

The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing

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Web Marketing Today, February 1, 2005. Originally published 2/1/2000

I admit it. The term "viral marketing" is offensive. Call yourself a Viral Marketer and people will take two steps back. I would. "Do they have a vaccine for that yet?" you wonder. A sinister thing, the simple virus is fraught with doom, not quite dead yet not fully alive, it exists in that nether genre somewhere between disaster movies and horror flicks.

But you have to admire the virus. He has a way of living in secrecy until he is so numerous that he wins by sheer weight of numbers. He piggybacks on other hosts and uses their resources to increase his tribe. And in the right environment, he grows exponentially. A virus don't even have to mate -- he just replicates, again and again with geometrically increasing power, doubling with each iteration:

[illegible]

In a few short generations, a virus population can explode.

Viral Marketing Defined

What does a virus have to do with 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.** Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions.

Off the Internet, viral marketing has been referred to as "word-of-mouth," "creating a buzz," "leveraging the media," "network marketing." But on the Internet, for better or worse, it's called "viral marketing." While others smarter than I have attempted to rename it, to somehow domesticate and tame it, I won't try. The term "viral marketing" has stuck.

The Classic Hotmail.com Example

The classic example of viral marketing is Hotmail.com, one of the first free Web-based e-mail services. The strategy is simple:

1. Give away free e-mail addresses and services,
2. Attach a simple tag at the bottom of every free message sent out: "Get your private, free email at <http://www.hotmail.com>" and,
3. Then stand back while people e-mail to their own network of friends and associates,
4. Who see the message,

5. Sign up for their own free e-mail service, and then
6. Propel the message still wider to their own ever-increasing circles of friends and associates.

Like tiny waves spreading ever farther from a single pebble dropped into a pond, a carefully designed viral marketing strategy ripples outward extremely rapidly.

Elements of a Viral Marketing Strategy

Accept this fact. Some viral marketing strategies work better than others, and few work as well as the simple Hotmail.com strategy. But below are the six basic elements you hope to include in your strategy. A viral marketing strategy need not contain ALL these elements, but the more elements it embraces, the more powerful the results are likely to be. An effective viral marketing strategy:

1. Gives away products or services
2. Provides for effortless transfer to others
3. Scales easily from small to very large
4. Exploits common motivations and behaviors
5. Utilizes existing communication networks
6. Takes advantage of others' resources

Let's examine at each of these elements briefly.

1. Gives away valuable products or services

"Free" is the most powerful word in a marketer's vocabulary. Most viral marketing programs give away valuable products or services to attract attention. Free e-mail services, free information, free "cool" buttons, free software programs that perform powerful functions but not as much as you get in the "pro" version. Wilson's Second Law of Web Marketing is "The Law of Giving and Selling" (<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmta/basic-principles.htm>). "Cheap" or "inexpensive" may generate a wave of interest, but "free" will usually do it much faster. Viral marketers practice delayed gratification. They may not profit today, or tomorrow, but if they can generate a groundswell of interest from something free, they know they will profit "soon and for the rest of their lives" (with apologies to "Casablanca"). Patience, my friends. Free attracts eyeballs. Eyeballs then see other desirable things that you are selling, and, presto! you earn money. Eyeballs bring valuable e-mail addresses, advertising revenue, and e-commerce sales opportunities. Give away something, sell something.

2. Provides for effortless transfer to others

Public health nurses offer sage advice at flu season: stay away from people who cough, wash your hands often, and don't touch your eyes, nose, or mouth. Viruses only spread when they're easy to transmit. The medium that carries your marketing message must be easy to transfer and replicate: e-mail, website, graphic, software download. Viral marketing works famously on the Internet because instant communication has become so easy and inexpensive. Digital format make copying simple. From a marketing standpoint,

you must simplify your marketing message so it can be transmitted easily and without degradation. Short is better. The classic is: "Get your private, free email at <http://www.hotmail.com>." The message is compelling, compressed, and copied at the bottom of every free e-mail message.

3. Scales easily from small to very large

To spread like wildfire the transmission method must be rapidly scalable from small to very large. The weakness of the Hotmail model is that a free e-mail service requires its own mailservers to transmit the message. If the strategy is wildly successful, mailservers must be added very quickly or the rapid growth will bog down and die. If the virus multiplies only to kill the host before spreading, nothing is accomplished. So long as you have planned ahead of time how you can add mailservers rapidly you're okay. You must build in scalability to your viral model.

4. Exploits common motivations and behaviors

Clever viral marketing plans take advantage of common human motivations. What proliferated "Netscape Now" buttons in the early days of the Web? The desire to be cool. Greed drives people. So does the hunger to be popular, loved, and understood. The resulting urge to communicate produces millions of websites and billions of e-mail messages. Design a marketing strategy that builds on common motivations and behaviors for its transmission, and you have a winner.

5. Utilizes existing communication networks

Most people are social. Nerdy, basement-dwelling computer science grad students are the exception. Social scientists tell us that each person has a network of 8 to 12 people in their close network of friends, family, and associates. A person's broader network may consist of scores, hundreds, or thousands of people, depending upon her position in society. A waitress, for example, may communicate regularly with hundreds of customers in a given week. Network marketers have long understood the power of these human networks, both the strong, close networks as well as the weaker networked relationships. People on the Internet develop networks of relationships, too. They collect e-mail addresses and favorite website URLs. Affiliate programs exploit such networks, as do permission e-mail lists. Learn to place your message into existing communications between people, and you rapidly multiply its dispersion.

6. Takes advantage of others' resources

The most creative viral marketing plans use others' resources to get the word out. Affiliate programs, for example, place text or graphic links on others' websites. Authors who give away free articles, seek to position their articles on others' webpages. A news release can be picked up by hundreds of periodicals and form the basis of articles seen by hundreds of thousands of readers. Now someone else's newsprint or webpage is relaying your marketing message. Someone else's resources are depleted rather than your own.

Put into practice

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When I first offered this to my readers in February 2000, many took me up on it. Six months later I received a phone call:

"I want to speak to the King of Viral Marketing!"

"Well, I'm not the King," I demurred. "I wrote an article about viral marketing a few months ago, but that's all."

"I've searched all over the Internet about viral marketing," he said, "and your name keeps showing up. You must be the King!"

It worked! Even five years later this webpage is ranked #1 for "viral marketing."

To one degree or another, all successful viral marketing strategies use most of the six principles outlined above. In the next article in this series, ["Viral Marketing Techniques the Typical Business Website Can Deploy Now"](http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/viral-deploy.htm) (<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/viral-deploy.htm>), we'll move from theory to practice. But first learn these six foundational principles of viral marketing. Master them and wealth will flow your direction.

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