

Marketing on a budget

As I walk into the room, I'm greeted by the smell of electronics and the hum of computers. Michael sits in his command chair surrounded by LCD monitors speaking into a headset. He turns to me and acknowledges my presence, saying, "Hey Nick! I just have to blow this guy up and then we can start." He's engaged in a galactic dogfight in *EVE Online*. Michael directs his crew, involved in the dogfight, to "throw some missiles in this asshole's face." I hear an explosion. Michael signs off and turns to me. "So yeah, what's up?"

Michael Matuson, a fellow college student and Communications major, has been involved in a few viral marketing schemes and campaigns. He began to tell me about his experience generating buzz about *Planetside*, a multiplayer game developed by Sony in 2004. "We built all of these pre-constructed sites [which] created 'seeder sites,' supplying information about the game ... Each site had basically the same info, but they all linked back to the main *Planetside* site" (Matuson).

Michael explained the processes that he and his group, dubbed *The Reserves*, undertook to spread the word about *Planetside*. Sony, who was doing no real advertising, noticed a surge in subscriptions and somewhat embraced the group and their efforts.

"At first we didn't get any actual support for the [campaign], until they actually started seeing ... an increase in signups, which they attributed to us ... Sony ended up teaming up with us and created what was called The Reserves to create sort of a 'demo' of the game. So we actually teamed up with the developer and created a new wave of subscriptions for the game (Matuson)."

The Reserves didn't cost Sony a single cent to create—in fact it was the people paying for their service who created it. It was possibly the best viral marketing Sony could have asked for.

What is viral marketing?

Also known as "word of mouth" or "buzz" marketing, viral marketing is the practice of propagating an idea throughout a social network (real or virtual) by using its members as walking, talking advertisements. The general idea is that one person will tell two people, who will each tell two people, who in turn will tell two more, and so on.

Contrast this to traditional marketing, which generally uses in-your-face billboards, commercials, and obvious advertising. This sort of thing used to be the status quo, and, while it's definitely not ineffective, viral marketing has much more potential to impact your audience.

As an example, the last time you browsed the web you probably didn't even notice all the ads you encountered.

I quickly recognized that blending a board wasn't a typical type of activity for a blender.

They are everywhere. The last time you listened to the radio, how long did you listen

between songs before you realized it was a commercial you were hearing? How easy is it to tune out the television?

We've grown accustomed to the usual methods; they don't phase us anymore. They're blatant advertisements from a faceless corporation; from "the man," if you will. That's where the difference lies: viral marketing is an endorsement of a product or idea from someone you know.

Examples

There are hundreds upon hundreds of great examples of viral marketing, but I've chosen a few that I feel really represent the scope of what you can accomplish without investing a lot of time or money.

Keep circulating the tapes!

In the mid 1990's, producers of the show *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (MST3K) encouraged viewers to tape the program. The practice became so widespread that they added the phrase "Keep circulating the tapes!" to the end

credits (Mullen). There's no hard data to support how well this practice worked for them, however this is the first real example of fan-based viral marketing.

PS: I Love You.

In 1996, Hotmail was the very first free, web-based email service. Back then it was known as HoTMaiL (each letter capitalized in reference to HTML), a small startup out of San Jose, California. Two months after the company's launch, they had gained 750,000 users. Four months later, 1 million. Five weeks after that, 2 million. How did they grow so quickly?

It's a very simple strategy that Microsoft, who bought the company in 1998, still employs on the site today, although with a different message. The creators put a small ad at the bottom of every email that left the Hotmail servers: "PS: I Love You. Get your free email at Hotmail." In his book, *Viral Loop*, Adam Penenberg explains

"Simply by using the product, every customer became an involuntary salesperson. This implied endorsement from a friend or peer made it more powerful — and more far-reaching — than traditional advertising. The receiver of a Hotmail messages could see a.) his friend is a user, b.) it works, and c.) it's free. Successful consumer branding is often based on user affiliation (TechCrunch)."

Hotmail's story is a great example of how consumer branding, or brand loyalty, can push a product that extra mile. In this case, people receiving emails from Hotmail users saw their family, friends, and colleagues using the product and said, as Penenberg puts it, "the cool kids wear low cut jeans, so I will, too." So much so that "[one of the creators] sent a message to a friend in India and within 3 weeks Hotmail registered 100,000 users there" (TechCrunch).

Will it blend?

In December of 2008, director of marketing at Blendtec, George Wright, discovered a room at the company's headquarters covered in wood shavings. After questioning his co-workers, he discovered that Tom Dickson, the company's CEO, would often test the durability of Blendtec blenders for jamming a 2x2 wooden board into them. In an interview with .net magazine, Wright jests that "[he] quickly recognized that blending a board wasn't a typical type of activity for a blender ... I personally

wanted to watch it, and ... others would find it interesting as well" (Netmag).

\$50, a white lab coat, some marbles, and one rake later, five episodes of *Will it Blend* were uploaded to YouTube. The resulting hit has created "phenomenal growth" for Blendtec's sales—especially online, where sales have increased five-fold. Wright exclaims that "[their] marketing department actually *generates* revenue!" (Netmag).

Since its conception, the *Will it Blend* series has become associated with other products. Featured cross-promotions include:

- ▶ Apple's original iPhone, iPod, and iPhone 3G
- ▶ *Grand Theft Auto IV*
- ▶ *Transformers*
- ▶ And even Chuck Norris



Will it Blend was firmly rooted in pop culture when alt-rock group *Weezer* featured the series in its music video for their single *Pork and Beans*. Dickinson returned the favor by blending a copy of the album with, yes, a can of pork and beans.

Understand your market — they will be the ones who generate the buzz to those who are less interested.

The best part about *Will it Blend* was the extremely low

budget that started the project. With virtually no overhead, Blendtec created an extremely successful campaign that skyrocketed their sales.

Want more viral success stories?

Visit <http://www.ignitesocialmedia.com/viral-marketing-examples> for a slew of great examples over the last decade.

Tips for growing your campaign

Alright, you're pumped after reading these success stories. How do you get started? First, here are some basic things to keep in mind when designing your campaign.

Free means accessible.

Possibly the most important part of creating a viral campaign is to offer it for **free**. Not only free as in beer (ie, *gratis*, or "for zero price"), but also free as in speech (*libre*, or "having freedom"). If your idea is to grow exponentially, it absolutely must be available to virtually anyone at virtually any time. Stay away from any of the following:

- ▶ Requiring registration or membership
- ▶ The need for special software
- ▶ Forcing potential users to jump through hoops

Avoid adding **any** additional steps between the user and the content. Your campaign should be about visibility, not exclusivity.

Share and share alike.

You should make your content simple to **share**. Allow people to share your link via social bookmark or social media links such as Facebook, Digg, del.icio.us, or even a simple "Email to a Friend" link. The easier it is to share, the more likely it will be shared.

Elicit a response.

Make people feel something: love, joy, desire, fear, or awe; just about any emotion will do. The more emotion you can tie to your idea, the better. Positive emotions are generally preferred (you are more likely to share something you love than something you hate), but don't rule negative feelings out! Make your audience's blood start pumping and they will want to share their experience.

Be different.

Simply put: do something new! If you want to get noticed, you will have to stand out from the crowd. There are literally **millions** of YouTube videos, twice as many blog posts, and ten times more photos. How can you make your content pop? How can you make it memorable?

The most important thing to remember is **don't be a copycat**.

Venues

You know how to organize your campaign, but where do you go next? Here, I'll discuss two popular venues for actually getting the word out.

Facebook

Because the site gets such a high amount of exposure (more than 8 billion minutes are spent on the site **each day** [Facebook]) is proof enough that Facebook should be your first stop. The entire Facebook platform is fine-tuned for viral marketing. With over 300 million active users, with an average 130 friends each (Facebook), a link has the potential to spread through a given network in a single day.

The following means are provided by Facebook for your viral campaign:

- ▶ **The news feed.** The news feed is your best friend. Nearly anything that happens on Facebook—wall posts, friend additions, photo postings, shared links, RSVP status to events—is pushed to the news feed for all of a users' friends to see.
- ▶ **The Share button.** On that note, the Share button is what will most likely propagate your link through the Facebook network. Share allows your users to push an event from their news feed to their friends' inside of two clicks.
- ▶ **Pages.** Pages function as a hybrid between a user profile and a group. You're provided with a wall, status updates, friends (termed "fans"), as well as photo galleries, videos, mass messaging, and events. One advantage to having customers "fan" your page is that their joining is pushed to their friends' news feeds, as will updates to your page's status.
- ▶ **Facebook Connect.** With some work, Facebook Connect will allow your users to link their Facebook profile with their profile on your own website. This tool has the potential to be extremely powerful, because it allows you to send updates to their news feed, which in turn will be pushed to their friends' feeds, on a whim. This is an opt-out feature, meaning that it is on by default and must be intentionally disabled on the user's end. Powerful stuff.

Social news

Social news sites are websites that allow users to submit, vote, and comment on stories, articles, links, videos, or other online media. Some popular social news sites are:

- ▶ Digg
- ▶ Slashdot
- ▶ Fark
- ▶ Reddit

Fundamentally, these sites all work the same way, so let's use Digg as an example to illustrate what happens when a link, or story, is submitted. Users submit the link and a summary of its contents to a specific category on the site, which is then pushed through the system. The story appears in that category for users to find whether via searching for keywords, browsing that category, or otherwise stumbling into it. They are presented with a link to the content, the summary, and a discussion created by other users' comments.

Generally, these visitors will swarm to the link and skim through the content because they find it interesting, but won't click on anything else. They'll probably only stay for a few seconds, and it's doubtful that they'll buy anything or click on any ads. Usability expert Jakob Nielsen goes so

far as to say that these visitors are "notoriously fickle and are probably not in your target audience ... consider any value derived from Digg and its like as pure gravy" (useit.com).

While he does have a point (peruse Digg for a while, you'll find yourself doing it, I promise), don't dismiss those bursts of traffic. If nothing else, social news sites almost always create a very interesting buzz in the form of comments; buzz which can add to your campaign's success.

Making it effective

The only way to successfully create a viral scheme is to plan, plan, plan. Understand your market—your audience, and get the word to those people first. They will be the ones who generate the buzz to those who are less interested.

Also understand that not every single campaign will be an instant hit! Many of the greatest viral campaigns were the result of either professional marketers or blind luck. Don't be discouraged if everything doesn't go according to plan; take it as a learning experience and begin building your next campaign.

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