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Controlled infection! Spreading the brand message through viral marketing☆

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Abstract Viral marketing uses electronic communications to trigger brand messages throughout a widespread network of buyers. The process is often portrayed as a random ground-up phenomenon over which marketers have little control. But an examination of successful viral marketing cases identifies a number of strategies underpinning this chaotic phenomenon, providing insight into how marketers can use it to position their brands, change their image, and increase adoption rates. Successful viral marketing campaigns are comprised of an engaging message that involves imagination, fun and intrigue, encourages ease of use and visibility, targets credible sources, and leverages combinations of technology.

1. Introduction

More than ever, time is of the essence for marketers. Consider the situation facing the movie industry: three years ago, movie moguls complained of the dramatic decline in receipts following the opening weekend of blockbuster films. In an effort to combat this phenomenon, film marketers would often boost marketing expenditures in the week leading up to release in an effort to ensure that as many people as possible saw the movie during opening weekend before negative word-of-mouth could spread. For instance, after realizing the true dreadfulness of its film *Godzilla*, Sony Pictures raised its advertising budget to $50 million, opened the film on a record 7363 screens, and almost broke even.

Now the widespread use of SMS technology has even narrowed this small window of time. SMS is a short message no longer than 160 characters of text sent by one user to another, most commonly via a mobile phone. Coupled with a phenomenon known as "viral marketing," the technology creates a positive or negative buzz around a brand, product, or service. "The instant buzz can be cruel," notes Huck (2003), page 2. "Traditionally, Hollywood counts on a buffer—a few days—to entice audiences before the word, good or bad, leaks out. Nowadays a turkey like...*Gigli* is stricken from day one."

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Why has this time period contracted? Consumers are reported to be text messaging their friends halfway through a movie to tell them whether or not it is any good. The word is then transmitted quickly around a wide network of peers and extended on to a wider audience via online chat groups. The result is that movies often have dramatic drop-offs between the opening session and the rest of the weekend despite saturation-level marketing (the average film costs $63 million to make and market). *The Hulk* took in $62 million in its opening weekend, plummeting 69.7% by the end of the week. *2 Fast 2 Furious* earned $50.4 million at opening before dropping 63%. *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* took in $37 million, then spiralled downward 62.8%. This fundamentally changes the game for marketers, reducing the potential payback window to a few hours and dramatically raising the risk associated with marketing expenditure to ensure widespread product trial or adoption.

Marketers have given this phenomenon several names; besides "viral marketing" and "buzz," there is also "reaching the tipping point" and "convergence marketing," all of which refer to a very specific type of word-of-mouth communication about a brand or product that leads to explosive self-generating demand—or ruin. As Rosen (2001), page 7, puts it, "It's the aggregate of all person-to-person communication about a particular product, service, or company at any point in time." However, until now, authors have either identified this phenomenon as the stuff of marketing legend or confused it with other marketing tools. They think of it as standard public relations or sponsorship activities, such as product placement in films or the paid adoption of a product by high-profile stars. They have linked it to standard adoption and diffusion models, such as the adoption of *Absolut* vodka as a gay icon providing the credibility to diffuse the product into the wider community.

Rather than considering viral marketing as little more than a random ground-up phenomenon that is largely out of their control, marketers are actively using it to encourage product adoption and word-of-mouth referral. Such an approach dramatically lowers the cost of promotion and boosts the speed of adoption, a critical concern for new product launches. The low-budget New Zealand film *Whale Rider* used this technique to its advantage, opening at a few select cinemas and going to a wider audience via positive word-of-mouth. Hence, we examine this phenomenon of viral marketing and identify some key components marketers can use to attract consumer interest. In contrast to other writers in this area, we are interested in products or services that want to capture the mass market rather than creating buzz around a limited edition product.

Viral marketing can be defined as making email into a form of advocacy or word-of-mouth referral endorsement from one client to other prospective clients. From a practical perspective, it is a strategy whereby people forward the message to other people on their email lists or tie advertisements into or at the end of messages. From a marketing perspective, it is the process of encouraging individuals to pass along favourable or compelling marketing information they receive in a hypermedia environment: information that is favourable or compelling either by design or by accident.

This type of marketing phenomenon is a form of emergent behaviour, which Johnson (2001), page 18, defines as "the movement from lower level rules to higher level sophistication." Thus, brand communication, meaning, and adoption occur from the ground up, primarily in the hands of consumers rather than marketers. Like much emergent behaviour in nature, small low-level events, such as the interactions between a few consumers, can give rise to higher-level intensity, such as the development of brand communities like Harley Davidson and shared brand meaning à la Star Trek. It can also affect the ability to position a product and may ultimately decide the fate of a brand, product, or company.

Why do firms need a viral marketing strategy? How can they understand the power of emergent events? The case of Honda UK and other successful case studies can serve to illustrate some key themes of executing a viral marketing campaign and developing these strategies.

2. Why firms need to manage this phenomenon

Viral marketing offers three main advantages to a firm. First, it incurs very little expense since the individual passing on the referral carries the cost of forwarding the brand message. Second, the act of forwarding electronic messages containing advertising is voluntary rather than a paid testimonial or a mass ad campaign and thus may be viewed more favourably by the recipient. Third, those forwarding the messages will be more likely to know which of their friends, family members, and work colleagues have similar interests and thus more likely to read the message, hence, more effective targeting. Here, the term "interests" refers not only to the narrow sense of just the product or