than quality—to recommend it to friends and family. Products that have become successful through the use of value viral campaigns are Viagra, Hotmail e-mail accounts, PalmPilots personal handhelds, and Harry Potter books. Examples of companies that utilize this strategy on their websites—and provide high-quality customer experiences online—are

Amazon.com and Yahoo.com (Rohrbacher, 2000). In fact, Amazon.com and other websites are “further mechanizing the recommendation process” by offering company recommendations of books or bands that customers are statistically likely to appreciate based on past purchases and personal-interest profiles (Trager, 2000).

Amazon.com and iShip.com also offer a form of value viral incentive by offering free gift shipping in company wrapping paper that includes a company advertising flyer: the gift recipient receives an advertisement along with the gift. But value viral campaigns cannot be successful if the product being advertised does not offer a positive enough experience to warrant a recommendation (Rohrbacher, 2000).

Guile viral campaigns are similar to value viral campaigns, but personal recommendation is encouraged through an incentive rather than solely through an exceptional product. Amway, Tupperware, and Mary Kay Cosmetics were all founded on incentive-based word-of-mouth, a process in which salespeople—or consumers—earn commission for spreading information about the company and selling its products (Rohrbacher, 2000).

Online companies like Quixtar and MyPoints offer incentives for personal recommendations through points that can be converted into Internet gift cards. Many websites employ this strategy, which is most commonly referred to as “extended referral credits.” For example, AllAdvantage pays customers 50 cents per hour to display the company’s *Viewbar*—an interactive online banner—on their personal websites, ten cents per hour when someone else uses their Viewbar, and five cents per hour for anyone who downloads the Viewbar because of their referral (Rohrbacher, 2000).

According to Louis Trager in *Inter@ctive Week*, “Many online merchants have found customer acquisition to be an excruciatingly difficult and expensive proposition. If contacts and customers can be leveraged by getting them to supply leads for new customers, or better yet, recommend the merchant, it’s worth giving them something for their trouble, especially if the deal can be sealed with a few e-mails” (Trager, 2000).

In addition to point incentives, many Websites are offering *self-organizing viral distribution networks*, or networks in which users accumulate “frequent flyer miles” for spreading a software application to colleagues and friends. Netcentives is the most common online company that utilizes a self-organizing viral distribution network. But like value viral campaigns, guile virals succeed only when the reward and the products are worthy enough for recommendation (Rohrbacher, 2000).

In *vital viral* campaigns, on the other hand, customers want to share experiences that require both parties to own certain products. This use of two-party-necessary buzz was made popular offline by technological advances in communication that required ownership by both parties involved, such as the telephone and the facsimile machine.

Recent product examples of vital virals are RealPlayer media player, Macromedia Flash player, and Adobe Acrobat reader; these products all require two parties to own the software in order to send messages through it to each other. ICQ, one of the most popular and successful examples, has been compared to herpes “because it spreads through intimate one-to-one contact” (Rohrbacher, 2000). Plus, Web sites like eBay and Internet service providers like America Online use this strategy on the Internet. But quality is important with vital viral as well because “users must feel that the experience and the

product are worth it to make a change for themselves, let alone to convince others to do likewise” (Rohrbacher, 2000).

Spiral viral also offers a motivation to forward a message but not through a physical or monetary incentive. Spiral virals offer funny, dirty and/or interesting experiences that customers want to share with others. These campaigns are most often seen online: the Hamster Dance and the Frog Blender videos were popular “spiral viral” successes. Another example, online *joke lists*, circulate jokes to subscribers by e-mail for short or long periods of time (Boase & Wellman, 2001). But, “success stories in this category were rarely intended to be ‘viral’...but funny, dirty, and/or interesting” (Rohrbacher, 2000).

The last category—and the only category that can be effectively controlled or created—is the negative *vile viral*. In vile viral campaigns, customers warn others about negative experiences. Olestra and Crystal Pepsi are examples of products that were unsuccessful because of a negative buzz. These vile viral campaigns are rarely intentional on the part of the brand and rarely produce positive results (Rohrbacher, 2000).

But some of these negative campaigns are considered deliberate buzz creators. In fact, many viral marketing critics believe that companies are anonymously creating negative advertisements and then complaining about their publication to encourage debate and, hopefully, generate more exposure to the advertising message. For example, a “test commercial” for Ford’s Sportka appeared online that featured a cat being decapitated by the car’s sunroof. Ford vehemently denied any responsibility for the

“leak,” but the commercial created a significant buzz that many critics are claiming may have been intentional (“Buzz Passes,” 2004).

Each of these five strategies could be successfully employed for many different products, both online and offline. “Build the product to fulfill those needs and satisfy those wants and to provide a positive experience. If you’ve done it right, you’ll know—and so will 12 other people” (Rohrbacher, 2000).

Computer-Based Viral Marketing

The term *viral marketing* most commonly refers to online marketing. And the use of viral marketing campaigns online is steadily increasing because the Internet offers an ideal communication network. According to a survey by Opinion Research Corporation International (ORCI), Internet users told an average of 12 other people about an online shopping experience last year (Rohrbacher, 2000). Plus, online communities—often called Virtual Information Communities (VICs)—offer specialized niches of similar consumers: “circles of friends, customer clubs, associations.” These communities can be tapped through e-mail systems or through community-specific websites (Welker, 2002).

The Internet is the most common media choice for viral marketing because it amplifies communications effects and “speeds up the proliferation of ‘buzz’ across groups” (Boase & Wellman, 2001). Because the Internet and email communication allow people to maintain weak social ties with little effort, viral campaigns can spread online faster than through personal, face-to-face communication. Singer Alanis Morissette described file-sharing networks like Mp3.com and Napster—examples of a strong social

network formed through weak social ties—as “a link between artist and audience that hinted at a world without barriers” (Boase & Wellman, 2001).

The most popular version of an online viral campaign is the *e-mail viral*. These viral campaigns, which are sent through e-mail systems, generally take one of three forms: the chain e-mail, the “send a copy to a friend” button, and the “take a look” button (Rohrbacher, 2000).

The chain e-mail—an online version of the chain letter sent through the physical mail system—utilizes a guile viral strategy and offers incentives for forwarding a message to others, which can range from prizes to personal satisfaction. Today, many non-profit groups use this method to influence legislation with mass-signed petitions.

The “send a copy to a friend” button, on the other hand, offers visitors of a website the choice to forward a copy of an article or promotion that they find interesting, which in turn generates more visitors for the website. Amazon.com’s and iShip.com’s free gift packaging utilize a similar strategy in encouraging customers to “send a gift to a friend” in company wrapping paper, which is known as *packaging piggy-backing* (Rohrbacher, 2000).

Similarly, the “take a look” button offers the choice to forward a link to the website itself. E-mail provider Hotmail utilized a form of the “take a look” button by adding a link to “Get your private, free email at www.hotmail.com” to the footer of every email sent out by Hotmail users (Sceats, 2004). With the “take a look” link, every outbound message includes an advertisement and a subtle, implied endorsement by the sender.

In addition to e-mail viral campaigns, many websites offer visitors with their own websites the option to post—or display—material on their personal home page; links are displayed throughout or at the end of the material to encourage visitors to access the original website (Internet Marketing Center of California, 2002). Geocities, the most popular example of a *posting viral*, enables users to create personal websites that contain Geocities advertisements (Welker, 2002).

In a variation of this form, many websites offer communities in the form of web-hosted address books, calendars, list servers and news group readers that require customers to recruit additional users. Homestead, for example, offers community websites that allows creators to broadcast invitations to other people who may like to participate.

Offline Viral Communication

Buzz marketing and viral communication are considered “umbrella terms” for marketing that uses consumers to physically pass on a sender’s message or brand endorsement through the Internet. But, as shown in Figure 1 on page 16, several specific variations of viral communication exist offline (“Buzz Passes,” 2004).

Guerilla tactics refer to creative marketing activities—specific to events and event sponsorships, “like stunts”—that are meant to attract attention for the brand (“Buzz Passes,” 2004). Though guerilla tactics exist primarily offline, many companies have begun to transition to the online environment by hosting online chat events in which consumers can engage in direct conversation in an event-like atmosphere.

Trendsetter tactics, on the other hand, refer to free product give-aways or product placements with the intent to jump-start a trend. Marketers distinguish key trendsetting individuals—or opinion leaders—and give them free access to products or services to encourage others' adoption by recommendation or example.

Yet the most discussed form of offline viral communication is the *stealth* or *undercover* tactic, which advertises through undercover actors using products in public places. Though this direct marketing strategy is controversial because it is not obvious to the consumer that he/she is experiencing an advertising message, undercover marketing is still popularly adopted by many marketing plans as part of their standard marketing mix (“Buzz Passes,” 2004).

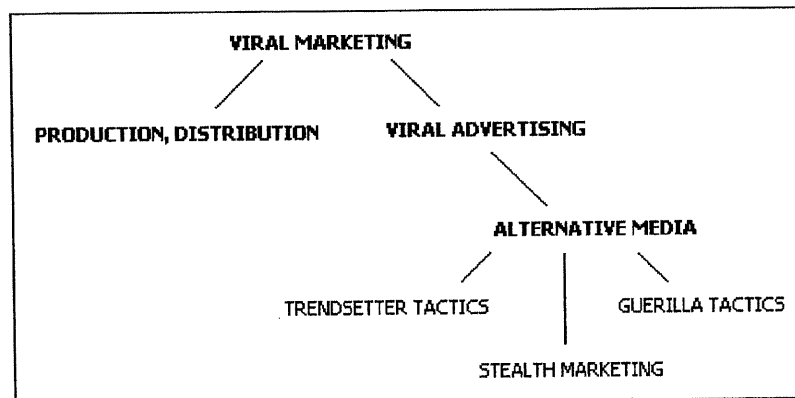


Figure 1. Diagram showing the position of offline viral communication in reference to viral marketing, viral advertising, and alternative media.

Stealth Marketing

Viral communication can multiply quickly through undercover marketing as opinion leaders within an offline community spread viral messages through their actions and recommendations (Boase & Wellman, 2001). In response to this viral extension-of-

actions offline, undercover, or *stealth*, marketers have begun to form marketing campaigns—and even marketing street crews—specifically designed to reach these opinion leaders (Safer, 2004).

Correspondent Morley Safer for 60 Minutes reported in 2004 that “advertisers are trying ever more inventive (and some would say devious) ways of getting our attention. This is called ‘undercover marketing’—marketing by masquerade” (Safer, 2004).

In his report, Safer followed technology company Essential Reality around downtown New York as it advertised its new product, the “P-5 Glove” used for video games. Essential Reality assembled a group of temporary employees as a street crew to market the glove. “We’re gonna go into coffee bars and crowded places,” instructed the leader of the crew. “Your job is to go out there and have fun with it. And say, ‘Yeah, sure, c’mon you wanna try it? Great, try it,’ and then all of a sudden just involve them with the brand” (Safer, 2004).

In the coffee bar, customers practically line up to test the glove worn by the simple “20-something, hanging out” customer who is actually an undercover marketer paid to spread information about the product. “No one is overtly trying to sell you anything, only trying to get you to want it, and then, of course, buy it and tell your friends about it. It’s not a ‘hard sell’ or a ‘soft sell.’ It’s a secret sell” (Safer, 2004).

Sony Ericsson took this same approach when marketing its new camera cellular phone. Marketing Director John Maron launched an undercover campaign he called “Fake Tourists” in which sixty hired actors were dispatched throughout ten large cities across America with the mission to spread buzz about the new phone. The actors would

ask pedestrians, “Excuse me, do you mind taking a picture of us?” and then recommend the phone. Maron calls this “an easy way to create a very non-evasive interesting conversation with somebody without the pressure of it feeling like...a pitch” (Safer, 2004).

This tactic is also commonly used to advertise alcohol and cigarettes. David Elias, CEO of marketing company Soulkool, made a deal with a popular club in New York: for one night, the club’s bar would pour only Turi Vodka, hoping to start a “Turi Vodka buzz.” Freedom Tobacco Company advertised its new brand of cigarettes, Legal, by placing employees in bars to offer strangers a free cigarette (Safer, 2004).

Malcolm Gladwell, author of the book *The Tipping Point*, feels this type of marketing is deceptive. He claims that undercover marketing is damaging the reasons why word-of-mouth recommendations are so powerful, that the person recommending something is “telling us about it for disinterested reasons. They’re not being paid by somebody. They have our interests at heart” (Safer, 2004).

Sony Ericsson’s Maron rebukes by claiming “the majority of people that [Sony Ericsson] polled found it interesting, fun, and innovative. They didn’t find it at all...deceptive or subversive...it was simply that they enjoyed a new way to see a cool new product” (Safer, 2004). But whether or not stealth marketing is considered ethical or appropriate, the practice of undercover communication is a popular viral tactic in the current marketing environment.

“Who Moved My Cheese?”

Spencer Johnson’s and Kenneth Blanchard’s bestselling novel, *Who Moved My Cheese?: An A-Mazing Way to Deal with Change in Your Life & in Your Work*, was marketed completely through offline viral communication. The marketing department of G.P. Putnam’s Sons division of Penguin Putnam decided to use a viral approach to marketing the book “by asking friends and associates to review the manuscript, then introducing it to the marketplace through exposure to business audiences through...seminars and speeches” (Fitzgerald, 2001).

It took over a year for *Who Moved My Cheese?* to sell its first million copies, but only five months to sell the second million and two months to sell the third million. By the end of the second year, sales had topped 4 million, “fueled by its popularity as a holiday gift to all age groups” (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Dr. Spencer Johnson claims that word-of-mouth “is far more effective than any traditional media” and attributes the success of his book to “21st century marketing. It was a very slow-building grassroots phenomenon, driven completely by word of mouth with absolutely no traditional advertising or marketing” (Fitzgerald, 2001). Because of early successes like these, offline viral communication is now being used in conjunction with online viral communication by even prominent corporations today.

Viral Campaigns

Internet and viral marketing are part of a trend in which global communication makes possible the extremely rapid adoption of new technology and new media. It took 20 years for 10 million listeners to tune in to the radio, 10 years for 10 million viewers to adopt television, 28 months for 10 million subscribers to order Netscape, and only 7 months for 10 million Internet-users to sign up for their free Hotmail account (Welker, 2002).

At the Cannes Lions International Advertising Festival in 2004, Internet entries had increased by 25 percent and billboards by 15 percent since 2003, many of them viral. The advertisements with the most buzz at the Festival included mainstream companies like Hewlett-Packard, Burger King, Adidas, and Ford Motor (Welker, 2002).

In its viral campaign, Hewlett-Packard presented visual artists with the opportunity to use Hewlett-Packard products through the online campaign “Hype”; the best of the artists’ work was displayed in a London gallery. Burger King created two Web sites that enticed consumers through humor: one Web site, subservientchicken.com, allows users to make commands to a man in a chicken costume while another, based on their commercial personality Ugoff, is a parody of fashion Web sites and offers the “ultimate lunch accessory” in its new salad line (Welker, 2002).

Mainstream Companies Abandon Traditional Campaigns

While viral communication is becoming a popular addition to traditional advertising campaigns across the globe, many mainstream companies are even lowering their traditional media budgets to invest more into viral marketing. Companies with youth-relevant products are learning that viral communication can reach the Generation Y consumers who are virtually unreachable through traditional media like television (Fitzgerald, 2001).

In the United Kingdom, Trojan Brand Condoms created an award-winning campaign that was seen by over 25 million people globally and over 6 million in its first month alone. Of the visitors to Trojan's "sex-and-games spoof" website, 77 percent recalled the brand and 50 percent claimed that they were more likely to consider the Trojan brand in the future (Kirby, 2004).

GFI Holdings' Slim Jim hired young people between the ages of 17 and 21 as part-time marketing representatives "to visit skateboard shops, record stores and clothing outlets where teens hang out" (Fitzgerald, 2001). They distributed product samples and newsletters containing what Dave Rosenberg, vice president of strategic planning, describes as "the kind of gross, rebellious humor teenagers love" (Fitzgerald, 2001). Rosenberg claims that young marketing representatives are more capable of choosing ideal locations and more suitable than adult marketers at portraying the campaign attitude of "a teen's dream and a parent's nightmare" (Fitzgerald, 2001).

In response to teenagers' rebellious attitudes and love of music, Pepsi-Cola Company's Mountain Dew launched the viral campaign "Mountain Dew Pirate Radio" in

2001. A group of 16-foot marketing trucks toured the United States, offering underground “pirate” radio broadcasts of new local musicians and free samples of Mountain Dew. Pepsi-Cola labeled the campaign a success for distributing 1,750 cans of Mountain Dew each day of the tour (Fitzgerald, 2001).

And because music and viral communication both thrive within Internet communities, record labels are also using teenagers’ love of music to promote new artists. In 2004, Def Jam partnered with 360 Youth to introduce new singer Fefe Dobson to teenage girls through a contest on Alloy.com. The contest, which offered the chance to win a performance by Fefe at their school, encouraged 52,705 teenagers to visit the Fefe microsite on Alloy.com. According to Samantha Skey, vice president of convergent marketing at 360 Youth, “The combination of the ability to be in schools and to have a robust online [component]” made the campaign successful (Elkin, 2004).

Even companies that rarely target teenagers, like the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), have adopted viral campaigns for youth-specific promotions. In April and May of 2001, PBS created “funky, teen-targeted lounges” in malls where it screened clips of its new, 13-part documentary series for teenagers, “American High” (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Promotion of Viral Campaigns through Traditional Channels

Perhaps the most significant viral marketing trend is the use of traditional advertisements to support a viral campaign. The most popular example of this tactic, Microsoft’s Xbox game Halo2, sold over 1.5 million copies over a month before it

became available on retail shelves; it “achieved this feat with an unearthly viral push that isn’t in English—or an other known language for that matter” (Oser, 2004).

A story written in alien language—from the point of view of “the Covenant” aliens from the game—was “discovered” on the Internet the weekend before the traditional advertising campaign began. “Although there was not one word of English (or any other Earth language for the global effort) on the site, gamers ‘cracked the code’ and translated the language within 48 hours of its going live. [Microsoft] thought it would take them two weeks” (Oser, 2004).

Believing consumers would take two weeks to crack the code, Microsoft planned a traditional marketing campaign with television, cinema and print promotions. The slogan “Earth will never be the same” was meant to increase interest in the alien document. “All [traditional promotions] point to the website,” said Xbox’s group marketing communication manager Brian Rekasis.

Though the viral campaign was so effective that it began spreading before traditional media brought widespread attention, Microsoft experienced continued success even after the code was solved. “If you give your core audience something to get them further excited, then they will become advocates for you and go out and spread the word” (Oser, 2004).

Sega also used traditional media to fuel its viral hoax campaign for ESPN NFL Football 2K4. Sega placed video clips on the web and in traditional media with the “fiction that beta testers of the game were experiencing odd side-effects and Sega was scrambling to cover up the scandal” (Montague, 2004). The company created a blog that

featured “video clips of gamers blacking out from playing the beta, homemade video news footage of Sega employees being ambushed...and even a filmed disclaimer by NFL player Warren Sapp denouncing the rumors about the game” (Montague, 2004).

Though many consumers noticed the falsehood of Sega’s claims, over 4 million consumers downloaded the hoax videos. “The genius of the ‘Beta-7’ campaign was that it blended both traditional ad principles with a ground breaking viral marketing technique that grabbed even skeptics with its elaborate, albeit farcical, story” (Montague, 2004).

Automobiles Go Viral

But the mainstream industry that is most rapidly and thoroughly adopting viral marketing is the automobile industry. In fact, BMW’s 2001 BMW Films campaign “is often noted as the start of the trend among mainstream advertisers” (Mand, 2004).

Industry analysts frequently cite the online short films campaign—featuring “Hollywood’s finest talent,” including actors like Clive Owen—as the first viral campaign that “has grown enough to attract corporate behemoths” (Mand, 2004).

Mazda later created a “parking” video campaign with controversial taglines: “To all those who say size doesn't matter and women can't parallel park, here's your answer.” The campaign sparked a global debate between men and women over which sex has the best parking abilities. Steve Jelliss, manager for Mazda Motors in the United Kingdom, claims that “online viral marketing campaigns have proven their value in providing high brand exposure to a wide-as-possible audience, and ultimately contributing to car sales” (Kirby, 2004).

Mitsubishi Motors Europe is currently premiering its Lancer Evolution VIII through a viral campaign that features video advertisements and adventure games based on the car. Scott Goodson, a founder of the company in charge of the campaign, claims that “the goal is to do underground marketing that trendsetters would admire [because] cool trendsetters don’t rush out to buy things they see in mainstream advertising” (Hall, 2004).

In the United States, Toyota contacted viral agencies to create a \$10 million campaign that could reach the lucrative market of men between the ages of 24 and 30. “We want to get new ideas under the radar screen,” said corporate communications marketing manager Deborah Wahl Meyer. Toyota turned to viral marketing when its traditional marketing campaign was unsuccessful with reported sales of only 1,338 Toyota Echos in the first quarter of 2004 (Halliday & Cuneo, 2004).

Volkswagen of America is also targeting young adults with its Beetle campaign by challenging college students to fit as many students as possible into a Volkswagen Beetle. “Teen’s innate sense of mischief is being harnessed to make scenes on college campuses nationwide” (Fitzgerald, 2001). The record number of students packed into a Beetle so far is 26 students at Babson College (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Reasons for Viral Growth

With the rise of fragmented cable channels and digital media, consumers are more elusive to advertisers. Roger Hatchuel, Chairman of the Cannes Lions International

Advertising Festival, feels that advertisers will never again be able to rely on television advertisements alone. “Before, you had the good old days of broadcast and mass media. With the money, you had access. It was easy. Today, with technology and digital, the consumers are in control. They can avoid advertising” (“Thinking Outside,” 2004).

“With TiVo’s fast-forward, viewers’ shrinking attention spans and new media choices, the 30-second TV ad has more rivals for customers’ attention” (“Thinking Outside,” 2004). And the increasing popularity of these cable and digital devices is enlarging the hard-to-reach arena every day. “Marketers face a choice between throwing more money at increasingly impotent advertising or letting their customers do the work for them” (“Buzz Passes,” 2004).

A shift in media usage from traditional media to the less invasive online media has sparked a “migration” of entire social networks to the Internet: “a large proportion of everyone’s friends and family members are now online or soon will be” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). As more people follow this migration online, the number of network contacts “rises exponentially” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). Plus, consumers who are at work are easily accessible through Internet communication, perhaps more so than through the radio, the only other medium used during work hours.

Though Internet advertising became extremely popular in 2000 because of its low cost and because of the rising number of online consumers, the online advertising environment is changing now as well. The growth in banner advertising has created thick online clutter that Internet-users are becoming immune to: average banner click-through rates are now less than 0.26 percent (Digital Media Communications, 2005). Plus, “even

the spreading phenomenon of pop-up interactive ads looks set to annoy rather than inform and entertain users” (Digital Media Communications, 2005).

In a changing environment in which reaching consumers is increasingly more difficult, the ability to incite action while building brand equity makes viral marketing an effective—and often successful—strategy. The viral campaign merges the immediate value of word-of-mouth to the long-term value of brand equity: “it builds awareness and premium brand building...[it] provides the missing link between the word-of-mouth approach and the top-down, advertainment approach to brand marketing” (Kirby, 2004). And this dual effect can be achieved within a specifically targeted market at low media costs.

The comparatively low costs, the ability to target specific audiences, and the capacity to offer both word-of-mouth and brand-building promotions are making viral communication a popular marketing strategy (Fera, 2004).

Better than Word-of-Mouth?

The popularity of viral marketing is increasing because it makes possible the creation or manipulation of the elusive, yet proven-effective word-of-mouth recommendation. This positive personal endorsement is considered by marketers the single best advertising message source. “We trust the judgment of people who know us and what we want and like. We can even learn to put a high degree of reliability on the recommendations of strangers who don’t know us at all, and whose views and tastes are

nothing like ours. Think of all the people who say they know what movie or restaurant to choose because a certain critic likes it” (Trager, 2000).

According to a McKinsey & Company study in 2003, 67 percent of U.S. consumer-goods sales are based on word of mouth recommendations (Taylor, 2003). And over 90 percent of consumers told at least one person about a Website when the original recommendation came from a friend (Kharif, 2000). “Heavy exposure to the best and most expensive advertising is not enough to get people to part with their money, whereas a mere mention of a product by friends, family and even strangers will often do the trick” (Taylor, 2003).

Consumer distrust of advertising messages is a result of heavy traditional advertising clutter. “The simple fact is that traditional advertising is so pervasive that it is no longer persuasive... When faced with an obvious pitch, people’s natural defense mechanisms kick in and they automatically discount the validity of the message” (Taylor, 2003). Viral communication is effective because it avoids the direct “top-down” advertising pitch that makes most consumers suspicious of advertising messages (Kirby, 2004).

But traditional “bottom-up” advertising through word-of-mouth requires high consumer interest that many products cannot create. Viral marketing campaigns, on the other hand, “can help those brands without a ‘wow’ factor by creating entertainment and provoking debate” (Kirby, 2004). As illustrated in Figure 2 on page 29, viral marketing is “the synthesis between top-down and bottom-up marketing” (Kirby, 2004). According to Justin Kirby, managing director at Digital Media Communications, the viral campaign

avoids consumer suspicion by avoiding “top-down advertising” and makes possible the actual production of buzz by avoiding the complete “bottom-up advertising” of pure consumer word of mouth.

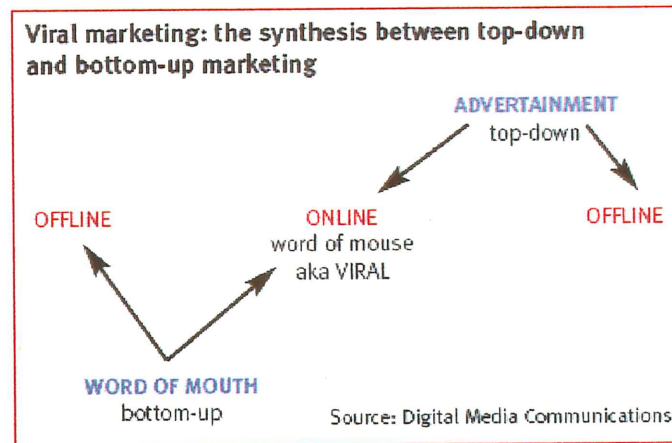


Figure 2. Diagram showing the position of viral marketing as between top-down and bottom-up advertising on the marketing scale. From “Getting the Bug,” by J. Kirby, 2004, Brand Strategy, p. 33.

Cost-effectiveness

“Contacting individuals on the web is virtually cost-free. It is possible for one individual to contact hundreds in one day who can contact hundreds more, etc. Pyramids can be built in a day, not years” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). In fact, the most expensive aspect of a viral marketing campaign is usually the production cost of the advertisement itself, not the cost of media purchases.

This cost-effectiveness popularized viral marketing when, because of a general economic downturn in 2000 that led to a reduced spending on more expensive media, marketers turned to the Internet for lower-priced advertising (Digital Media

Communications, 2005). As a result, even non-profit and charity organizations are able to reach large quantities of consumers on a limited budget.

Charity Virals

Barnardo's, the United Kingdom's largest children's charity, launched a humorous campaign that was emailed to its 5,000 employees. The emails contained a link to a video clip in which runners wearing "fancy-dress" exercised at a local gym; the message contained the textual explanation that "no matter where you run or what you wear, Barnardo's will turn 'miles into smiles' for disadvantaged children" (Rigby, 2004). Carolyn Rich, new-media manager at Barnardo's, claims, "A viral campaign is the most cost-effective and direct way to target fundraisers and drive visitors to our web site" (Rigby, 2004).

Many American charities are also using viral campaigns, but most of these charities tend to rely more on shock value than on humor. The International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW), for example, relied on a shocking viral advertisement to communicate its campaign against the reemergence of elephant poaching for ivory. In the commercial, a man places an ivory necklace on a woman but leaves a streak of blood on her skin when he removes his hand; after a cross-cut to a graphic photograph of a poached elephant, the commercial asks consumers to sign an online petition ("IFAW Launches," 2004).

Reaching Audiences

In addition to being cost-effective, viral communication is a “self-selecting” medium; because viral campaigns spread information through free consumer channels based on entertainment and interest, those most interested in the product or idea are also those most likely to forward it to a friend. “A [viral commercial] automatically finds its way to the relevant target group because, if a message is not relevant, it is not passed on...and wastage is only an issue if you pay for the media” (“Buzz Passes,” 2004).

Plus, online viral communication provides opportunities for reach not available through traditional marketing. Andrew Rolf, creative director of Internet consultancy Hyperlink Interactive, claims, “There are some sections of the population, such as young people and hobbyists, that you cannot reach with conventional media or whom it would be too expensive to reach with TV. The Internet is a good means to seek out niches” (Harvey, 2003).

“Blogging”

The recent *blog* trend is making online viral marketing easier, cheaper, and more targeted to niche groups (Garrity, 2002). These easy-to-create Web sites that mix “journal-style commentary” with links to additional Web sites of interest are the epitome of viral communication through message posting. Blogs, the online version of “what [marketers] used to call the fanzine,” offer consumers who don’t have physical access to less mainstream stores the chance to learn about and discuss their favorite band, movie, food, or anything else.

Many blogs are even “becoming a favored meeting ground for the type of early adopter fan that record companies covet when spreading word-of-mouth for baby bands and critic-driven acts” (Garrity, 2002). Plus, the majority of blogs have the “shocking demographic that most magazines would kill for:” 18- to 35-year-olds who are “smart and have money and buy everything online” (Garrity, 2002).

In response to this demographic, film companies and record labels are beginning to view blogs as a “valuable viral marketing tool for labels looking to hype new acts...and plug new music from under-the-radar acts” (Garrity, 2002). But more than just record companies are responding to blogs as a possible avenue for advertising messages.

Robin Bechtel, Vice President of new media at Warner Brothers, claims that “a lot of these blogs have these interesting little niches, which really help us when planning marketing campaigns” (Garrity, 2002). The Warner Brothers’ record label supports a variety of blogs—even some that provide unlicensed MP3s—by supplying them with free tracks from their bands.

Though the majority of blogs have low Web site traffic, they are usually part of a wider community of Web sites with similar interests strung together by links and can thus target large, specific audiences (Garrity, 2002). And because visitors to these interest-specific Web sites have an emotional—and possibly passionate—connection with the subject, marketers “have a whole subset of people who are willing to take marketing into their own hands because they want to spread the word on stuff they are interested in” (Garrity, 2002).

Plus, the ability to target such specific audiences through blogs—and other types of viral communication—offers the unique opportunity of *avoiding* audiences companies do not want to reach. In marketing its adult computer games, Sony wanted to avoid “the traditional children’s market, fearing that games that appeal to a young audience would be anathema to technology enthusiasts” (Montague, 2004). Jim Wimms, former vice president for marketing at Sony Computer Entertainment, said the company placed “ads only serious game players would understand” on blogs frequented by the target audience, both to create viral interest and to avoid untargeted audiences.

Accessing the Teen Market

A more specific reason for recent growth in viral marketing is its ability to reach the difficult-to-reach teenage market. The typical teenager spends up to six hours a day playing videogames, listening to music and “surfing the Internet.” Those in this generation “multitask at a very high level. They can play games on the computer while sending instant messages, listening to the stereo and watching TV while a friend is sitting on a couch,” leaving little time to passively observe advertising messages (Fitzgerald, 2001). In fact, when a survey by WonderGroup Youth Marketing asked teenagers to list their daily activities, they added up to 28 hours (Fitzgerald, 2001).

Along with their lack of time to pay attention to advertising messages, modern teenagers are suspicious of commercial information, especially commercial advertisements. “Adults can’t tell teenagers anything these days—at least not through traditional TV and print ads,” so “marketing experts are...jumping through hoops to get

Generation Y's attention through guerrilla and viral tactics" (Fitzgerald, 2001). Record labels are utilizing viral marketing with extremely successful results, revealing "how the Web can be tapped to create an emotional bond with the often fickle teen and young adult audience" (Elkin, 2004).

Building Brand Equity

Early users of viral communication believed that the viral medium "could deliver a direct correlation between advertising and purchasing behavior" and that it should be used with that correlation in mind. Therefore, most online viral campaigns focused on a direct call to action (Harvey, 2003). "The idea of using the Internet for branding in the way that radio and television have long been used received little attention" (Harvey, 2003).

But, a study by Internet provider MSN "appears to confirm the value of running Internet campaigns for branding purposes, and shows particular success for those that cross the divide between television and Internet" (Harvey, 2003). The study found that online advertising added an additional 16 percent reach and an additional 10 percent recall rate on top of the 30 to 50 percent expected by television alone. McDonalds in the United Kingdom, for example, moved 20 percent of its advertising budget online and raised awareness for its new flatbread sandwich by 13 percent compared to an expected two percent through traditional media alone (Harvey, 2003).

Michelle Rutter, head of Pan-European sales and trade marketing at MSN, claims that these results prove the brand-building potential of online viral advertising. "It's a

great frequency builder. People see the ads much more often when they're online as well as on television" (Harvey, 2003). European betting company Totesport is using viral marketing solely for building brand equity, with no call to direct action; its online partnerships manager Riman Verma claims, "With viral activity, you often expect to find that someone who interacts with your brand may not bet with you there and then. But when an event comes up on which they do bet, you're at the front of their mind. So its not necessarily a case of registrations right now, it's as much about brand-building" ("Strategic Play," 2004).

Totesport's Riman Verma claims that brand-building opportunities online are even greater than those offline because of their cost-effectiveness. "We've said for a long time that viral games are a great way to build brand and they're incredibly cost-effective. I can say that for the number of eyeballs Tote got for its relaunched brand image, it would have had to pay ten times as much on [traditional] ads" ("Strategic Play," 2004).

In fact, industry analysts from research company Jupitermedia believe that, because of brand-building opportunities and cost-effectiveness, "online advertising [in 2007] could capture between seven percent and nine percent of all ad budgets, which represents brisk growth" (Harvey, 2003).

This growth in Internet spending "is even more exciting than the purely quantitative reading shows. There's a hidden multiplier at work here: virality. Consider how many e-mails, films, and e-clips consumers pass on to their own private networks. You can't do that with a television ad or a poster" (Fiddes, 2004). Viral communication online allows marketers to advertise a brand message and build brand equity to

“customers who are actually listening;” it changes advertising from “interrupt and repeat” to “engage and entertain” (Fiddes, 2004).

Brand-Building through Blogs

While blogs are important to reaching elusive target markets, they are also capable of building brand equity and establishing company credibility. The increasing popularity of blogs “has changed the landscape of guerilla marketing. At first it was seen as just something cool to do...but blogs are now being used to build personal and corporate credibility that will eventually attract consumers” (Ord, 2005).

Company leaders are “blogging” more personal information about themselves to raise their personal profile, to reach customers and employees, and to be seen as modern. “They are blogging for the same reasons they do public speaking, to build credibility for themselves and their company. Blogging has become a new...less time consuming way to reach potential and current consumers” (Ord, 2005).

CEO and founder of iUpload Robin Hopper explains that, because viral marketing through blogs is “possibly the most powerful type of corporate marketing per dollar spent ever invented,” major marketing companies are beginning to use blogs within larger advertising campaigns. Jackie Danicki, an associate of Big Blog Company in London, gives personal evidence that corporate blogging *is* powerful and effective: “I know from our perspective, the amount of people we’ve ended up talking to and doing business with just simply thanks to our blog is amazing. Producers in Hollywood. People from

publishing companies in the States. People who in another time without this network we would never have made contact with” (Ord, 2005).

“Antipreneurism”

In a complete rebellion of mainstream brand-building online, Adbusters Media Foundation recently introduced Blackspot, “the world’s first anti-brand.” Designed to “‘uncool’ corporate behemoths like Nike and bring them to their knees,” Blackspot creates products—like a sneaker made of hemp that features a red toe tip to signify the “kicking of corporate ass”—that promote what it calls “anitpreneurism” (George, 2005). The company is promoting the idea that “you stick it to The Man by consuming non-conformist goods” (George, 2005).

Blackspot is promoting this idea through brand-building viral advertising: Adbusters is marketing the products “by producing spoof ads criticizing hyper-consumerism and media clutter” and “adding to it by launching an aggressive Blackspot marketing campaign featuring...a viral marketing scheme...focused, rather obsessively, on ‘kicking [Nike chairman] Phil Knight’s ass” (George, 2005). Using the same viral strategy that many companies are using to *build* brand equity, Blackspot is gaining loyalty by *disassembling* the brand equity of all major consumer brands.

Current Environment

As the term “viral marketing” is making its debut on slang dictionaries like UrbanDictionary.com, “more than ever and with newfound savvy, companies are seeking to create the sort of unique Web-based advertising that inspires hundreds of linked blogs and forwarded e-mail to friends. Viral advertising is the 21st century’s head-sticking jungle” (Simonds, 2004). Today, marketing companies are being created solely for the production of viral campaigns; in fact, Renegade Marketing Group in New York, which specializes in guerilla “street teams” and viral marketing, has risen to number 62 on *Promo Magazine*’s list of Top 100 Promotion Agencies in 2004 (“The Top 100,” 2004).

“Buzz-builder” companies like the Word-of-Mouth Marketing Association in the United States and the Viral and Buzz Marketing Association in Europe are uniting globally to establish ethical and measurement standards and shift viral marketing toward a “more quantifiable medium” (Neff, 2004). This shift is paralleled by a more accepted atmosphere in which viral marketing is taking new forms, appearing in new venues, and is first being viewed as a solid medium with real problems and valid benefits.

Viral Companies

Many major companies, like Universal Music, are “creating new in-house divisions devoted specifically to viral and fan-based promotions on the Internet” (Garrity, 2002). Universal Music president Jim Urie says his company “will continue to want to do as much of the street-team stuff as [it] can, because that’s just so integral to marketing

certain kinds of music, where they want to find the group of kids on the street corner and turn on the coolest kid in that group” (Garrity, 2002). But many marketing companies are taking this strategy a step further, focusing completely on viral communication and abandoning all traditional media campaigns.

One of the earliest viral marketing companies, Digital Media Communications, Ltd., was founded in 1994 and began specializing in “online viral and buzz marketing for major brands” in 2000. The company—whose clients include Diesel, EA Sports, Levi’s, Mazda, MTV, Sony Ericsson, Virgin and Xbox—is recognized as “the leading practitioner in the online viral and buzz arena” (Digital Media Communications, 2005).

The Viral Factory, another viral marketing company, boasts clients like Ford, Bacardi, Trojan Condoms, Time Warner Books, and Lycos. The company claims that it has “a proven track record of getting it right—and making viral marketing budgets work. Our films burn bright and fast, and have consequently carried our clients’ messages globally, with a buzz that has spilled over into the offline world, creating huge P.R. value.” Its Trojan Games campaign, for example, experienced “24.2 million fully-tracked views of the viral videos—with no media spend” (The Viral Factory, 2005).

Best known for pre-promoting the CBS series “Survivor,” MindArrow Systems is specializing even more than most viral marketing companies by focusing all of its viral efforts on rich-media e-mail pop-ups, which can include a telephone link, messaging, chat, audio, animation, questionnaires, surveys, and hyperlinks. These pop-ups “allow advertisers and marketers to target specific recipients for upcoming promotions or product releases” (Gruenwedel, 2000).

New Formats Widen the Viral Arena

The emergence of companies specializing in viral marketing is part of a booming viral environment. With the continuous advent of new products and venues for viral communication, these advertisers have increasingly more options for spreading their viral message. And technological advances in the computer industry are especially beneficial to the viral marketing environment.

Internet marketing company Gizmoz has created a 13 kilobyte Java applet that functions as a container for content, videos, advertising and hyperlinks. Able to be opened, or “played,” easily on almost any computer desktop, Gizmoz “have the additional benefit of one-click e-mail capabilities, realizing its viral marketing potential” (Bannan, 2000). According to Gizmoz, its “eponymous multimedia product will help both content creators and advertisers more effectively deliver their wares and messages to users” (Bannan, 2000). Plus, all Gizmoz traffic goes through one server so advertisers can determine exactly how many people viewed their content.

The Gizmoz concept avoids many of the problems inherent in online viral marketing, including technical and ethical problems. Content owners have the opportunity to create private networks in which users decide whether or not to tune in; therefore, Gizmoz are essentially “pre-tuned stations or channels [that] allow users to hear or see what they want. It’s like turning on a radio” (Bannan, 2000). And because Gizmoz can be sent as an attachment through e-mail or accessed directly from the desktop, they do not require plug-ins or cookies. “There’s no invasion in terms of trying

to put cookies on anyone's [PCs], so it avoids a lot of the controversial issues about getting personal information" (Bannan, 2000).

New Media Maze, a full-service digital marketing and PR agency, is continuing the Gizmoz "container" trend with its recent development of an online video streaming product Trailer Player. Trailer Player "allows movie clips to be delivered to end users in a quick, entertaining and simple way by streaming the movie trailers in Flash" (Gibbon, 2004). The company has also included a "send to a friend" feature that allows users to pause the clip and send it to a friend, and initial results from this addition "show a huge uptake of this option" (Gibbon, 2004).

Cellular Phone Virals

The Gizmoz container can also be used on cellular phones, allowing marketers and consumers to send animations as picture and video messages. The company's "Talking Headz" service offers a program in which animated heads of a celebrity or cartoon speak the text ("Viral Takes Word," 2004). According to Gizmoz, Talking Headz will encourage viral word-of-mouth recommendations "as users forward animated images to friends and family ("Getting Emotional," 2004). And, "as 3G networks become more prevalent, the ability to send more sophisticated animations will improve" ("Viral Takes Word," 2004).

Plus, software company mUrgent has created an "instant PC-to-cellular communicator" software called MessagingYou. The software allows users to send free text messages—that contain a branded advertising message—to any cellular phone.

Receivers can download printable coupons or additional advertising information from the text message. According to Aleks Bugarski, company executive vice president, “MessagingYou increases a company’s brand awareness online, via wireless phones through viral marketing...it is a productivity tool that puts the brand message in front of customers at least 30 times more per month than conventional marketing” (“mUrgent Debuts,” 2003).

Google Bombs

Many marketers are using viral marketing to cut through the online clutter by purchasing *Google Bombs*, or paid search results, on search engines. Forrester Research claims that between 15 and 25 percent of Internet purchases begin with a keyword search on a search engine. In response, according to Forrester Research analyst Carrie Johnson, “companies pay search engines a lot of money to have their sties show up at the top of lists generated by keyword searches...It’s a very lucrative business for Google” (Gatlin, 2003).

The use of Google Bombs became widely known during the 2004 presidential election. “Pro-Bush law student Ken Jacobson [used] his blog, Esoteric Diatribe, to spearhead a campaign to make Kerry’s site the first link listed when a user typed in the word ‘waffles’ into their search engine” (Perrone, 2004).

Political Advertising

In the United Kingdom, the Green Party launched an online viral film advertising campaign “that [drives] home the fundamental issues being glossed over by larger, richer political parties” (Digital Media Communications, 2005). According to Spencer Fitzgibbon, spokesman for the Green party, “Using online viral marketing enables us to get our message out to millions of voters for next to nothing, encourage them to get involved in spreading the word about vital national and global issues, and gauge how many of them are truly interested and inspired as the campaign progresses. No other promotional technique that political parties are allowed to use can achieve these objectives” (Digital Media Communications, 2005).

England’s Liberal Democrats also used a viral campaign for Simon Hughes as London Mayor. The campaign featured a promotional game in which “players had to steer Tory candidate Steve Norris from a plummeting Jarvis shares indicator over bottles of champagne to land a pile of cash” (“The Revolution,” 2004).

This use of viral tactics for political campaigns has spread to the United States with the use of Google Bombs and is expected to continually rise because of its ability to reach a large number of voters at little cost. Plus, a poll conducted by Internet advocacy consulting firm e-advocates “suggests that voters who have Internet access trust candidate information they get online more than candidates’ television spots or direct mail” (e-advocates, 2005). In fact, 64 percent of respondents claimed the Internet as the source of candidate information they trust most (e-advocates, 2005). And though legislation is pending in Congress to expand restrictions into Internet advertising, online

political advertisements are not currently restricted by law and thus “have the potential to be nastier than those on TV or radio” (“Banner Year,” 2004).

Problems with Viral Tactics

According to ClickZ expert Sandeep Krishnamurthy, there are four key problems inherent in the viral marketing environment: brand control, uncharted growth, lack of measurement, and spam threats. First, the marketer has no control over branding in viral communication. “You don’t know ahead of time whom an individual is going to contact. As a result, many of your messages may end up outside the target audience” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). For example, for younger consumers outside of Ford’s viral target, “seeing Ford try to steal the clothes of Pot Noodle or Trojan Condoms is like watching your dad on the dance floor” (Owen, 2004).

And even if the message is well-targeted, senders of viral information could alter or add to the message. In 2004, aspiring director Earl McDaniel III created his own commercial for Procter & Gamble’s Tide brand based on one of the company’s online advertisements. In the commercial, a man and woman are about to engage in sexual activity “until the mood is broken as she sees, most graphically, that his underwear is dirty” (Neff, 2004). A Procter & Gamble spokesman responded that “it’s definitely not on Tide’s brand equity by a million miles...[but] there’s not a lot you can do about what people post on the Web” (Neff, 2004). Giving up control of branding is extremely risky,

especially for those brands with an established image or values, because “it can risk alienating the very audience that it is trying to impress” (Owen, 2004).

The viral marketer also has little control over message growth and measurement. “You can’t always track who received the e-mails and what they did with them. In many cases, it may not be possible to tell if people who adopted your service did so because of your viral marketing technique or otherwise” (Krishnamurthy, 2000). And viral encouragement to forward a message—especially through monetary incentives—can lead to *spamming*, or unsolicited mass e-mailing. “Spam is one of the greatest irritants of modern life...and now we are being assaulted by human spam as well when we go out” (Lynn, 2005). As consumers become more aware of viral communication, they will become suspicious of all personal recommendations as “human spam.”

Ethical Issues

In early 2000, consumers and marketers began to realize the ethical implications of viral communication when Prosper Business Development and PennMedia began to create e-mail “newsletters that merged targeted content with disguised advertising and encouraged consumers to pass them along to friends and family (Bannan, 2000). In 2004, a fake video was released by someone who claimed he worked “in a high security job” showing a group of Americans being shot at in “an apparently Middle-Eastern city” (Reevely, 2004). The current consensus is that it was a video clip promoting the release of the movie September Tapes. “The most effective viral marketing hijacks sources of

information consumers already trust. If not for the fake-looking static, the...video might have spread much more quickly; imagine it running on TV news while reporters pestered the Pentagon for an explanation the generals couldn't provide" (Reevely, 2004).

The use of the viral hoax is becoming popular even among mainstream companies like Volvo. A fake documentary, "The Mystery of Dalaro," aired online, chronicling the "eerie coincidence" of 32 people in a small Swedish town buying a Volvo from the same dealer on the same day. "The 'mockumentary' has created a buzz and spiked traffic to dealerships and Volvo Web sites...a Google search of the terms 'Volvo and Dalaro' brings up more than 150 results of various sites and chat rooms" (Halliday, 2004).

Though these types of viral hoaxes are not subject to any current government control in the United States, regulations on e-mail and laws in other countries provide some boundaries for viral campaigns. E-mail marketers are now "subject to the new federal CAN-SPAM Act, which...establishes an opt-out framework for commercial e-mail" (Seligman, 2004). This new legislation is especially important to viral advertisers because the Act defines a "sender" of commercial e-mail as "the advertiser or marketing agency or other entity sending the message on behalf of the advertiser" (Seligman, 2004). This "raises some difficult questions with respect to referral e-mails and other forms of viral marketing, such as in a promotion in which people may authorize the sending of an e-mail to their friends and colleagues but the actual party sending the e-mail is the sponsor of the promotion" (Seligman, 2004).

Because viral advertising is something of a "grey area" when it comes to government marketing regulations, many groups and companies are forming their own

standards for ethical conduct to prevent further parameters (Seligman, 2004). The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA) released its ethical code of conduct in February, “marking the first industry-wide effort to tackle the issue of ethics in word-of-mouth marketing head on” (“What’s Ethical Buzz,” 2005). The WOMMA code focuses on what it calls its “Honesty ROI, an honest disclosure of relationship, opinion, and identity.”

According to WOMMA co-founder and CMO of Intelliseek Pete Blackshaw, “Word-of-mouth marketing is a huge opportunity, but absent any standards, it’s also a bit like the Wild West. E-mail marketers never took control, and because of that we’re still fighting spam daily. This code of conduct is our attempt to define what’s right before we all have to live with what’s wrong” (“What’s Ethical Buzz,” 2005). And they consider their ethical code especially important when utilizing viral tactics on minors.

Viral Communication with Minors

Since the purchasing power of children aged 4 to 12 has risen to over \$30 billion a year, advertisers have responded with methods that many feel are “a threat to both parents and children” (“Consuming Kids,” 2004). In fact, “those in the business of marketing to kids have a developed a specialized (and somewhat cynical) vocabulary to describe the strategies used to get children and their parents to pony up for the desire du jour,” including the term *viral marketing* as “using cool kids (the persuaders) to launch a trend so wannabes will naturally follow” (“Talking the Talk,” 2004).

Juliet Schor, sociologist and author of the book *The Overworked American*, specifically criticizes companies like the Girl's Intelligence Agency (GIA), which offers girls as young as 6 a "slumber party in a box." The "party" is used to gather information and to spark a viral communication channel to reach those girls who did not attend. According to Schor, these methods are turning children into marketing instruments and showing them that "friends are a lucrative resource that they can exploit to gain products or money" ("Consuming Kids," 2004).

Undercover marketing agency Soukool also provides incentives for children willing to market their products. Thirteen-year-old Lucas Schlager, a "Cowboy Bebop" fanatic, is just one of 350 nationwide volunteers enlisted by the company to "hype the movie in exchange for T-shirts and posters. From the comfort of his Long Island bedroom, Lucas spends hours in chat rooms, typing and hyping away...on thirteen different chats and four message boards" (Safer, 2004).

Companies are "[bypassing] adult controls by getting kids to 'sell' the products to each other," whether by giving free products to opinion leaders, "seeding" chatrooms with false or incentive-based praise, or paying radio stations to get DJs to "spontaneously speak favorably about a product" ("What is Hip," 2003). But, according to *The San Francisco Chronicle* and many other companies and consumer groups, "there's something inherently deceptive about handing out free goods to carefully selected kids, and doing so regardless of what parents or other adults might think" ("What is Hip," 2003).

Societal Implications

According to Seth Godin, author of *Unleashing the IdeaVirus*, “The future belongs to marketers who establish a foundation and process where interested people can market to each other. [Marketers need to] ignite consumer networks and then get out of the way and let them talk” (“Viral Marketing,” 2004). A number of other marketers feel the same way, believing that “viral marketing will one day be recognized as part of the traditional media mix” (Hill, 2004).

But many marketers criticize the move to mainstream viral communication. “Viral advertising just takes—and gives nothing back. An email from a friend of a friend recommending a film or a CD turns out not to be a recommendation at all...a conversation with a girl in a bar turns from being an innocent flirtation into a marketing ploy. The real trouble with viral marketing is that it pretends not to be marketing at all. It tries to mimic real life—and can only end up making us suspicious of every encounter we have” (Lynn, 2005).

Mohanbir Sawhney, a marketing expert at Northwestern University, also believes that the use of viral communication will backfire. He claims that, “like any other tool, it works really well for a while...[then] people become inoculated. All of this stuff starts to look like spam” (Kharif, 2000).

Viral Spam

The continued use of consumers as e-mail advertisers could “immunize” e-mail receivers to the benefits of word-of-mouth recommendations. “Even good friends can be as annoying as marketers if they bombard me too much. Companies think viral marketing will cut through the clutter, but if they come en masse, they’ll be the clutter” (Neuborne, 2001). And this “immunization” could come at the cost of personal credibility. “There are names for friends who sell you out for their own material gain. Like snitch. Or real-estate broker. Or brother-in-law. Ultimately, the credibility cloud will blanket even sincere recommendations, made without compensation” (Trager, 2000).

Implications for the Advertising Industry

In addition to consumer e-mail “immunization,” the over-use of viral marketing could produce an “immunization” to advertising. Jamie Hill of *Marketing Week* asks, “Is the medium in danger of becoming over-exposed?” (Hill, 2004). In every new viral advertisement, creative diversity is required “since pure copies of existing virtual communication concepts would simply immunize...demanding consumers” (Welker, 2002). Can marketers continue to generate increasingly creative promotions? Is the need to break through the clutter pushing viral communication in a too sexual, too shocking direction?

“In any event, buzz marketing in various guises is here to stay, and indications are that its use is becoming more strategic than tactical, with major brands lining up to join

in. If [public relations and marketing] agencies want to play a role, they need to start coming up with the buzz-inspiring ideas” (Fera, 2004).

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