
"How To Use Viral Marketing"

by Tim Bruxvoort

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Viral marketing. It sounds like something you want to avoid like the plague. But it's really something you and your business need to catch now.

If you're not yet familiar with the term "viral marketing" let me give you a basic definition. Viral marketing is simply a strategy that encourages individuals to "willingly" pass on a marketing message to others. It takes advantage of rapid multiplication to explode your marketing message to thousands or millions of people.

A viral marketing virus acts similar to a biological virus. But, the big difference between a viral marketing virus and a cold or flu virus is that people willingly pass the marketing message on. Not too many people really want to share their cold with others, but they'll be more than happy to spread your "digital virus". And when they spread it, they can spread it much farther than a biological virus. Your message can spread around the world in a matter of hours.

To summarize the benefits of viral marketing:

1. It's cheap. You can create your own viral marketing message in the form of an e-book or video and then it costs you little or nothing to get the message out.
2. You can reach a huge audience. There is no other way your message can spread so quickly to a large audience for so little cost than with viral marketing. And the best part is that people are passing your message to their friends and associates so you get an implied endorsement from them.
3. You can build your reputation. If you create good, quality information that's being passed around, you can quickly be recognized as an expert. And when you have the reputation as being an expert in your field, you sell more products. You "build your brand" faster with viral marketing.
4. You can combine it with other marketing methods. This is a method you absolutely should be using with your email marketing and affiliate programs. Email is still the most effective way of spreading your virus. You can also use it with off-line advertising such as direct mail, classified advertising, or display advertising to drive people online.
5. You can sell products other than your original target product. You may create a viral message to sell one product but find out that your potential customer is interested in another of your products instead.
6. Viral marketing tools are easy to develop. There are easy ways to create e-books even if can't write (or think you can't). There are also easy tools to create viral marketing videos. It doesn't take a big budget or a lot of talent to create a viral marketing virus.

These are the major benefits of viral marketing. When you use it you may find others that are unique to your business.

The concept of viral marketing really isn't new. Off the Internet it is essentially any form of "word-of-mouth" advertising. It also works similar to "network marketing." However, just like all things Internet, it can't have a normal name. Before the Internet who would

have imagined naming a company something like Yahoo! or Google? Or how about using words like “spam” other than for an unidentifiable meat product. Regardless of how it sounds, the term viral marketing is the perfect descriptor of this Internet marketing method.

Just exactly how viral marketing on the Internet started could be somewhat of a debate. Where it became the most effective moneymaker is probably not so debatable.

Likely the first effective use of viral marketing was with the free e-mail service Hotmail, which is now owned by Microsoft. Hotmail was started by two guys named Sabeer Bhatia and Jack Smith, who were upset that they couldn't use their employer's email system to send email to their friends.

After they started the e-mail service, word of the e-mail service spread like wildfire and they had over 22 million subscribers within 24 months. Microsoft later bought Hotmail for around \$400 million dollars.

Why did the news of Hotmail spread so fast? Simply because they gave away free e-mail addresses and services and at the bottom of every email sent was a tag that said: "Get your private, free email at <http://www.hotmail.com>".



Everyone who opened an email saw it. And when they passed on the email to their friends or associates they saw it too. So a single email could multiply and spread just like a virus. It turned into a “Viral Marketing Pyramid.”

When your viral message gets passed to someone, they become a “Host” for your virus. Then they become a “sneezer.” When they “sneeze” (send out your message), they spread the virus. For viral marketing sneezing is a good thing. The more people you have spreading your virus the better.

Of course we can't all hope for the same success as experienced by Hotmail. But you can still be wildly successful even if your marketing message spreads to only a tiny fraction of the number of people Hotmail's did. To be successful, however, your viral marketing campaign should contain the following elements.

Elements of a Successful Viral Marketing Campaign

1. Offer something for free

Hotmail was such a huge success because it gave away something for free. No matter how much exposure people have to the word “free,” it still holds tremendous power. Although, you don’t have to use the word free in your campaign if it’s well implied.

Take for example a couple of videos that were done by a company called Jib Jab Media (www.jibjab.com). They created a video called “This Land” which was a satirical look into the 2004 presidential election race between President George Bush and Democratic presidential contender John Kerry. This video spread like wildfire across the Internet and created instant recognition for Jib Jab. It was so popular that Jay Leno of *The Tonight Show* commissioned Jib Jab to do a second one called “Good To Be In DC.”

In a lot of cases, viral marketing is all about delayed gratification. A successful campaign may not bring you immediate profit, but it sets the stage for future profits either through email addresses collected, advertising revenues, or sales of other products.

2. Make it easy for people to spread your message

Do you remember a time when you had a cold or flu and one of your family members caught it? You didn’t have to work too hard to give it to them did you?

It shouldn’t be much harder for people to spread your viral marketing message either. Viral marketing only works if passing along the virus is near effortless. In the case of Hotmail it was the short and concise message at the bottom of an email that said, "Get your private, free email at <http://www.hotmail.com>". People didn’t have to do anything they weren’t already going to do to spread this message. For Jib Jab, people just had to send a website address...a little more effort required, but nothing too strenuous.

You can do simple things like add a “Tell-A-Friend” button on your web site, including a catchy display ad graphic at the bottom of an email, starting an affiliate program to have other people sell your products, or do what Hotmail did with the simple message. The benefit of pointing people to a web site address is that you get more traffic to your web site, which has a very positive impact on search engine performance. With all the traffic you get to your website you get increased link popularity so your web site is more likely to rank higher in the free search engine searches.

To spread your message faster and farther in the easiest way possible, viral marketing combines extremely effectively with affiliate marketing. In case you’re not familiar with affiliate marketing, it’s simply a way to get other people to sell your product and you just give them a cut of the sale. You just provide your viral marketing tools to your affiliates

and let them spread the message from their web sites. The easier you make it for your affiliates, the faster and farther your message will spread.

3. Make sure your servers can handle a “viral overload”

Just in case your viral message is extremely successful, you want to make sure your Internet hosting service can handle the load. Jib Jab received over 10 million hits in one month, which brought their hosting service to its knees. You don't want your virus to spread so fast that it kills the host.

You also need to check on whether or not there would be any charge for a sudden increase in traffic to your web site. If your hosting service is going to send you a big bill, you need to consider that in the costs of your campaign.

Getting Your Sales Message to the Target Audience

One downside of viral marketing is that while you can drive a lot of people to see your message, not everyone is going to be interested in what you're selling. This is why you need to tailor your message specifically to your target market. You really don't want to drive a bunch of extra traffic to on your servers if it isn't going to do any good (see number three above about viral overload).

Your viral marketing message should be carefully crafted from your main sales message. The same people who would take an interest in your viral marketing message should also be interested in your sales message.

Be sure the transition from your viral marketing message to your sales message on your web site is a smooth one. You need to make sure that once a potential customer gets to your sales message that it does its job. Does your sales message convey the core benefits of your product? Is your message substantial enough to have an impact on the reader/listener/viewer?

If your potential customer doesn't get excited about your product, then your viral message may have been wasted. Unless, perhaps, you have another product they do get excited about. If the customer does get excited about your product but your ordering system doesn't work, you've also wasted your effort. This is why you want to make sure your product, sales message, and web site (including ordering systems) are working and effective before you start your viral marketing campaign.

Only when all pieces of your overall product, marketing, sales, and support systems are working well can your viral marketing campaign be a success. If all of these are working in harmony, then your bank account will also be happy.

Track The Results of Your Campaign

Just like with any other marketing campaign, you want to know how well your viral marketing is working. You can take steps to isolate your viral marketing campaign respondents from others. One way to do this would be to set up a different landing page (entry page into your site) for your viral marketing respondents and then use software tools to measure how many people are coming in to that page. You could even set up a completely different web site. You'll also need a different order page so you can track your conversion rate (how many people who come to your landing page actually buy). Then you can compare your original customer orders with your viral marketing orders to see which ones are better performers.

Do it Over and Over

From now on, you should have an element of viral marketing in every email you sent out. Every one of your web sites should have a Tell-A-Friend script. You should continually create free e-books, articles, and reports that you allow people to pass around. Make all your marketing campaigns viral in some aspect. Check out the example below of a way you can quickly and easily create viral marketing videos.

Viral Marketing Example

Let's look at an example of how you can put viral marketing into practice. Say you have a sales letter-type web site that is selling a single product (sales letter web sites are the best way to sell a single product).

The web site at www.viral-video.com is a perfect example of using this technique.

1. First you bring targeted traffic to your new web site through pay-per-clicks or other search engine techniques. Or you can send an email to your distribution list if you have one. You can either advertise your site directly in your email or use a graphic display ad at the end of the email similar to the way Yahoo! does it with their free email.
2. Place a link to a webpage on your site that has a video people can view. The video needs to be something related to your product. Perhaps it's a demo or just something really entertaining that relates to your product.
3. You'll place a link at the end of the video pointing to a Tell-A-Friend page on your web site. You'll create the video so at the end of the video a webpage with a Tell-A-Friend script pops up that easily enables people to send the link to the video they just watched to five or more of their friends. After they send the email to their friends then you'll have the Tell-A-Friend script pop up your home page again.

4. Now when the friends get the email they are taken directly to your video (not your home page). Once they watch the video they can send the web address of the video to their friends. Of course the Tell-A-Friend script sends them to your home page.
5. In case someone doesn't want to send an email to their friends, you'll place a button on your Tell-A-Friend script that says "Click to Close This Page." This button takes them directly to your web site. You could also create a pop-up on exit page that takes them to your web site if they don't click the "Click to Close This Page" button or send an email to a friend. So regardless they would be taken to your home page.
6. You'll also set up an affiliate program so others can sell your product for you. You need to set up an affiliate web page that lets your affiliates download your video to place on their web sites. Of course, at the end of the video it redirects the viewer to your web site. You'll need a way that your affiliate can change the "redirect" web address in the video so it contains their affiliate identification number. Then when the video sends traffic to your home page they get credit for any sales that result. You'll want to make sure they can't change the entire address since you want the traffic sent to your site. A product like ViralVideo at www.viral-video.com will enable you to set this up.

Once you implement viral marketing in your business, you'll wonder how you got along without it. It's a marketing method that most marketers really don't understand or use very well yet. You now have a better understanding than most of your competition so you have an edge. With that edge you can propel your business to greater heights than you ever imagined possible.

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