

Viral marketing: making the right connection

Noah Brier, Renegade Marketing Group, discusses the issues involved in creating a successful contagious campaign that will engage its target market: it's a gamble!

THE ADVERTISING INDUSTRY has caught an infectious bug. It's considered highly contagious and should not be ignored. It is being called viral marketing, and ever since Crispin Porter + Bogusky created the now-famous Subservient Chicken, every marketer worth their salt has promised to include a viral component as part of a client's next campaign. However, while the dream of viral marketing is a nice one, the reality of producing a viral element, one that effectively spreads through one-to-one exchanges, is often an unpleasant one.

That is not to say viral is dead, quite the contrary. Still, as with any element of a campaign, viral must be understood for what it is: a gamble. True, most often it's a cheap bet. But it's a bet nonetheless, and as any good gambler knows, the odds favour the house. A successful viral piece depends on a nearly infinite number of variables, the most important of which is distribution. When a marketer creates a print ad or online banner, the means of distribution has been decided; well-received or not, there is little question that the advertisement will reach the target defined by the outlet. Viral is another story altogether.

In fact, just calling it viral is problematic. After all, the goal of all marketing is to be viral. When creating an advertisement, the hope is that the message will infect the consumer and replicate itself inside them, thereby connecting the brand and the individual. The only online elements considered viral are those that find success. That is because, as every good virus knows, it's either spread or be dead.

By concentrating on the long-term goal of virality, marketers often lose sight of the narrower objectives and strategies specifically attached to online viral advertising. The strategy of a successful online viral marketing element concentrates not on incubating a message, but rather on spreading it. In other words, the viral message has to be contagious. In fact, contagious marketing is probably a much

more appropriate term. Every time one of these elements is created, the hope is that one person will feel compelled to pass it to another, or better yet, many others.

It does not matter how original, revolutionary or amusing your message is if no one sees it. And with 'viral' marketing, there is no guarantee anyone will. After all, there is no formal distribution channel, just those people you hope will email, water cooler, instant message and blog your idea. Seldom asked, however, is just who those people are.

Really knowing your audience is an important part of any campaign, but it's even more integral for viral. Bear in mind, you are not just trying to talk to these people; you are trying to convince them to be a proactive co-marketer. If you do not have keen insight into what gets your target consumer excited, then there is no way you will be able to craft a contagious idea they will find worthy of passing along.

There are lots of things to think about when it comes to a viral target, but few are

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more important than what they are doing when you expect them to help you spread your seed.

Are you targeting college-educated 24 to 35-year-old males who make £50k plus? Well then, you had better know that the majority of these people will be at work when they read/see/hear your message. They are doing things like working on spreadsheets and chatting with colleagues. They are not interested in sound (because the guy at the next desk would probably not appreciate it) and they need something with a punch line that will pay off almost immediately.

The most important thing to remember, though, is that at some point they will be bored. They will save that spreadsheet, polish off that PowerPoint and be left to their own devices, if only for a moment or two. Here is the opening, this is prime time for contagious marketing: the time of the day we all face at some point, when we click aimlessly, hoping to find something to amuse that can be quickly closed should the boss appear.

Appropriately enough, Jonah Paretti, director of R&D at Eyebeam, calls people engaging in these non-work activities the bored-at-work network (BWN for short). Its members have the power of millions and can spread links faster than any television network ever could.

They range in age, income, gender and race, but they all have one thing in common: They are looking to be engaged. Of course, that is easier said than done. Often, the most unexpected things are the ones that end up picking up steam and taking on a life of their own. It could be anything: a video of a kid pretending to wield a light sabre or a commercial where Honda parts are used to make a Rube Goldberg-esque sequence. It's almost impossible to gauge how contagious something will be until you put it out there. But when you get it right, it can spread faster than a playground rumour.

Still, there are ways to increase the odds for this kind of contagious market-

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ing. Marketers can use the lessons of others' past successes and failures to help them beat the odds. Of course, the strategies behind these questions are not written in stone, nor should they be, but taking them into consideration as a means of evaluating your contagious element cannot hurt.

► **Did you heed the connectors?**

There are millions of them out there writing blogs, telling marketers exactly what they like and don't like. People listen to them and they love to be at the forefront. Find them, listen to them, engage them and let them help you.

► **Did you ask people you know?**

Most likely lots of people you know are part of the BWN. Ask them what they think. See if they would pass the link around. The more of a connector they are, the more valuable their opinion. The beauty of contagious marketing is that the potential carriers are not hard to find, they are all around us.

► **Is it honest?** If you are pretending to be something you are not and you get caught, that negative publicity can be just as contagious as any viral piece, possibly even more so. Think about what you are

risking by presenting yourself dishonestly to the very people you hope to reach and what the ultimate impact of that action may be.

► **Did you have fun?** It's pretty simple, if you did not have a good time doing it, then it's probably not going to go viral. Why would someone else enjoy something you did not? This question probably works for all marketing, but seems even more relevant when you want to go viral.

In the end, though, the most important rule to remember is that there are no rules. That is the beauty of this kind of marketing. It is attention you are vying for, and if you create something contagious you have done your job, no matter what approach you may have taken. Everyone in the advertising business knows about Subservient Chicken, and just about all of them have tried to model a viral element in the image of the feathered one. In doing so, many lose touch with the fact that anything can be viral.

There is another kind of viral marketing: the kind the consumer spreads unknowingly. In point of fact, the viral concept existed before Subservient

Chicken, and companies thrived using viral marketing tactics that did not necessarily involve a group of people clicking a 'tell a friend' button. Take Hotmail, for example. It built a customer base by including a message at the bottom of every outbound email informing the recipient that the message had been sent from Hotmail.

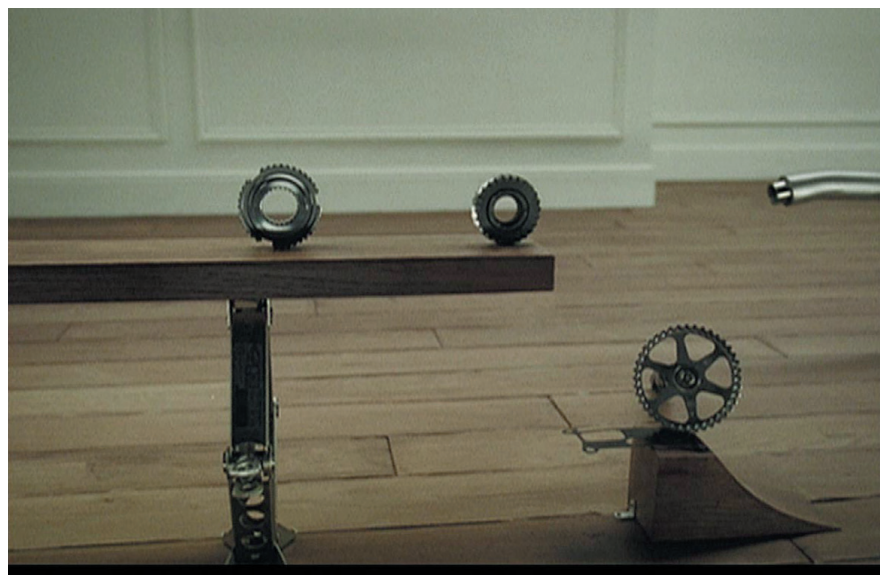
Although at first glance it may not seem so, Hotmail was using viral advertising. While we tend to believe that viral marketing needs to meet certain criteria, really it can be anything that uses ordinary people's online connections as its platform.

There is no reason we should limit viral to videos or interactive games. As shown by Hotmail, something can go viral by using the medium in new and exciting ways. Of course, most marketers are not in a position to create an application which will insert their message directly into their target network and replicate it without their knowledge. However, it shows there are other ways to think about contagious marketing.

Sometimes finding those new and exciting approaches means exiting your comfort zone. The old marketing maxim of 'staying stupid' seems appropriate here. By leaving your mind uncluttered by what works and what does not, it's easier to find new answers to old questions.

It is for this reason we need to remember the purpose (contagiousness), the audience (often those people who are bored at work) and the medium (the internet and, increasingly, mobile devices). In reality, it all boils down to one simple rule that can be applied to almost any marketing project: start with what you know and work your way to a big idea, not vice-versa. Depending on the path you choose, the questions here may be helpful, but there is no guarantee. With viral, there is never just one answer. Pass that on. ■

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Honda: the Cog commercial took on a life of its own