



viral marketing

Viral marketing is the planned, systematic spreading of information from person to person, in a contagious way which benefits powerfully from the multiplier effect. It's therefore based on 'word of mouth' or what Emanuel Rosen refers to as buzz.

Word of mouth marketing is important because it:

- cuts through the daily deluge of advertising messages
- is highly credible
- is self-generating and cumulative
- is cost-effective
- can develop with thrilling speed and reach
- is perfectly suited to the Internet age

There are several key elements to carrying out a successful viral marketing campaign:

1. recognising that it doesn't happen automatically but has to be planned meticulously and systematically
2. identifying and harnessing the reach and credibility of 'network hubs'
3. actively seeding different target groups
4. creating mechanisms which make it easy for messages to be passed accurately from person to person

1. systematic planning

There is a definite art and a growing science to successful viral marketing. Fortunately this has been captured and clearly described in the last few years, in books recommended in the *resources* section at the end. The need for investing in the process is vividly illustrated by Emanuel Rosen's description, in *Anatomy of Buzz*, of what is needed to trigger buzz going:

a heroic push – beyond natural contagion

2. network hubs

Rosen identifies four different types of 'network hubs' – opinion leaders or people who are disproportionately passionate, knowledgeable, credible and/or communicative about a product or idea.

- regular hubs – sources of information and influence in a certain product category
- mega-hubs – press, celebrities, politicians
- expert hubs – *mavens* Rosen's favoured Yiddish term for people who are the best informed in that specific product sector
- social hubs – outstandingly popular and socially active

Rosen gives the network hub example of Moses complaining to God that he could no longer control the children of Israel – God told him to gather “seventy men of the elders of Israel” and use them to spread the word to the rest of the people.

Mega-hubs are important because they are

- visible
- few
- highly influential

Grassroots campaigns are much more of a slog and it can be harder to quantify results, unlike counting 'media hits'. But 'invisible networks' are very important, partly because they engage in two-way dialogue and have high credibility with their peers/community members.

In some instances, the network hubs are obvious – if they're not, they're unlikely to qualify as hubs! But there are also people with a lower profile but an equally high credibility or propagation quotient.

Some ways of identifying network hubs include:

- conference or trade show speakers, exhibitors and high profile attendees
- chatroom hosts/moderators
- people who frequently write letters to target newspapers
- members of sector's trade body
- editor of relevant trade magazine
- headhunters
- via list brokers (direct marketing specialists have remarkably specific contact lists which can be bought or rented)
- directories – Who's Who and trade/community equivalents (Jewish Year book has a Jewish Who's Who!
- and headhunters

3 active seeding

‘Seeding’ is strategically planting the product or idea across different clusters, to accelerate the rate at which word about it spreads. It’s about getting people to see and/or use the product. In commercial marketing, it’s mainly ‘sales promotion’ – sampling, discounts etc. A ‘good seeding campaign’ is partly distinguished by “a different scale” – the book *Cold Mountain* was sent to 4,000 buyers, readers, authors, reviewers and other influentials. ‘The ideal seed customer shouldn’t be shy.’

Seeding works best for products or ideas that people talk about, so you need to ensure that your seeding campaign includes conversation starters, eg because of surprise or human interest factors.

A crucial principle of viral marketing is that *people link with others who are similar to themselves* - golfers talk to golfers, runners to runners, and golfers don’t necessarily talk to runners, so you have to plant seeds separately in the different sectors to avoid messages getting ‘trapped’ within one sector or ‘cluster’.

However, people are of course members of and also linked to more than one network –runners are also mosque attenders and know Labour Party members. But people need active motivation and practical support to transfer messages from the cluster where they received the message, to other clusters with which they’re linked. Similarly, supporting alliances across different types of network hubs can produce powerful effects, eg between celebrities and well connected community leaders.

4. creating mechanisms

There are particular information products and processes which are highly conducive to being passed on, notably Internet sites (remember the dancing hamsters?) and e-mail jokes and petitions. The main features of these are:

1. ease of transmission
2. process replicability
3. pleasing people – the sender needs to feel that the receiver will be happy to receive it, and ideally that they will want to pass it on further

Examples of tools which are designed to make spreading the word easy and rewarding include:

- e-mails:
 - unadorned
 - with an attachment
 - with a hyperlink to a website feature
- postcards
- variations on business cards
- inexpensive and pocket-sized information products, eg pens, chocolates with printed wrappers, key-rings

There’s an issue about whether or not to incentivise the process of message-spreading. It’s usually best for the incentive not to be the main motivation – the product or idea has to be strong enough to be recommendable and the viral concept to be replicable. Part of the credibility of buzz as third party endorsement is that it is untainted by personal gain for the recommender. If you’re unsure, ask your customers what they think, for example check out if they want a reward for telling a friend, or give them a choice eg a discount, gift token, donation to a charity...

5. conclusion

Viral marketing is a powerful dynamic which can potentially increase your reach tenfold or a thousand-fold if the initiative is sufficiently well planned and implemented. Whether you're launching a report, wanting to publicise a new service or speaking to a local group about your organisation, it's always worth planning in a viral element. For each one person you meet, you can potentially reach another ten or more people by equipping the first person with attractive pass-it-on information products. And on a bigger scale, you can design a viral marketing campaign that reaches tens of thousands of people if you can identify and engage network hubs.



viral marketing promotional planner

1. In what way is your product or service genuinely fabulous? (If not, it's possibly not worth even trying viral marketing.)

2. What is your compelling idea?

3. What are the one, two or at most three simple facts you are going to ask people to tell others?

4. What do you want people to tell others? Why might they want to tell other people about it? How can you support this?

5. What might put them off telling other people about it? What can you do to off-set this?

6. Who are the relevant key influencers, or 'network hubs' for each of your target groups:

	regular hubs	mega-hubs	expert hubs	social hubs
Target group 1				
Target group 2				
Target group 3				

7. How can you reach network hubs, eg:

* what do they read

* what media do they watch or listen to, including websites

* have you got their postal and e-mail addresses

* other

8. How can you help network hubs to spread the word accurately and extensively eg what are you giving them in terms of:

* iron-clad evidence of effectiveness or quality

* bite-sized, simple, memorable messages and answers to potentially awkward questions they might be asked

* key facts in pass-on-able formats (postcards, business cards, fun e-mails)

* samples or discounts

* quotes and testimonials from highly credible others

9. How are you using the multiplier factor to increase the spread of your message from everyone you're in contact with, eg

* have you got an e-mail this page to a friend or colleague button on each page of your website?

* do you give people multiple copies of information resources, one for them, 2+ for them to give to others

* other

10. What specific 'pass-it-on' resources are you using, some for person to keep, some for them to pass on to others, eg postcards, customised business cards, post-it notes with message, stickers, postcards, chocolate with printed wrappers...

11. What other plans have you got to make this communications initiative dynamically viral?

resources

books

Anatomy of Buzz Emanuel Rosen

Very clear analysis of viral marketing, describing which sorts of messages are conducive to what sort of processes to maximise their organic spread across communities.

The Secrets of Word-of-Mouth Marketing George Silverman

Worth not being put off by the hyper-naff cover photo and the first part of the book which covers similar ground to *Anatomy of Buzz*. Moves beyond theory and analysis to specific steps that need to be taken for a successful viral marketing campaign.

Don't Take Our Word for it! Godfrey Harris

Definitely theory-lite, but amidst some rather 'quirky' ideas, the dozens of practical examples include some very useful ones.

pass-it-on products

card products

Whitney Woods
01706 210538
www.whitneywoods.co.uk
info@whitneywoods.co.uk

chocolates

Coronation Promotions
01253 798606
www.coronationpromotions.co.uk
sales@coronationpromotions.co.uk

other, slightly bigger things, eg pencils and key-rings

EuroGifts
01202 826442
sales@eurogifts-uk.com