

## Social media and the viral revolution

### *Social Media*

“The traditional marketing model we all grew up with is obsolete”

*Jim Stengel, Global Marketing Officer, Procter and Gamble*

Marketing today is undergoing major changes. Traditional advertising and campaigning is becoming less effective. In its place, word of mouth and peer-to-peer communication are becoming increasingly important influencers of opinion. There are several reasons for this, but the main driving force has been the growing availability and accessibility of communication technologies that have increased the speed and reach of word of mouth.

These different electronic communication forms that have been made possible through the use of computer technology. The terms new/social media are in relation to “old” media forms, such as print newspapers and magazines that are static representations of text and graphics.

“New media: non-traditional ways of delivering advertising or promotion messages, anything from text messaging to the Internet”

*Oxford University Press*

Apart from altering the meaning of geographic distance, and enabling increases in communication volume and speed, new technologies are also allowing forms of communication that were previously separate to overlap and interconnect. This interactivity is a key term for a number of social media use options, which replace the “one-to-many” models of traditional mass communication with the possibility of a “many-to-many” web of communication.

### **Exponential potential of viral marketing**

There are many debates about how to define viral marketing. However, one could summarize and say that:

Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in message's exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplications to explode the message to thousand, to millions.

However one wants to define it, the practice of encouraging people to pass along a message voluntarily has been used for a decade, but it has only recently become one of the most effective tools used in marketing, campaigning and advocacy today.

*Additional definitions*

*Word of mouth marketing:* Umbrella term for marketing practices, which aim to make people talk about an issue or brand

*Buzz marketing:* Using a special hook, event or promotion to get people and the media talking about a campaign

*Viral marketing:* creating branded Internet materials or websites that people enjoy sharing with friends, usually by email

There are many reasons why viral marketing has gained in popularity, these include:

- New personal communication technology such as blogs, instant messaging, 'intelligent' mobile phones, online communities and social networking sites are increasing the speed, reach and utility of word of mouth.
- Growing marketing literacy among people means that they are more likely to dismiss traditional campaigns, instead turning to peers and trusted word of mouth sources for information.
- Acute advertising and message clutter is making it increasingly difficult for traditional campaigns to 'break through' and capture people's attention.
- Accelerated media fragmentation is shrinking media audiences, more channels and more media are making it harder to reach target audiences through traditional campaigns.

In addition to the above, another important factor driving the increasing use of viral marketing is purely economic; viral campaigning can offer a cost-effective solution compared to traditional marketing and campaigning techniques, which are becoming increasingly expensive and complex to implement and manage. For example, in 1965, a campaign could reach 80% of a mainstream target audience with three TV ads. By 2002, 117 spots were required to achieve the same reach. It is clearly difficult for businesses, let alone organizations, to maintain such constant mainstream media brand awareness. Hence, the less expensive on-line media routes, especially free peer-to-peer-driven message spread, is becoming more attractive.

Moreover, unlike most traditional campaigning, viral campaigns are measurable and can provide accountability when tracked. It is easy to measure traffic to a specific website and tools exist to track the viewing of and interaction with elements downloaded from the Web and spread by email from user to user. And, as viral activity has no fixed cut-off point, it can continue to provide an ever-increasing return on investment.

A final strong point regarding viral marketing is that it can be used successfully even when a brand or issue is unknown or has no obvious 'wow' factor. Instead of creating interest about the issue or product, buzz can be created around the viral campaign agent, which then stimulates and builds interest in the issue or brand itself.

#### High Profile Viral Campaigns

*The Blair Witch Project (1999):* The first high profile online campaign that successfully promoted the hit movie. The website used mystery and intrigue to stimulate word of mouth anticipation of the film. The site attracted 75 million visitors on the first week of the film's release.

*Nike Armstrong Bands (2004):* A high-profile cause marketing campaign to enhance the word of mouth appeal of the Nike brand. In a joint venture with the Lance Armstrong Foundation, Nike began selling 1 dollar yellow wrist bands. With no traditional promotion, demand spread entirely word of mouth, in just six months, 20 million bands had been sold.

*Burger King's 'Subservient Chicken' (2004):* Highly successful branded game to promote awareness of Burger Kings new chicken sandwich. The game involved directing the actions of a man dressed as a chicken. The game clocked up 286 million visitors word of mouth, and created double digit growth of awareness of Burger King.

*Obama Girl (2007):* In June 2007, Barelypolitical.com launched a viral video on youTube called "I Got a Crush... on Obama" featuring a woman singing of her love for 2008 U.S. presidential candidate Barack Obama. The video has to date been seen by over 100 million viewers.

## Viral success: the importance of being remarkable

“The future belongs to the people who unleash ideaviruses. What’s an ideavirus? It’s a big idea that runs amok across the target audience. It’s an idea that propagates through a section of the population, teaching and changing and influencing everyone it touches”

*Seth Godin, Unleashing the Ideavirus*

The difference between one viral campaign succeeding and another failing is dependant on the ability to connect with a target audience as well as inspiring them to interact with the campaign material. The ultimate aim of viral marketing campaigns is of course not just to ‘go viral’ and spread in the digital domain, but to deliver a measurable response, be it awareness, engagement or funds raised.

To do that today and stand out among the growing clutter of wannabe viral campaigns, a campaign must simply be remarkable. This includes being groundbreaking in the use of digital media as well as using a creative, intriguing ‘ideavirus’ which gets the campaign on to conversational agendas and ensures that people want to interact with and share the content.

Analyzing campaigns to date, it is clear that the most successful campaigns have centred around innovative ‘ideaviruses’ that have used surprise, humour, intrigue and delight to get the campaign talked about and digitally shared. These programmes have then had the message picked up by online public opinion leaders (e-fluentials) and individuals with so-called high Social Networking Potential (SNP), who are especially active users of email, newsgroups, bulletin boards, listservs and other online vehicles.

These efluentials and high-scoring SNP individuals help to spread a message and create buzz, however, they (and the general public) need a very good reason to do so. Delivering on this is the main challenge.

Hence, when aiming for a successful viral campaign, one needs to focus on developing a strong viral idea that can carry the campaign theme and generate the required buzz. To do that, a campaign needs to bring together a creative team that includes elements from digital marketing, advertising, production, web and new media technology as well as public relations.

## Comparison: Social Media and Traditional Media

Traditional Campaign	Social Media Campaign
Expensive to develop and place	Cost-effective campaigning/advocacy/fundraising tool
Expensive and labor intensive to transfer to new country/theme	Simple to replicate or roll out by country/globally
Many forms of media required to reach target audiences	Target audience are active internet/new media users
Hard to analyze reach and ‘return on investment’	Trackable and measurable
No action/engagement immediately available for audience	Interactivity; user can engage with and share campaign material
Will be used less and less over time	Social media is at the forefront of future advocacy/campaigning