

Is Viral Marketing an effective and reliable method of advertising and branding? A perspective of Gen- Y of India

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Abstract

The world of marketing has been revolutionized in recent times. So many new methods of marketing are being experimented with. Marketing is imperative for any business and the world today focuses on gaining more attention from the customers, where people are rigorously trying to find out effective and cost saving techniques of reaching out to the customers. Viral Marketing is also one such technique which is gaining popularity these days. Viral Marketing if done effectively is a cheap and fast means of marketing. Primarily it works on the principle of “Electronic Word of Mouth”. Viral marketing is still in its nascent stage and has a huge potential if researched extensively. There is a high uncertainty and unpredictability about a marketing campaign going viral. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore if viral marketing can really help in effective advertising and branding, and what are the elements that are essential for making a content go exponentially popular on internet. The study is specifically focussed on the perception of Gen-Y i.e., people born between 1977 to 1994, as this population segment has the most active internet users. With the use of a structured questionnaire conducted with 128 respondents within India, we analysed their responses and perspectives on viral marketing in order to develop a deeper understanding about this topic. This study has generated many new insights in the area of viral marketing, especially about the most important elements that enable an ad campaign to go viral. This study might help the marketers to come up with better campaigns which would have more possibility to become successful in terms of their reach to the consumers.

Keywords: viral marketing; brand; electronic word-of-mouth-communication

1. Introduction

Mass marketing techniques have dominated the marketing strategies implemented by companies worldwide. Media such as radio, television, newspapers, direct mail etc. were the ones carrying out the message to the large audience. The rapid growth of digital media opened new marketing possibilities for businesses. Now the masses can be reached faster and more efficiently. The popularity of the Internet is growing, and with audiences gravitating towards the Web, it has become vital for marketers to seize the opportunity and to compete in

this new digital battlefield. The digital media capabilities can help businesses to spread viral messages to the mass market like viruses. It is a very powerful technique which can be used to increase brand awareness of the organization.

At the same time, mass media advertising has become very expensive with the vast majority of companies finding it difficult to maintain a constant mainstream media presence. Also, consumers are showing increasing resistance to traditional forms of advertising. That is why in recent years, there has been a growing interest towards more cost-effective, alternative methods of marketing. And that is where viral marketing comes into picture. Viral marketing offers new kinds of non-interruptive solutions for companies trying to acquire new customers and to retain old ones. It exploits existing social networks by encouraging customers to share product information with their friends. It works on the principle of electronic word of mouth.

2. Literature Review

Advantages of Viral Marketing: Compared to traditional media, viral marketing is quite inexpensive. The cost is involved only in the creation of the message and after the initial distribution from the creator of the message, it encourages the recipients to spread it further (1).

It has the ability to get to the right audience. Problem with traditional media is that the message goes even to those customers who are absolutely uninterested in the message. But in case of viral marketing it is sent by the people the recipients trust or are familiar with, and probability of accepting the message in the later case is higher (2).

Moreover, consumers find viral marketing campaigns attractive because those campaigns are non-interruptive, so they enable consumers to choose to interact proactively with a communication (and the brand behind it). This type of approach - “bottom-up” approach - respects that the customer is in control; therefore, viral marketing campaigns are ultimately directed by consumers themselves (ibid.).

Disadvantages of Viral Marketing

There are always two sides of a coin and in this case also any negative message about a company gone viral can make a

major dent on a company's image as it spreads like a cancer which is difficult to be tracked, controlled or withdrawn back. This might lead to the loss of brand control (3).

Viral marketing messages can become repetitive. When a message becomes viral, a lot many people share it at the same time. This may lead to a person getting the same message from several other sources and people may get annoyed or irritated by seeing the same message repeatedly (Goldsmith, 2002).

It could reach and be spread by a group of people that the company wishes not to be associated with. Moreover, in some cases, these people may modify the message or add something to it that can harm the brand and the company. Lack of measurements is another problem which marketers are struggling with while implementing viral marketing (3).

3. Research Methodology:

This research is mostly of exploratory nature. Being a new area, not a lot of literature is available in this field. But whatever literature is available was reviewed in order to have a better understanding about viral marketing, its components, how it works and to identify the gap in the existing research. It was found that there is very sketchy understanding of the factors which enable an advertisement to go viral. This study is an attempt to bridge that gap.

The data for our research was collected using an online survey through Google forms. The survey questionnaire can be accessed at <http://goo.gl/forms/Zqt6c66d82>. The sample was taken from varied demographic categories.

4. Sampling Design:

Convenience sampling was used to collect the data through online Google forms. 127 responses were received. All the respondents are members of Gen Y (born between 1977-1994), are from urban areas, and are frequent users of the Internet.

5. Data Analysis and Main Findings:

Following are the findings:

Analysing the responses given for the question, "How likely are you (respondents) to respond to online ads/ videos/ Pictures/ articles/ posts/ blogs?" it was found that 31.5% respondents are likely to ignore if it is random in comparison to 15% if it is done by the people they know. Same way 11% are likely to 'like' it if it is random and 30% will like it if it is through the people they know, 6.3% are likely to 'share' if it is random and 12.6% if it is through later.

	Ignore it always	Ignore it sometimes	Check it out but do	Check it out	Check it out	Check it out and
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	s		nothing	and like it	and share it	comment on it
By the people they know	15%	39.4%	38.6%	30.7%	12.6%	7.1%
Random	31.5%	40.9%	26%	11%	6.3%	3.1%

It was also revealed that Facebook and Youtube are the most frequently visited online platforms by 20.6% of the total respondents visiting them frequently. Followed by Instagram by 18.5% and least visited is Tumbler with only 0.4% respondents visiting it.

	Facebook	Twitter	Instagram	Google+	Youtube	LinkedIn	Tumbler	Pinterest	Wikipedia
Percentage	20.6	3.7	18.5	7.7	20.6	9	0.4	1.9	17.6

Respondents were asked 'What makes you share/ like/ comment on any online ads/ videos/ Pictures/ articles/ posts/ blogs the most?' and according to them the usefulness of the message or the informative content of the message influences most of the respondents which was about 26%, to share/ like/ comment on any online ads/ videos/ Pictures/ articles/ posts/ blogs. Other factors include Social message in the content with 22.75%. Whereas, only 1.2% of the respondents chose any celebrity endorsing or related to a message as the reason to respond to the message.

	Popularity	Informative/ usefulness	Emotional Content	Social message it contains	Fun part	Just because it is recommended by some one you know	Because some celebrity you like is endorsing or related	Because of the liking/ respect for the person / source
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Perc enta ge	7.5	26.4	13.8	22. 9	1 9. 5	3.3	1.2	5.4

Respondents were also asked if they can remember any marketing campaign which went viral and were requested to name three such campaigns. Following are the top 6 marketing campaigns which were on top of their mind.

1. ☐ World cup "Mauka Campaign"
2. ☐ ALS Association "ALS Ice Bucket Challenge"
3. ☐ Coca Cola "Share a Coke campaign"
4. ☐ Airtel "har ek friend zaroori hota hai"
5. ☐ Vodafone "Zoo Zoos"
6. ☐ Cadbury "kuch meetha ho jaye"

ALS Association "ALS Ice Bucket Challenge":

Out of these I did a case study on two of them to understand how their campaign getting viral helped in their brand awareness. Below are the findings from the case studies:

According to Forbes website, As of September 3, 2014 the ALS Association has received more than \$107 million in Ice Bucket Challenge donations on the research in comparison to only USD \$ 2.5 million in 2013. There have been more than 4.2 million tweets about the challenge, peaking at 1,877 tweets per minute. Before this campaign very few people knew about ALS Association but now a lot many people around the world are aware of the organisation and also about ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) disease.

Coca Cola "Share a Coke campaign":

The campaign was launched in the first half of 2014 in markets around the world with the aim of increasing sales and to improve the image of sparkling beverages of the Coca-Cola Company. According to Wall Street Journal, more than 125,000 social media posts referenced the "Share A Coke" campaign between June and July of 2014. 12% of online conversations about Coca-Cola in that time can be attributed to the campaign. And over 353,000 virtual bottles of coke have been shared via Coke's campaign-specific website. Respondents were also questioned, "What according to them made these campaigns go viral?" and few new components that can make the campaign go viral were unveiled. The most

eminent among them were the jingles used, uniqueness, innovativeness and creativity of the campaign.

6. Recommendations

Pursuant to the analysis of this research which reveals that majority of the respondents frequently visit Facebook and Instagram hence; there is more probability of a campaign to go viral through these platforms. Campaign designers and planners should try to inculcate content with humour, fun, uniqueness, emotional appeal, information and usefulness as these allure people to respond to a message the most.

7. Conclusion:

Viral Marketing is a very powerful marketing tool in today's digital world and plays a very important role in creating Brand awareness. One must include viral marketing as the part of their marketing plan. Though it is still very difficult to assure if a campaign will go viral because besides, the content there are many other factors likes the audience, timing of its launch, varying social media trends, platforms where it is launched, etc. which affects a campaign in becoming viral. Hence, designing a viral marketing campaign requires careful planning at the same time spontaneity. Viral marketing is also a double edged sword and can also perturb a brand's image adversely hence, one needs to be extremely careful about it. Viral Marketing still have a lot undiscovered potential in it to be used as a dependable marketing weapon.

8. Limitations:

☐ The research cannot be generalised due to the following rationale:

1. Only Gen Y perspective is studied.
2. Sample size is small. I conducted my study with 127 responses.
3. Geographical constraints as the respondents were from very few places of India (which include Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Gujarat, Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Orissa, Assam, New Delhi, Bengal and Maharashtra). Hence, it might not be applicable to other locations.

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