



# Two hearts in three-quarter time: How to waltz the social media/viral marketing dance

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## KEYWORDS

Web 2.0;  
User-generated content;  
Social media;  
Viral marketing;  
Word-of-mouth

**Abstract** The concept of viral marketing has been discussed in the literature for over 15 years, since Jeffrey Rayport first introduced the term in 1996. However, the more widespread use of social media has recently pushed this idea to a whole new level. We provide insight into the relationship between social media and viral marketing, and illustrate the six steps executives should take in order to dance the social media/viral marketing waltz. We define viral marketing as electronic word-of-mouth whereby some form of marketing message related to a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way—often through the use of social media applications. We consider the three conditions that need to be fulfilled to create a viral marketing epidemic (i.e., giving the right message to the right messengers in the right environment) and present four different groups of social media viral marketing campaigns (nightmares, strokes-of-luck, homemade issues, and triumphs). We conclude with five points of caution that managers should heed when trying to launch their own viral marketing campaign.

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## 1. One. . . way: Viral marketing goes social media

The bubonic plague, also referred to as the Black Death, is widely considered to be the deadliest pandemic in human history. Between 1348 and 1350 it killed more than 35 million people across Europe, corresponding to approximately 50,000 lives lost per day. Yet, as compared to more recent epidemics, these figures seem modest; according to

the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), approximately 60 million Americans contracted the H1N1 virus between April 2009 and April 2010—more than 150,000 per day! Although only 265,000 were actually hospitalized and 12,000 perished, many of us won't soon forget the panic surrounding this 'swine flu.' Now, consider an epidemic of another sort. On July 14, 2010, Procter & Gamble uploaded a 30-second video spot via the social media application YouTube, to promote its Old Spice brand. This video, entitled *The Man Your Man Could Smell Like*, was viewed 23 million times in 36 hours—representing 15 million 'infections' per day. If H1N1 had spread with the same rapidity, 60 million infections would have been reached after

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less than a week, and the 35 million casualties of the Black Death would have taken no more time than a long weekend.

Admittedly, watching an online video is certainly not comparable to getting infected by a potentially deadly disease. Nevertheless, these numbers illustrate the incredible speed with which so-called ‘viral marketing campaigns’ can spread at a time when social media start to rule the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Viral marketing allows firms to promote their products and services with very low budgets and still reach the same levels of awareness that are usually only achievable with high-frequency TV advertising. Viral marketing enabled *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* to become blockbusters, although the individual budget of each movie was less than the average salary of one starring Hollywood actor. Brands such as Evian (Roller-Skating Babies), Burger King (Subservient Chicken), and Old Spice have all benefited from viral marketing epidemics, while JetBlue, Heinz Ketchup, and others have suffered severely at the same hands.

What is this new form of advertising that allows average people like Stephen Voltz and Fritz Globe to become celebrities and spokespeople of firms, while at the same time being such a headache to multinationals like Microsoft and Sony? We intend to answer these questions and to illustrate the six steps of waltzing the social media/viral marketing dance:

- One. . .way: Viral marketing goes social media
- Two. . .concepts: Word-of-mouth and viral marketing

- Three. . .conditions: How to create an epidemic
- Four. . .groups: Social media viral marketing campaigns
- Five. . .pieces of advice: Spreading the virus
- Six. . .degrees of separation: From epidemics to immunity

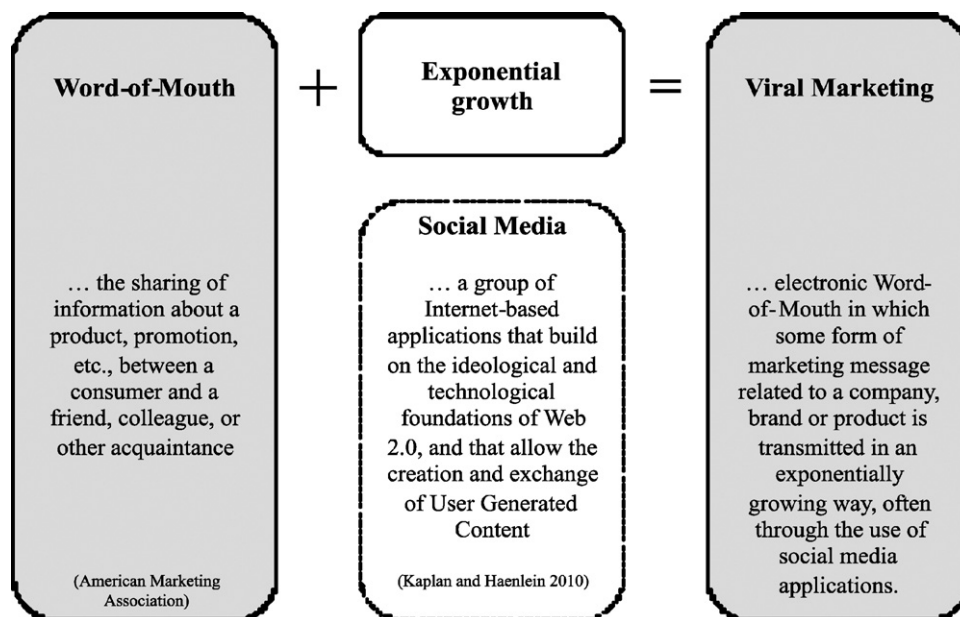
## 2. Two. . .concepts: Word-of-mouth and viral marketing

Before we discuss how successful viral marketing epidemics can be created, which different types of viral marketing campaigns exist, and what firms should consider when trying to launch a viral message, it is first necessary to clearly define what viral marketing stands for and how it links to related concepts, such as word-of-mouth and social media (see Figure 1).

### 2.1. Word-of-mouth

*Word-of-mouth* (WoM) is a topic that has been of interest to marketing researchers for more than five decades. It can loosely be defined as the sharing of information about a product, promotion, et cetera, between a consumer and a friend, colleague, or other acquaintance (MarketingPower, 2010). WoM has been shown to substantially influence consumer attitudes and behaviors, and to be up to seven times more effective than traditional print advertising in impacting brand switching decisions

Figure 1. Relationship between word-of-mouth and viral marketing



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