

HOW TO GO VIRAL

A CASE STUDY OF 10 SUCCESSFUL VIRAL CAMPAIGNS

INTRODUCTION

Going viral is an artist's dream. One Instagram post or tweet catches fire, and within 72 hours a song is in front of millions of people.

The reality is it's hard to make things go viral, no matter how hard you try. It's difficult to predict how users will react to certain pieces of content, and whether or not they'll share it.

Although it's impossible to guarantee that a song will go viral, there is a lot to be learned from songs that did. In fact, there're a few common threads in every viral music marketing campaign.

Generally speaking, most successful viral campaigns will include one or a few of the following techniques:

- The content is genuinely unique and creative.
- The content is associated with big artists/celebrities.
- The content gives users something to do/share/create.

The first step in viral marketing is to create something worth sharing. Regardless of your budget (or lack thereof), viral content needs to engage people; if it doesn't, it'll end up in the social media graveyard.

Creating viral-worthy content is only the first step. Just like starting a fire, you need to gather enough tinder to let the fire grow on its own. Once the content is created, the next step is to get that content in front of as many faces as you can. This is where viral marketing comes into play.

Generally speaking, there are two types of viral marketing: purposeful and incidental. Purposeful viral marketing happens when there is a tactical and dedicated plan in place to make a piece of content go viral. Incidental viral marketing happens when a piece of content spreads by itself, with no initial plan or effort by the original content creator.

An example of purposeful viral marketing is Daft Punk's first teaser for their 2013 album Random Access Memories. Their initial 15 second plug on Saturday Night Live lit a fire under the song, making the 15 second preview a viral hit overnight. This is a clear example of a purposeful marketing campaign.

On the other side, a prime example of incidental viral marketing is Baauer's "Harlem Shake". Baauer himself didn't create the original Harlem Shake video: an amateur comedy channel on Youtube came up with the skit, and chose his song to attach to it.

INTRODUCTION

So while Baauer didn't consciously create a viral hit, through the efforts of a single Youtuber the trend made viral history.

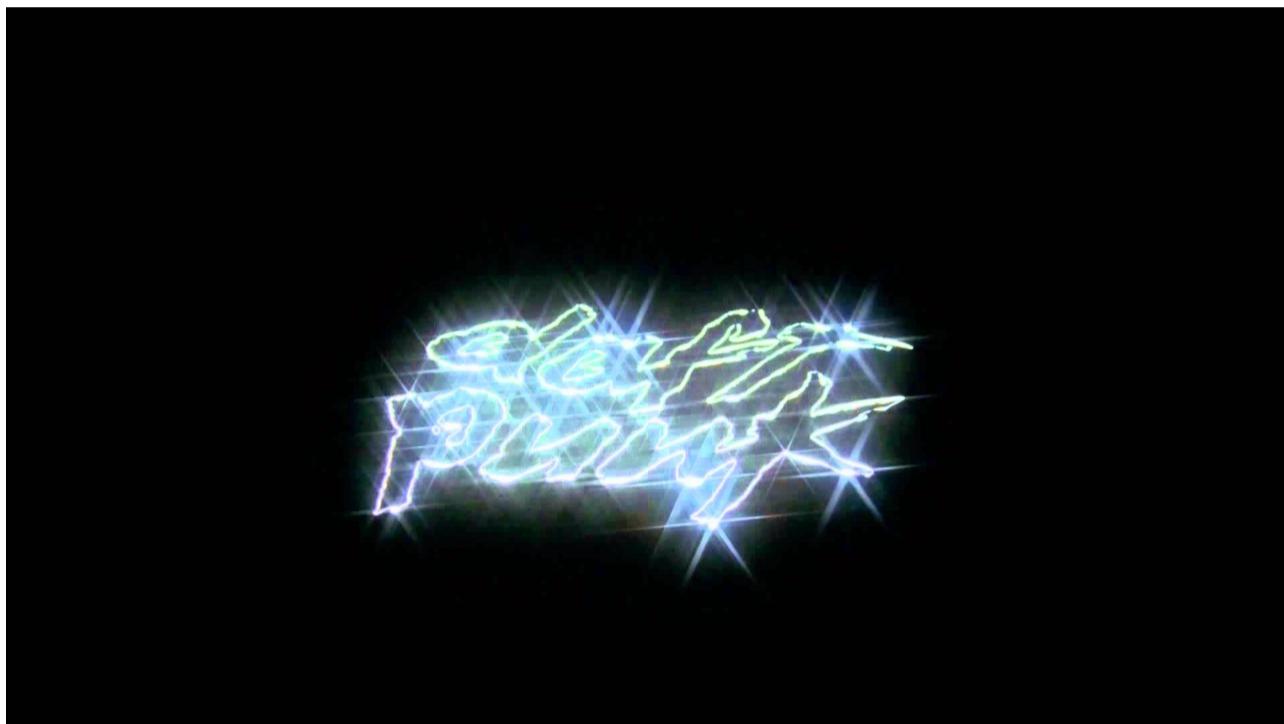
Going back to the previous point, these songs achieved viral success through different avenues, but share a common thread: quality content. Harlem Shake was an underground hit in the DJ community before the first "Harlem Shake Video" was created. Similarly, putting aside the Daft punk brand name and choice (expensive) SNL advertisement, "Get Lucky" is an undeniably catchy song.

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In an era where hits happen overnight, there is plenty we can learn from songs and artists that achieved viral success. Let's take a look at ten examples of viral marketing campaigns, breaking down where they started, how they became viral, and key takeaways from each success story. Hopefully, you'll learn practical strategies to increase the organic growth of your content and gain key insights into industry standard marketing techniques.

DAFT PUNK - GET LUCKY

Daft Punk's "Get Lucky" shaped the music industry in a dramatic fashion. The song was released during the EDM bubble of 2013, when the pop industry desperately needed a rebrand. The first clip of the song aired during a 15 second commercial on NBC's Saturday Night Live. The video showed a basic animation of iconic Daft Punk logo, paired with a snippet of their song "Get Lucky".



Instantly, fans began speculating about the song, its collaborators, and its release date. People made mashup videos of the songs, extended versions (since the original loop is ~7 seconds), and much more.

The keys to success in this case aren't too complicated, but it's nonetheless an important story to highlight. They are:

- An iconic duo with a loyal following teases their first studio album in 8 years.
- A carefully placed prime time commercial spot on a culturally relevant show.
- A song teaser that made the track a hit before the song was released.

While the first two likely won't apply to you, the last one is an incredibly powerful technique (one you'll see throughout this article). Even before the track was on iTunes, it was destined to become a hit. People knew the song and were anxious to get their hands on it. By teasing it out to the listener piece by piece, they built up anticipation for the release.

A modern cultural phenomenon is that people love to be the first to discover something new. Nearly everyone is guilty of it. People love to discover a song before it reaches the mainstream since it complements their taste in music. This is why the

DAFT PUNK - GET LUCKY

teaser technique works so well: it builds anticipation for a release that, in turn, boosts the success of the launch. Rather than trying to get people's attention on launch day, listeners have it saved in their calendars and show up the second the song is released. This increases the initial success of the song, making it more likely to grow on its own.

Even bigger artists need extensive marketing campaigns to gain people's attention: they're fighting in the exact same space as everyone else. Sure, some of them may have large marketing budgets, but their marketing still needs to be effective. Regardless of the quality, it's important to have a dedicated and focused plan in place.

Key Takeaways:

- Leverage your existing fan base.
- Meet people where they are.
- Build anticipation for a release by teasing out snippets prior to launch day.

BAAUER - HARLEM SHAKE

If you're reading this article, that means you've been on the internet before, which means you know about the Harlem Shake. The Harlem Shake video craze was undeniably: it saturated all aspects of culture, and spread like wildfire in a matter of 48 hours. It launched Baauer's career from the underground to the mainstream, and created a viral video trend that lives to this day.



But how did it all happen? What made the Harlem Shake and the Harlem Shake videos so special?

Before we dive into it, let's look at a quick recap of the trend's history. The song "Harlem Shake" was released in June of 2012 on Mad Decent. The song was initially successful, garnering moderate support from the DJ community. The first "Harlem Shake video" was created in February of 2013 by an amateur youtube comedian called Filthy Frank. His initial video got support from the major electronic music blogs, and he immediately followed up with different versions of the Harlem Shake video.

This was the kicker.

A creative, simple concept that was easily replicated.

BAAUER - HARLEM SHAKE



DO THE HARLEM SHAKE (ORIGINAL)

58,569,319 views

243K likes 34K dislikes SHARE ...

This is the exact same reason that “Damn Daniel” or the “Ice Bucket Challenge” took off. People saw these videos and thought, “Hey, that’s so simple I could do it”.

So when people saw the Harlem Shake, they made their own version. A lot of them. Really quickly.

From there, you all know the rest. The song achieved mainstream success, hitting number 1 on the Billboard Top 100, selling over one million units within a month of the first Harlem Shake video being released.

Now, let’s answer the question asked earlier: What made the Harlem Shake and the Harlem Shake video so special?

First off, as mentioned above, the concept of the Harlem Shake video was simple, creative, and easily replicated. This wasn’t the first Youtube video that made a joke out the EDM “drop” (remember back in 2013 people were still arguing about the word “drop”? I don’t miss those days at all). What made this video trend stand out is it showed people they could make one too. Think about it: all you need is a video camera and a \$0.99 song, and you can be like everyone else making these videos.

BAAUER - HARLEM SHAKE

In other words, making a Harlem Shake video is accessible. A viral video trend of people driving Lamborghinis off ramps isn't going to take off cause 99.999% of people can't replicate it. But anyone who watches a Harlem Shake video has the means to replicate it.

What about the song? Was there something special about Baauer's "Harlem Shake"? Not necessarily. The song was moderately popular in the DJ community before the first video came out, but it wasn't a smash hit. In my opinion, the original video creators could have chosen a similar song and been just as successful. In other words: Baauer got lucky.

However, it's not fair to say it was all luck. First off, Baauer made a catchy, quality song in its own right that earned a release on Mad Decent. He put himself out there to even have a chance to be selected in that first Harlem Shake video. To sum it up, it took a lot of hard work and amazing timing for Baauer's "Harlem Shake" to go viral.

Key Takeaways:

- Some people get lucky, but in order to get lucky, you need to first put yourself out there.
- Create something people can easily replicate and share.

RAE SREMMURD - BLACK BEATLES

The Mannequin Challenge was a viral video trend in 2016 where people remained frozen (like mannequins) while the camera moved through the crowd. The official anthem for the trend was Rae Sremmurd's song "Black Beatles". However, unlike the Harlem Shake video, it wasn't there for the start.

The trend started when people (generally high schoolers) began creating these videos with the hashtag #MannequinChallenge. At the beginning, there wasn't an official song to go with the challenge.

So how did Black Beatles become the official Mannequin Challenge anthem? A forward thinking and perfectly timed marketing campaign.

The team behind marketing Rae Sremmurd's "Black Beatles" (Interscope and PizzaSlime) recognized that the Mannequin Challenge was trending but had no song associated with it. They saw an opportunity to pair Black Beatles with the movement, and did everything in their power to do so.

To begin with, they recognized that the target audience of "Black Beatles" fit the demographic of the Mannequin Challenge: high schoolers on the internet. They used their network (and money) to get social influencers and public figures to record their own Mannequin Challenge videos to "Black Beatles". Once they got enough traction, the connection was made, and the official challenge anthem was set.



RAE SREMMURD - BLACK BEATLES

To summarize: Rae Sremmurd's team jumped on an existing trend and got social influencers and public figures to pair "Black Beatles" with the Mannequin challenge.

Key Takeaways:

- Recognize and understand current and previous viral trends.
- Trends evolve as they grow: the style, format, and music of viral videos can change.
- Social influences and public figures have a large effect on viral growth.



OSHI

After the last section, you can see the power social influences have on the virality of a song. This is exactly what happened with London producer Oshi.

In early 2016, Lorde tweeted one of his remixes, saying “hadley showed me this the other night and it's the only thing i feel like listening to @KALIUCHIS @oshimakesmusic ✨ <http://m.soundcloud.com/oshi/kali-uchi>”.



Instantly, the tweet got picked up by blogs like Billboard, Your EDM, and Run The Trap, touting headlines such as “The 17-Year-Old Who Impressed Lorde” (talk about clickbait). The popularity of the song (and Oshi’s career) soared instantly, putting the underground producer into the spotlight.

The song was doing well in its own right before Lorde’s tweet: it had already reached over a million plays on Soundcloud. But after that tweet and the coverage thereafter, the song exploded, currently sitting at a cool 20 million plays.

There are a few factors that made this event possible. First, Oshi was able to get his music into the hands of a powerful social influencer (Lorde), either directly or indirectly. Second, he was able to capitalize on that support with the extended blog coverage that associated him with an established artist.

Blogs regularly do this. They’ll sell you on newer artists based on their association to established acts. They’ll use headlines like “Skrillex collaborator (artist)” or “Deadmau5’s label signee (artist)”. They do it because it works, and if you can, you should too.

OSHI

Keep an eye out for opportunities you can capitalize on. If a large artist, celebrity, or blog supports you, think about how you can sell that association. Further, put yourself in situations where support like this is possible. Social influencers have the ability to launch careers, so look for opportunities to put your music in front of them.

Key Takeaways:

- Try to capitalize on every opportunity: turn everything into a “marketable” moment.
- Put your music in front of social influencers.
- Use headlines that sell.

MARSHMELLO

So far, we've looked at how songs can go viral. Let's take a look at the other side of viral marketing by looking at an artist that has gone viral in the past couple years: Marshmello.



Marshmello is one of few electronic artists that has reached ultra-mainstream success in the recent years (he is currently the #8 highest paid DJ of 2017). His meteoric rise to success is unmatched by other electronic artists, and his brand has become a staple in the industry. Whether or not you're a fan of him, his success in the industry is undeniable. Let's break down the key factors behind his viral success.

One reason is the strength and consistency of his brand. The helmet, the artwork, and the music all fit the same theme. None of them are revolutionary: he's not the first artist to wear a helmet, he's not the first artist to use graffiti/cartoon style artwork, and his music isn't that revolutionary or groundbreaking. Regardless, his brand is unique enough and consistent across the board. The consistency and power of his brand helped fans identify with him right from the start, making his path to the mainstream a lot shorter.

For most artists, their brand evolves. They try new styles, images, and personas until they find a brand that sticks. So how did Marshmello have his brand right from the start? He's been doing this for a while.

MARSHMELLO

Before the Marshmello project, he (Chris Comstock) was a dubstep/DnB artist under the name “Dotcom”. Dotcom has been active and releasing for at least the past 5 years. When he launched the Marshmello project, he had two tools in his arsenal: experience and connections.

Since he had experience in the electronic music industry, Marshmello knew how to navigate it. He knew what sells, what doesn’t, and how to properly start and develop a project. Further, his connections made his rise exceptionally fast. It’s a lot easier to launch a project if you’re already friends with the biggest names of the industry. Keep in mind he wasn’t gifted these connection: he established them through hardwork and perseverance.

For a lot of you, this fact may be a bit of a let down, but it’s important to understand. If you’re someone who “wants to become the next Marshmello”, understand that he started in a very different place then you. This isn’t to say it isn’t possible, but it’s important to understand his rapid success is far from typical. Before the Marshmello project started, he had several successful years in the industry, which came after years of perfecting his craft.

One last thing: whether or not you’re a fan of Marshmello, his brand sells. I’m not going to debate if he “sold out” with this project, but I can confidently say that Marshmello brand sells.

Instead of asking fans to come to you, think about how you can meet them halfway. Don’t get mad at fans for disliking your project: ask yourself how you can make it better for them. This isn’t necessary to build a career, but for a mainstream career like Marshmello, it’s important to know if what you’re selling is something fans are willing to buy.

Key Takeaways:

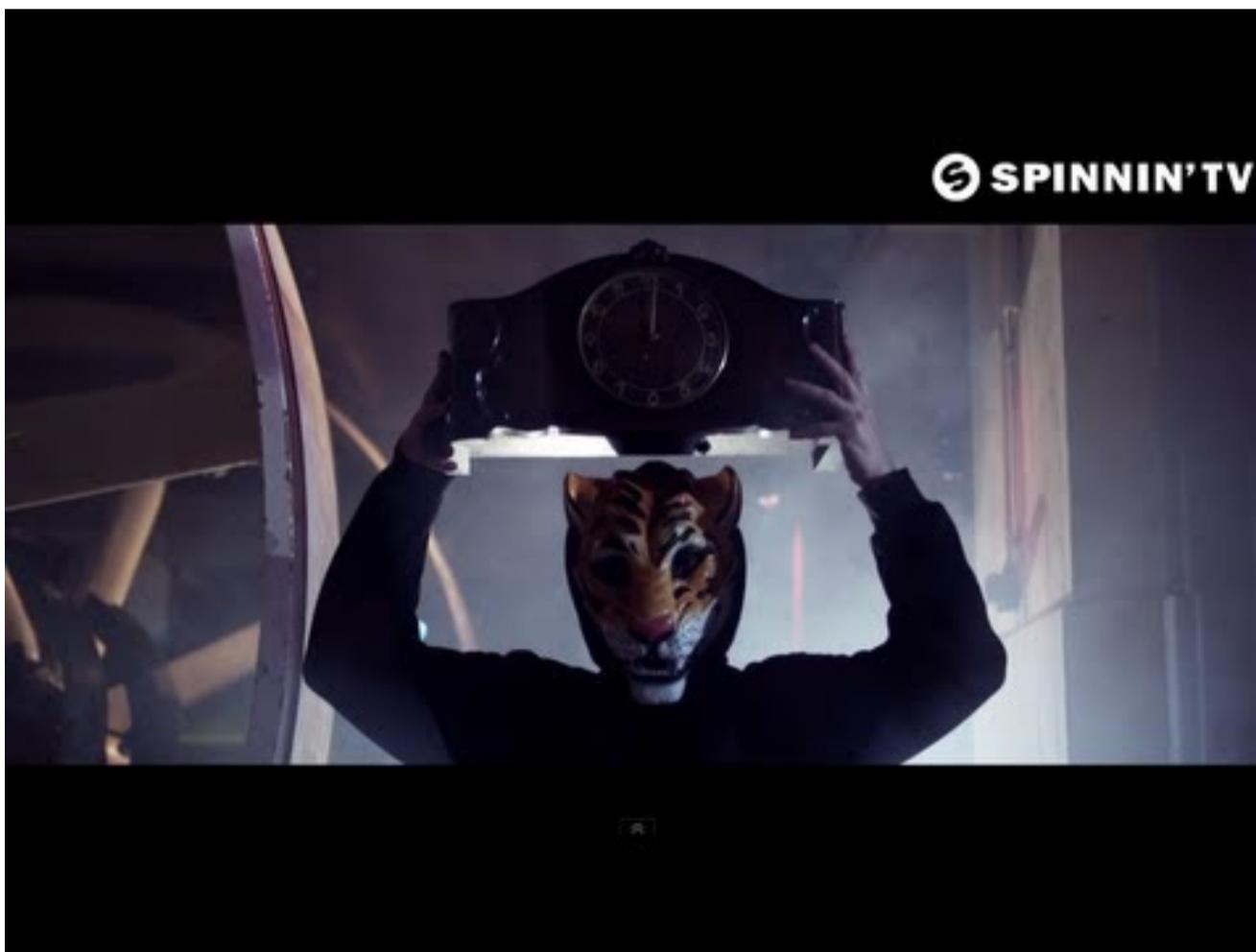
- Connections aren’t necessary, but they absolutely help.
- It helps to sell something people are willing to buy.

MARTIN GARRIX - ANIMALS

The story behind Martin Garrix's "Animals" is similar to the one behind "Get Lucky" - make the song a hit before it's released. Again, this is much easier said than done, but it's important to understand how certain records reached such an elevated status.

There are several factors that contributed to the meteoric rise of Animals, but I'm going to focus primarily on one: creating your own buzz.

Animals was a staple in several prominent DJs' sets well before the release. This led to speculation as to whom the artist was. The leading theory was it was a collaboration between Hardwell and GTA, two powerhouse names in the dance music industry. In part, this theory was manufactured by Spinnin' Records, who welcomed the idea of building hype around the release.



Spinnin' capitalized on this, posting an unattributed "Animals" teaser video, further mystifying the artist behind the hit record. Once blogs picked up on this, they began posting about the "unreleased Hardwell and GTA collaboration". This helped build even more hype behind the record. When the release eventually came out, they revealed it was a 17 year old Dutch producer named Martin Garrix, which shocked and excited the dance community.

MARTIN GARRIX - ANIMALS

Spinnin' and Martin Garrix didn't stop there: they followed Animals up with series of chart topping hits, keeping his newly formed fan base satisfied.

This brings up an important point: capitalize on your viral success.

One big song or collaboration won't make your career. What it will do is make it easier for it to grow. If you're lucky enough to get your five minutes of fame, do you have anything to follow it up with?

The last thing you want is for a song to go viral and have labels come knocking at your door, but you have no new music to show them. Make sure to have a steady backlog of songs so when the opportunity comes, you can prove to the industry you're here to stay.

Key Takeaways:

- Build hype by generating your own buzz.
- One hit isn't enough: make sure you're ready to capitalize if your song goes viral.
- Always keep a back catalogue of unreleased songs.

VERONICA MAGGIO - AYUHUASCA

Alright, so most of us don't have the money to buy a commercial slot on SNL, or the personal emails of all the biggest DJ's. You can still build hype before a release, only you'll need to get creative.

The following story is an excerpt from the Musically Sandbox 2016 survey about the marketing campaign behind Veronica Maggio's song "Ayahuasca":

"Veronica Maggio is a Swedish artist who is famous for her unique lyrics and storytelling technique. For the song 'Ayahuasca', we did something unexpected. We removed the vocals and the lyrics from the track.

On Veronicamaggio.se, we uploaded an instrumental version of the new song. However, the vocal track was muted. The challenge for her fans was to guess the lyrics word by word to add it back in.

Her fans needed to identify 97 words out of the 170,000 words in the Swedish language and place them in the exact order. To make it even harder, her fans were just given one guess each. If they completed the challenge the song would instantaneously be released on Spotify. It wasn't supposed to be easy; we wanted people to really think about which words she is most likely to use, to Google synonyms and to analyse her previous work.



The custom site we built for this allowed the vocal track to be added in dynamically with each guess. As soon as a word was discovered and unlocked, the vocals for that part of the track could be heard. Another important feature was that everyone could see each other's guesses in real time. This meant that you could learn from other people's mistakes and this made the activity a fun collaboration.

VERONICA MAGGIO - AYUHUASCA

Together with news magazines, blogs and her own social media accounts, we released clues and riddles that gave out important building blocks of the lyrics. This expanded the campaign beyond a single site and encouraged people of all music tastes to see if they could solve the puzzle. At the end of the campaign, the final word had 838 guesses before a 15-year-old girl from Gottenburgh solved it – “Sufletten” (“convertible top”) – and unlocked the song on Spotify. This triggered a remarketing activity to the 40,000 people who had been active in the campaign, which instantly took the song to the Spotify top 50 in Sweden.” - Creative Labs

Let's recap the key elements of this marketing campaign:

- They leveraged her existing fan base, providing them with a unique and creative way to interact with her.
- They generated buzz for the website on social media, blogs, and Swedish news stations (which in turn built buzz around the release).
- Once the song was unlocked (released), they remarketing it to the 40,000 people who visited the site (people who knew about the song, therefore were more likely to play it).

Key Takeaways:

- Leverage your existing fan base to increase launch day hype.
- Offer something unique and valuable to your fans.
- Give people something to talk about/share.

ALAN WALKER - FADED

While discussing the marketing behind Rae Sremmurd's "Black Beatles", I mentioned how they understood that fans of the Mannequin Challenge matched the target audience for "Black Beatles". In other words, they understood their demographic, and created content to reach them. The same applies to the promotion behind Alan Walker's "Faded".

Alan Walker was one of the biggest acts to breakthrough in 2016. His single "Faded" currently has over 1.3 billion plays on Youtube, and another 750+ million on Spotify. The promotion behind the release was extensive, but I'd like to highlight one aspect of it: gamers.

A large part of Alan Walker's fan base is gamers, and his brand reflects this. The style of his branding, marketing, and visuals are all consistent with gaming aesthetic. For the "Faded" marketing campaign, they partnered with popular professional gamers to promote the song, music video, and remix contest. Understanding where his followers hang out (i.e. gaming channels on Youtube and Twitch), they created a marketing plan to reach them.



I always preach that you should meet fans where they are, and the "Faded" marketing campaign is a perfect example of this. Rather than expecting fans to come to you, ask yourself, "Where are my fans, and how can I reach them?"

ALAN WALKER - FADED

Going back to Marshmello, he recently did interview segment on Radio Disney's Twitter account. Although I doubt it was a lifelong dream of his to be on Radio Disney, he understood that his fanbase crosses over with that of Radio Disney, making it worthwhile to promote his brand on that channel. Instead of distancing himself from his younger fans, he's meeting them halfway.

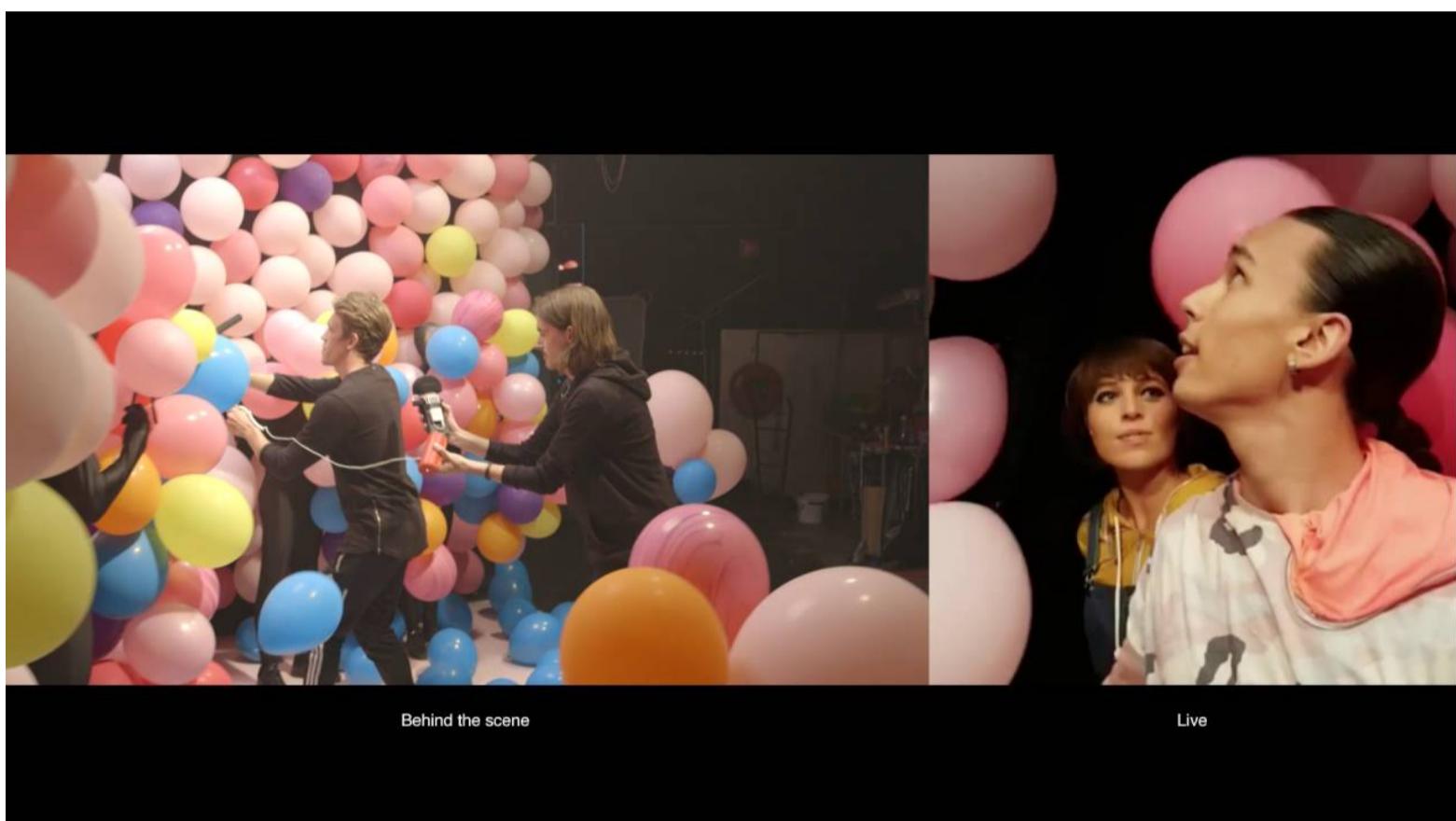
Key Takeaways:

- Meet fans where they are.
- Connect with social influencers that match your demographic (i.e. gamers, comedians, makeup artists, etc...).



KLINGANDE - SOMEWHERE NEW

For Klingande's 2016 single "Somewhere New", his team made history by creating the first ever live-streamed music video. After months of careful planning, they livestreamed the recording of a one-take music video, where the one take is the final product. Fans from across the world tuned in during the livestream to watch the video unfold, bringing the audience face to face with the recording process.



Much of virality stems from one key aspect: creativity. Sure, some viral trends are more creative than others, but in order to create a successful viral trend, it needs to be unique and creative. That was case here, where Klingande and his team were incredibly creative and forward thinking. They took the staple concept of the music video, and asked the question, "How can we be different".

Key Takeaways:

- Constantly ask yourself "How can I be different? How can I make this unique"
- Don't be afraid to try something new.

DRAKE

If anyone is the modern king of viral trends, it may as well have to be Drake. As a trendsetter and world class social influencer, it seems far too simple for Drake to set trends in music, video, and fashion. Let's take a look at some of the viral trends started by the hip hop mogul.

"If You're Reading This It's Too Late"

Drake's 2016 mixtape "If You're Reading This It's Too Late" featured a simple artwork with the title in block handwriting. This made the title/font instantly recognizable and easily manipulated. The album spawned an internet craze, where people transposed the text into different locations, or changed the description of the text (a meme generator using the same album font "coincidentally" launched the same day as the release).

What did this do? It gave users something to create, and something to share. The same underlying concept behind the Harlem Shake, Damn Daniel, and nearly every other viral trend. In Drake's case, all attention to this meme drew back to him & his album, further promoting his brand.

IF YOUR E
READING
THIS ITS
TOO LATE



PARENTAL
ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT

IF YOUR E
READING THIS
CHECK MY
SOUNDCLOUD
FAM



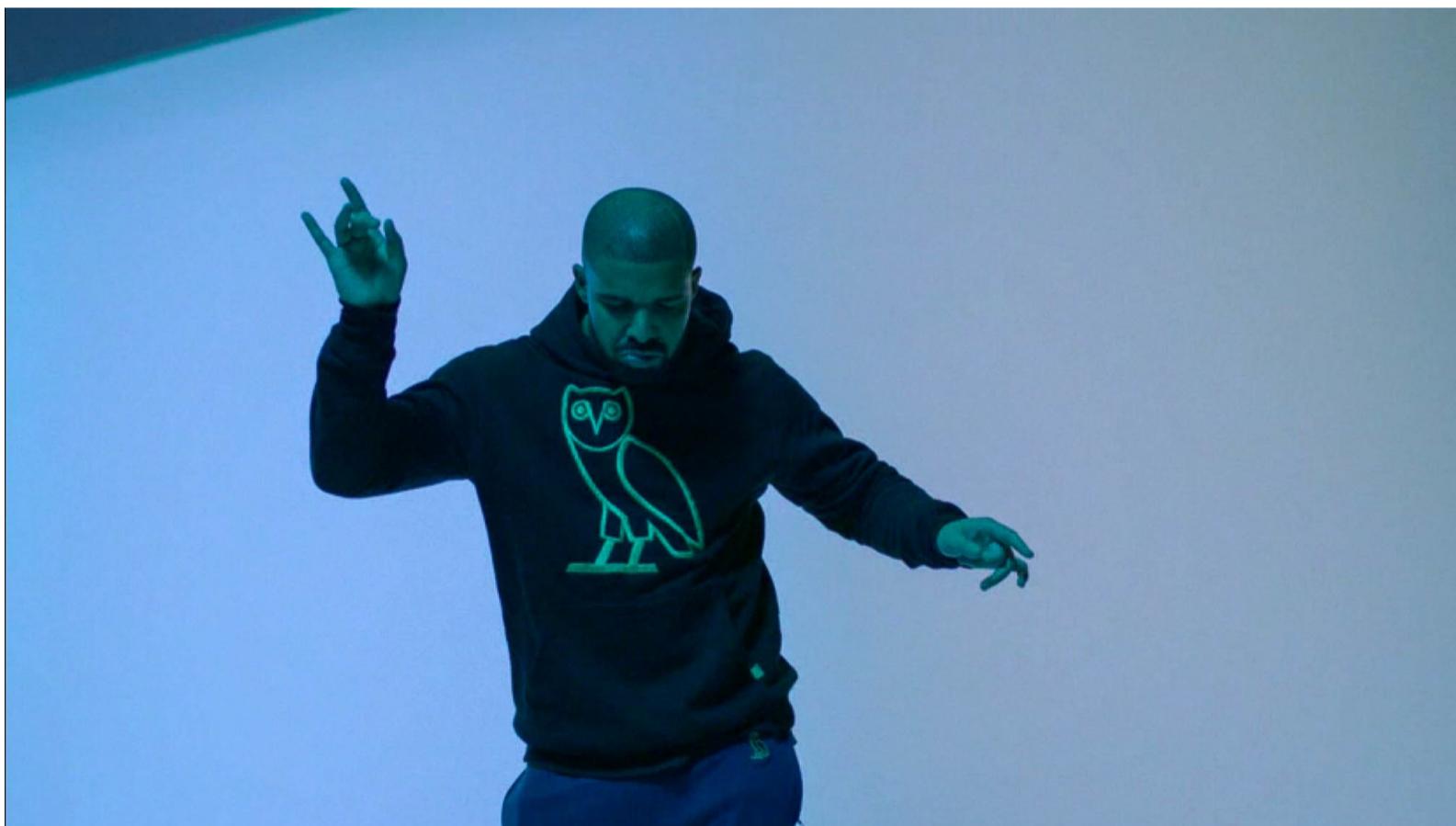
PARENTAL
ADVISORY
EXPLICIT CONTENT

DRAKE

“Hotline Bling”

There's a popular book by Cal Newport called "So Good They Can't Ignore You". For Drake's music video for “Hotline Bling”, he took up a different mantra “Be So Weird They Can't Ignore You”.

For those of you that have watched the video, you know exactly what I'm talking about. The video features Drake's slightly awkward dancing in a series of empty, colorful rooms. Kara Brown from website Jezebel describes Drake as “making corny things cool”. The video was so out-there that people had to talk about it, and, subsequently, make memes about it. Drake himself embraced the “Hotline Bling” parodies, himself appearing in one for T-Mobile during Super Bowl 50.



Key Takeaways:

- Creating something people can't help but share.
- Make it easy for others to create derivatives of your content.
- Most publicity is good publicity: embrace it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Making a viral hit is no easy task, but there're consistent factors behind every viral success story. Virality nearly always starts with quality, unique content. Then, it takes the perfect combination of organic growth and targeted marketing to take that content to the next level. Hopefully, you've come away with valuable insights into the world of viral marketing. The music industry can be difficult to navigate, so it's helpful to understand the key factors of success. Knowing this increases your chances of establishing a lasting career in the music industry.

Key Takeaways - Summary:

- Leverage your existing fan base. (#1)
- Meet people where they are. (#1)
- Build anticipation a the release by teasing out snippets prior to launch day (#1)
- Some people get lucky, but in order to get lucky, you need to first put yourself out there. (#2)
- Create something people can easily replicate and share. (#2)
- Recognize and understand current and previous viral trends. (#3)
- Trends evolve as they grow: the style, format, and music of viral videos can change. (#3)
- Social influences and public figures have a large effect on viral growth. (#3)
- Try to capitalize on every opportunity: turn everything into a “marketable” moment. (#4)
- Put your music in front of social influencers. (#4)
- Use headlines that sell. (#4)
- Connections aren't necessary, but they absolutely help. (#5)
- It helps to sell something people are willing to buy. (#5)
- Build hype by generating your own buzz. (#6)
- One hit isn't enough: make sure you're ready to capitalize if your song goes viral. (#6)
- Always keep a back catalogue of unreleased songs. (#6)
- Leverage your existing fan base to increase launch day hype. (#7)
- Offer something unique and valuable to your fans. (#7)
- Give people something to talk about/share. (#7)
- Meet fans where they are. (#8)
- Connect with social influencers that match your demographic (i.e. gamers, comedians, makeup artists, etc...). (#8)
- Constantly ask yourself “How can I be different? How can I make this unique” (#9)
- Don't be afraid to try something new. (#9)
- Creating something people can't help but share. (#10)
- Make it easy for others to create derivatives of your content. (#10)
- Most publicity is good publicity: embrace it. (#10)