

# Passing on the viral marketing message

It's not easy, but when researched and executed skilfully, viral e-mail campaigns really can succeed, writes Brett Rolfe.

**BRETT ROLFE**  
VIRAL MARKETING



JUST a couple of years ago the term 'viral marketing' emerged from the hallowed halls of venture capital firm Draper Fisher Jurvetson to become e-zine Iconocast's buzzword of the year. These days, every marketing manager knows they want something 'viral', and heaven help any account director who pitches a major client without

as the 'All Your Base Are Belong To Us' craze—www.aybantu.com.

The medium used to deliver the message plays a large part in the success of a campaign. Is it text, audio, video, or some other, more exciting content?

As a wider range of delivery media become available, the selection of medium becomes more complex.

It requires a thorough understanding of the technical attributes of each medium, as well as an appreciation of the technologies used by your target audience. At the core of the campaign is the message itself. What information does it convey? What is its tone?

The message may be as simple as a slogan you feel will pass for instant vernacular, such as the recent Budweiser "Whassap?" campaign, but the tradition extends back at least as far as Winfield's "Anyhow..."

More often, the message will be a piece of entertainment, some useful information, or the opportunity to participate in some kind of activity.

Having received the message, most campaigns are intent on generating a response from the recipient. This may be a change in recipient behaviour, or perhaps in attitudes and beliefs.

What distinguishes a viral

campaign from other marketing activities is that the people who experience the message must then propagate it to a new generation of audience members.

There must be a motivation for them to do this. Will they receive kudos from their friends (ego)? Are they afraid not to pass it on (fear)? Is there the possibility of material rewards if they do (greed)?

Having decided to pass on the message, to whom will the message travel—who is the next target? How many people will it be passed on to?

In order to propagate rapidly, particularly if the seeding is not large, the average number of people an individual will pass the message on to must be significant.

For a particular idea, each of these seven components can be measured in two ways: strength and fit. The strength of a campaign measures the volume or power of each component of the idea. How many people is it seeded to? How significant are the symptoms?

The fit of each component of a campaign measures the synergy between the idea and the goals of the campaign. Does your target audience use the vector technology? Are they incited by the method of motivation you have chosen?

## Assessing viral campaigns

When presented with a viral idea, grab a copy of the flow diagram and a red pen. Go through each component and think about the strength and fit of the idea for that component, and note down on the diagram particular concerns as well as areas where the idea excels.

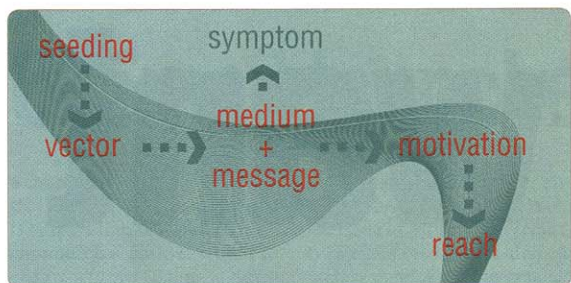
Just because the idea has problems, don't throw it away immediately. Perhaps an alternative motivation would suit the psychographic profile of your target, or maybe there is an alternative way to seed it in order to reach more initial targets.

On the other hand, there will be times when the idea isn't appropriate. There are great ideas that just aren't the right tools for a particular job. So note it down, file it away and wait until the time is right.

A final word of caution—it pays to be prudent. If the campaign is not right for your goals, don't pursue it.

Viral marketing is less controllable than more traditional forms of marketing communication. And the last thing you need is a rogue campaign damaging your brand. The power is in your hands—use it wisely!

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Viral marketing model: Use this flow-chart to evaluate proposals.

uttering the magic words.

But for all the hype, and all the proposals for the next Hotmail or Pokemon, very rarely does anyone ask what makes a really good viral marketing campaign.

Certainly the paradigm—which is essentially word-of-mouth delivered through digital media—is powerful, but it must be well-executed to reap the rewards and avoid the dangers.

## Understanding viral marketing

A viral marketing campaign relies on 'process flow'. Rather than a single event communicating a marketing message, it is the continual propagation of that message.

### Viral marketing model

The first stage of the process is seeding, where the message is sent to an initial group of people. This can be done by making use of an existing customer list, by purchasing a list, or by placing messages in strategic locations such as bulletin boards or chat rooms.

The message is then propagated using a vector—a means of moving from one person to another. In word-of-mouth, the vector is conversation. In most digital viral marketing the vector is e-mail, but it could just as easily be instant messaging or content placed on Web sites, such

## Spreading the gambling bug

### Case study

**THE BRIEF:** To launch an online casino. To demonstrate this process, let's look at a potential viral campaign to launch the casino.

**OBJECTIVES:** To raise awareness of the brand, and to develop a database of e-mail addresses for remarketing.

### The dancing casino chip

**Concept:** The client has this little animated casino chip guy that dances, and they just love him! So, how about we make a digital movie, like an .mpeg file of him and mail that to the casino's staff.

People will get a chuckle out of it, and forward it on. And there will be a link to the Web site in the e-mail, where the

recipient can register to receive a weekly newsletter.

**Seeding:** Limited audience of staff and friends will make this a slow-to-start campaign.

**Vector:** E-mail is good, though by the time you have attached a video it is getting uncomfortably large. Perhaps a Macromedia Flash file could be a nice alternative.

**Medium:** People are generally comfortable with video files, but if you do make it a Flash file (which is often an .exe file) you may have problems with the paranoia about opening viruses.

**Message:** There is definitely room here for a nice message...perhaps the little guy can sing the company tagline?

**Response:** About the only thing this does is let you know that the brand exists. On a good day, it might get you to the site, but there is no real reason to

register and give remarketing permission.

**Motivation:** Why pass it on? For a giggle and to impress your friends? Not the strongest of reasons.

**Target:** Who will you pass it on to? Anyone who might find a dancing casino chip funny. Will they be in the target audience? Who knows?

### Assessment

While the dancing casino chip certainly has merit—it's probably cheap for a start, as it reuses existing content—this analysis reveals the areas where it will not perform. To deliver a campaign that will gather the core following needed to achieve the objectives, it is often necessary to delve a little deeper into the profile of the audience, the core proposition of the product, and the strengths of the technology.