

# VIRAL MARKETING: A POWERFUL BUT DANGEROUS MARKETING TOOL

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of social media has potentially created opportunities for new forms of marketing communications. As a result, many companies, now-a days-are paying more attention to promote their products and brands by utilising these innovative methods .One of these powerful and innovative tool is viral marketing. It is a style of promotion that depends on an audience to generate the message of a product or service. Viral marketing is also known as Buzz marketing, Stealth marketing and Referral marketing. It is called as viral marketing as it spreads like a virus. It is a strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's influence and exposure. The objective of this paper is to describe the concept of viral marketing, basic elements and principles , opportunities and threats in viral marketing.

**KEY WORDS:** WOM, Viral Marketing, Social networking , Marketing campaigns

## INTRODUCTION

We are living in an age of instant comfort and gratification. As the average attention span of a consumer has fallen from 12 seconds to 8, going viral has become a requirement for brands. The emergence of social media has potentially created opportunities for new forms of marketing communications. As a result, many companies, now-a days-are paying more attention to promote their products and brands by utilising these innovative methods. One of these powerful and innovative tool is viral marketing. In the current competitive business world, every businessman and marketer look for different methods and strategies to promote their business globally. One of the widely available and successful marketing strategy is viral marketing. The concept behind the viral marketing is word- of- mouth i.e use influencers to make peer- to- peer product and service recommendations.

The word 'viral strategy' was used in marketing in 1995 for the first time by a strategy-team led by Lorraine ketch and Fred Satler for the launch of the first play-station for Sony Computer Entertainment. Later on, the term "viral marketing" was developed by Jurentson and Draper in 1997 and they used the term to explain the free mail service that Hotmail provides. The idea behind it was to explain a network-enhanced word- of- mouth. Viral marketing is also known as Buzz marketing, Stealth marketing, Referral marketing, word- of- Keyboard marketing .It is a style of promotion that depends on an audience to generate the message of a product or service . Marketing is considered 'viral' when it reaches the point where it is being shared by the public at large rather than just its target audience. It is a powerful marketing tool with untapped potential. Viral marketing communication can bring benefits to marketers with its advantages like high credibility, accountability, ease of usage, low cost and ability to reach a global audience. Viral marketing is a technique where individual is encouraged to spread marketing message over internet. It is called as viral marketing as it spreads like a virus. It is a strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's influence and exposure. It comprises of diverse platforms and can spread in many ways including blogs, chat rooms ,e-mails, social networks , company websites and viral videos.

Viral marketing methods includes e-cards, e-books distribution, e-mail marketing, refer-a-friend, pass-it -on, video email and many more. A well known example of a successful viral email marketing is Hotmail, a company, now owned by Microsoft. Being the first web -based e-mail provider, it had a leg upon competitors that allowed it to reach millions of people in a very short span of time. Users sending e-mail from Hotmail accounts automatically promoted the service to every receiver to whom they sent the message. This marketing strategy made Hotmail grew by having 12 million subscribers worldwide in just 18 months .Another example is that of

Barack Obama, the first black President of U.S.A, winning the election. The strategy adopted in this election is that he used social media tools like Facebook, Myspace and Youtube which helped him in his campaigning process resulting in more than 5 million people following his social networking sites. Justin Kirby and Paul Madersen in his book titled "Connected Marketing, the Viral buzz and Word-of-Mouth Revolution" explains that people no longer use the internet only for practical purposes like research and shopping but also for improving brand advocacy and for increasing brand awareness.

### **OBJECTIVES OF STUDY**

1. To understand the concept of viral marketing.
2. To reveal elements of viral marketing.
3. To explain different types of viral marketing.
4. To identify the successful companies adopting viral marketing programs.
5. To identify challenges and opportunities in viral marketing.

### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The study is conceptual in nature. Information regarding the study is collected from the secondary sources like newspapers, magazines, journals and different websites.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

The study is limited to certain facts only as the area of viral marketing is very wide. Secondly, the information is based on secondary sources, no primary information is collected.

### **ELEMENTS OF VIRAL MARKETING:**

According to Wilson (2002), an effective marketing strategy includes six characteristics namely:

- It gives away products or services for free: The logic behind this is that "free" attracts eyeballs, which in turn see desirable things which are purchased in most cases.
- It provides for effortless transfer to others: From the marketing point of view, it is important to simplify the message so that it can be transmitted without degradation.
- It scales easily from small to large: The transmission method should be rapidly scalable from small to large so that it can spread like wildfire. Marketers must realise that if the virus multiplies only to kill the host before spreading, nothing can be achieved.
- It uses existing communication networks: Marketers must learn to place messages within the communication networks that exist between people because people in digital environment also develops relationship networks. By exploiting these networks, marketers can easily spread messages in a cheaper way.
- It exploits common motivation and behaviour: Greed can drive people; so can the need to be popular, loved and understood. The resulting urge to communicate develops millions and billions of Websites and other electronic messages.
- Takes advantage of other resources: Marketers take advantages of other resources to get the word out.

## TYPES OF VIRAL MARKETING

- **Blog Marketing:** It is a content market strategy that uses blogs to address potential customers directly and individually and thus helps in achieving customer loyalty for their own brand. It is an inexpensive way for small businesses to drive traffic to their site, improve inbound marketing efforts and attract more customers.
- **Chat Rooms:** A chat room is a website, part of a website or part of an online service such as American online, that provides a platform for common users to communicate in real time. Some examples of chat rooms are Internet Relay Chat(IRC) and websites such as Talk City(www.talkcity.com)
- **Forum Marketing:** Forum marketing is one of the most effective strategy for promotion of products and services. Forum marketing is done by taking part in niche-related topics and sharing an informative post about your products and services.
- **Pass Along:** It refers to a piece of marketing material, such as an e-mail newsletter, that goes beyond the original receipt. Marketing videos that contain humour have a high pass-along rate as people forward the link to their friends and relatives.
- **E-Mail:** E-Mail Marketing is a form of direct marketing which uses E-Mail as a means of communicating messages to an audience. It helps in building relationships with new customers and retaining old customers. It is a cost effective way to reach your audience.
- **Flash Games:** These are the most popular online gaming experiences. Generally, these are free games which normally requires players to be online. Some examples of flash games are: Strike Force Heroes, Radioactive Teddy Bear Zombies, Age of War, Adobo's Big Adventure, Super House of Dead Ninjas etc.

## EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL COMPANIES ADOPTING VIRAL MARKETING:

- **NETFLIX:** Netflix is the world's most popular on-demand media streaming platform. They released a few short videos featuring Abish Mathew, a stand up comedian. Throughout the campaign they highlighted the advantages of Netflix over traditional TV watching. The hashtag# "Life without Netflix" generated a lot of buzz on Twitter and Facebook.
- **AMAZON:** Alexa is amazon's most iconic creation which is an artificial intelligence assistant, helping everyone in their daily life. The commercial has nearly 30 million views on Youtube. As of November 2018, Amazon had more than 10,000 working on Alexa and related products. Amazon's devices team announced that they had sold over 100 million Alexa-enabled devices in January 2019.
- **ARIEL:** Ariel is a well known laundry detergent company in India. They tapped the topic of gender inequality in their campaign by highlighting the fact that both men and women can do laundry. This is a great example of how one can create a buzz using creative marketing tactics.
- **ADIDAS:** Adidas asked participants of Boston Marathon event to share their photos and videos. This resulted in user-generated content which captures a unique and immersive look into the event. It garnered over 1,00,000 views in the initial two days after its release.
- **Procter & Gamble:** The campaign by Procter & Gamble on "My black is beautiful" in 2006 where parents attempt to explain about racial bias to their children made it viral. The commercial was created to celebrate to celebrate and uplift black culture and to challenge the biases associated with black culture.
- **UNIQLO:** It is an innovative Japanese apparel company that urges the world to dress casual. They wanted to build on a statement made by UNIQLO CEO who believes that UNIQLO is not a fashion company, it is a technology company. The company created a world-first fast moving image campaign and activated it online and in 10 locations. Then the shoppers were asked to upload the five digit code to the company website to redeem a sample from the clothing range. It was shared on Youtube and Facebook resulting in 35,000 new customers.

## OPPORTUNITIES IN VIRAL MARKETING

- **Low costs:** The ultimate goal of viral marketing is to spread the marketing message like a viral outbreak which makes it relatively a cheap way to reach a large audience. Viral marketing costs are a fraction of traditional advertising campaigns and advertising is essentially free when consumers share their positive thoughts and experiences about a company's products and services with others.
- **Potential of great reach:** A viral video on the internet has the ability to reach global audience without extra efforts or without investing huge amount of money. Due to this, even a small company or even a private individual can go viral. Internet and small media platforms have helped it in reaching global audience in an effective manner.
- **Increased credibility:** Viral marketing is basically based upon personal recommendations that helps a company in increasing its credibility among the audience. The simple fact is that usually with recognition, comes trust and acceptance. When the brand goes viral and draws the attention of a new audience, more people are willing to give it a chance. For example: The case of Dollar Shave Club-how many people were suddenly inclined to give new razors a try after its viral video.
- **Build up Brand Image:** Viral marketing allows companies to market their products and services by reaching customers that could not be targeted by its traditional marketing campaigns. It helps the companies to enter new markets and potentially expand its customer base.
- **Non-Invasive:** In a viral marketing campaign, consumers will receive viral content directly from their friends, relatives and family through social networks. It gives them control over when and how they view the content and to decide whether they will participate in the campaign or not.

## CHALLENGES IN VIRAL MARKETING

- **More focus on short term success:** Viral marketing focuses more on short term success rather than building differentiation to achieve long term advantages.
- **Hard to measure:** The effects of viral marketing are hard to measure as there is no consensus among businesses on how to measure its success. It is also difficult to determine whether any sales increase resulted from it or not.
- **Spam threats:** Viral marketing campaigns can also lead to significant spam issues if made badly.
- **Little control:** Marketers have little control over who receives the viral message.

## CONCLUSION

Viral marketing is one of the promotional mix strategy that a firm can use to increase brand awareness and a cost effective way to increase the popularity of products. Wilson's six viral marketing principles provide guidance on how to create a successful marketing campaign. In this competitive business world, Indian marketers can and should apply viral marketing strategies in the coming years in order to emerge as a business leader.

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