

# Viral PR?

James L. Horton

Too much has been written about viral marketing. So why write about it again? Because little has been published about the use of viral marketing in public relations.

Viral marketing was the rage for a while and many tried it, most with middling or no success. For those not familiar with the buzz phrase, viral marketing is the same as word-of-mouth marketing, except that it uses the Internet's networking power to spread a message among millions of individuals at low or no cost to an organization. Most see viral marketing as "free advertising." That is partially true. The essence of "word-of-mouth" marketing is credibility that links directly to what public relations is about. There are many viral marketing techniques but they all depend on voluntary action. An individual must find something of enough interest and/or importance to send it voluntarily to others and those persons must also find that thing of enough interest and importance to forward it themselves. Such action is usually done without incentives.

Anyone who gets e-mail knows about viral marketing. Think about jokes that make the rounds. They are forwarded constantly from person to person until they sometimes return from some circuitous route in the networking ether. There are informal joke networks (I am on one) in which anything one finds funny is sent on to friends who send

them to acquaintances who send them to their friends. At some point, transmission stops. An individual may not find the joke funny, may have seen the joke before, or may not, as a matter of practice, forward materials. In any event, the viral message peters out, but if it is successful, it reaches tens of thousands before it dies.

The nature of viral marketing includes randomness. One cannot know exactly where a viral message is going or who is going to see it. It might reach millions in a targeted audience or all the wrong people in an audience never considered. But when viral message-sending works, it is powerful because the message carries the credibility of the person who forwards it. Each sender says in effect, "I find this interesting, and I think you will find it interesting as well." One cannot buy testimonials like that.

So, how might one use viral marketing in PR? It isn't as easy, but in some instances, message distribution using viral methods appears to be practical and desirable.

## Viral Described

Those who practice and/or preach viral marketing have a range of ideas and techniques they use to generate "word-of-mouth." Why they do it is simple. Viral marketing is low-cost and powerful. It reaches entire social networks on the

web and the network allows for exponential growth of the message. These advantages are incentives to try viral marketing even though just as many things that persuade people to forward a message can dissuade them from doing so.

But there is no doubt about what can happen when viral marketing works – even if it is unintended. Phillip Harter knows. He was an assistant professor of surgery at Stanford University School of Medicine when he received some statistics one day that purported to calculate the world's entire population in terms of a village of 100 people. Harter thought it interesting and sent it on to his colleagues, friends and family members without noting that his forward included his automatic signature block identifying him as a professor at Stanford. What Harter didn't realize was that the message with his signature gained credibility with recipients who forwarded it to their colleagues, friends and family members. About six months after he had forwarded the statistics he started to get inquiries and comments from all over the world about them. Harter told everyone who inquired that the statistics didn't come from him and he wasn't sure of their accuracy, but it didn't matter. The queries kept coming. Understandably, Harter was unhappy.

On the other hand, thousands of efforts to use viral marketing sink with little trace of the effort that went into them. If you wish to see a range of such efforts, visit <http://viral.lycos.co.uk/>, a site that tracks viral programs, messages and games in the U.K. You will find everything from the wacky to the wild. You can also consult a blog that tracks the

field (<http://www.viralplanet.com/>). Success is random enough that one commentator called winning campaigns “happy accidents.” Others dispute this.

As you might expect for a Web marketing technique, there are many buzz phrases to describe what viral marketing does but the simplest way to define it is what one commentator dubbed “word-of-mouth with reach.” As for the buzz phrases, you can find them in an online glossary or dictionary such as <http://searchcrm.techtarget.com>. They are hardly worth remembering except to have some recognition when a marketer trots one of them out to impress you.

Types of viral marketing are distinct and depend both on the people who forward viral messages and technologies employed. There are:

- Efforts to increase brand awareness without selling anything.
- Efforts to sell products and services that usually include discounts, giveaways or other incentives
- Simple messages that share positive or negative experiences or interesting thoughts, jokes, funny videos and other observations.
- Messages with programs such as games that entice the user to get involved.
- Enticements for individuals to get involved in recruiting others in return for incentives.
- Recruitment of others as new customers to share products such as the AOL Instant Messenger or ICQ messaging service.

Viral marketing is further typed by passive or active marketing. With passive marketing, the audience spreads the word merely by using the product or service. This was the classic way that Hotmail spread the news of its free e-mail service. It incorporated a message to get your free e-mail account along with every message that one sent through Hotmail. Active marketing requires involvement by a party to spread the message. When a friend asks you to download AOL's Instant Messenger so you can write each other throughout the workday, it requires extra steps and effort on your part.

### How does it work?

Viral marketing typically plays on common motivations and behaviors, as long as a message is credible, and credibility has a definition that pertains to the message itself. A home video of one dog peeing on another might be hilarious and credible to some and gross to others. A news announcer stumbling over his delivery and making an embarrassing gaffe might be passed around the world along with guffaws because it was a real mistake. On the other hand, an individual who attacks his computer with his keyboard that is visibly not connected to the computer might be dispatched as a fake.

When marketing products and services, the first hurdle is to make sure that what one says is believable. Here is where large and well-known companies have an advantage over others. Mail recipients recognize their names and don't have to be wary that the message is a coming from a spammer. On the other hand, if a company is not as well-known,

it must find a way to include enough information to make its message credible.

The second task is to make the proposition or message compelling such that individuals will take advantage of it and send it to others who in turn will pass it on. This is often done by:

- Offering something for free that is of value to recipients, such as prized concert tickets or desirable software that build brand awareness or move the recipient a step closer to a sale. Value is tricky because it must apply to more than one person or to a subset of persons. Offering free tickets to the Metropolitan Opera to teenagers who listen to Rap and Heavy Metal has no value just as offering free tickets to a band that a teenager detests has no worth. Message power increases based on the number of people who find it valuable.
- Providing a sharp discount for something of value to the recipient. E.g., for a short time only – 50 percent off.
- Using Two-tiered system. Give away a subset of the product for free. Charge for the full version. Adobe Systems Incorporated did that when it gave away Acrobat Reader that allows one to read image files of formatted documents. You had to pay for the software that made the images, however.
- Offering something with high entertainment value. These are often games, challenges or sneak peeks directed to target groups, such as offering film clips and trailers to movie fans.
- Offering something with a high utility to the user. Microsoft, for example is

a master of the strategic leak about plans, software and products to build interest in them. Because Microsoft is the major player in personal computer software, anything it does has a built-in base of interest.

- Disseminating warnings that are of urgent importance to users -- for example, a warning about a new computer virus. (There are so many hoaxes about computer viruses, however, that it is difficult to gain serious attention.)
- Sending something unique and unlike anything recipient has seen before. This can be anything from a goofball illustration to a wacky short video, and it is the hardest to do. One of the earliest of these was the "Dancing Baby," a computer animation that some found endearing and others repelling. But unique equals fad equals evanescent. Anything unique is knocked off quickly and soon there are dancing aardvarks, shimmying male strippers and so on.

Timeliness is an important part of the equation. The second "dancing baby" was not nearly as interesting as the first. The fourth e-mail offering a 25 percent discount is not as compelling as the first two.

Influentials are an important part of viral messaging. These are individuals who are recognized online, whether or not they are recognized elsewhere, and whose credibility can give a fast boost to a message. Any PR practitioner recognizes the role of the influential as no different than the role of a reporter who writes a positive story about a product or service. The tastemaker and the re-

porter both lend impartial, third-party support to the message and as a result, lower the skepticism of others about it. Tastemakers differ by audience interest and community. Hence, one skill of the viral marketer is the ability to identify and approach influentials based on the message being sent. This is not as easy as finding the right reporter. Practitioners use media databases to identify reporters and their beats. The viral marketer surfs and observes to find those who have a larger voice than others online.

According to one commentator, three guidelines apply to marketers approaching influentials.

- The message, product or service must be differentiated and useful.
- The approach must be sincere and open with no holds barred.
- The influential should be a user of the product or service while recommending it.

PR practitioners will recognize quickly that these criteria apply to all interactions with members of established media.

### Using the Medium Well

Viral messaging must be easy to send and forward. Transfer of the message from one person to another must be as close to effortless as possible. No one is going to spend time reformatting or otherwise preparing a message to be retransmitted. But within this constraint, there are many approaches that one can take. For example, one can embed a link into an e-mail. Simply click and it will take you to a web site. One can attach video, text or an executable pro-

gram. One can place easily recognizable buttons and links on web pages and encourage visitors to click and send the URL to a friend. One can design a message that always links back to a Web site and builds traffic to that site. For example, I send you a link to an electronic birthday card and you click a link to see the card on the Web site and watch the animated dancing cows. One can concentrate on getting mention of the message on high-traffic web sites because that is where most users are.

One obvious limitation in distribution is scale. It might be easy to handle 50 people at a time coming to a web site to see their greeting cards. It is not easy handling 10,000 at a time. One must prepare viral marketing to scale easily from small to large response within existing communications networks. And this, of course, is not as low-cost or free as one would estimate. Success generates a need for resources, and resources cost money.

### **Success and failure**

Viral marketing has been especially useful in areas of high interest such as movies and entertainment where there is a built-in fan base. One studio has successfully used viral marketing to auction off props from its movie productions. The incremental revenue is not as important as the increased attention the studio reaps for the movie. Advertising agencies and their clients use viral marketing to prepare the market for campaigns. By providing a sneak peek at an upcoming TV ad, the agency can get valuable feedback on whether recipients like it and whether it should even be used. And because it is a sneak peek,

recipients have an interest in passing it to others who are similarly curious. Airlines have offered great deals. Software companies have launched new products, and design companies gained attention for their creativity.

Viral marketing appears to fail when there is no commonality of experience. That is, people are not interested enough in the message to pass it along. There are technical barriers as well that can kill a campaign. For example, some virus filters prevent downloading of executable programs. And, there are the challenges mentioned previously of the inability to maintain brand control over a message that can be sent anywhere by the individual who gets it and can spark growth where one may not want it.

An early reader of this essay, Dave Migdal, who works for a worldwide electronics manufacturer and marketer, had this to say about viral marketing:

*I've found it very difficult for clients (marketing groups, etc.) to buy into it because of its random nature. (Viral marketing) is tricky to measure, the audience is nearly impossible to identify, and there's a heightened risk in your message being compromised (with each hand-off and accompanying comments.)*

Migdal believes, by the way, that viral marketing only works when one is dealing with an audience that is “*predisposed to buzz, word-of-mouth, rumor, or essentially, fiction based on fact.*” It is not clear that this view is entirely correct since word-of-mouth in other media seem to work for all groups depending on the topic or issue at hand. It may be, however, that

online works differently – at least for the time being.

The lack of measurement for viral campaigns is possible to alleviate through insertion of a program into messages that reports back whenever a message is opened or link is clicked. Finally, if a viral message is considered obnoxious, one can be accused of spamming.

### Ideas for Daring Practitioners

In spite of all the caveats, using viral marketing to send a public relations message is a technique that daring PR practitioners should consider because, in fact, it is quite close to what they do anyway. Here are a few ideas to help stimulate your thinking.

- **An off-season sports promotion:** To build fan loyalty, a sports team offers free window decals to the first 10,000 fans who request them. The team sends an e-mail with the offer to the heads of the local fan websites and requests them to pass along the news to their friends. If successful, for the cost of 10,000 decals, the team gets the names, addresses and e-mails of 10,000 potential ticket holders.
- **A trial balloon:** An auto company wants to test reception to some auto design concepts among car enthusiasts. It leaks the images to a known enthusiast on a bulletin board who promptly posts them and sends them to his friends. The auto company monitors the bulletin boards for reactions.
- **A grassroots campaign:** An environmental group opposed to devel-

opment of a scenic piece of land wants to gather thousands of signatures from citizens who share its view. It sends an e-mail message to known allies that protests against the developer's plan and includes a link to a Web site where supporters can add their names to a petition.

- **Health awareness:** A blood-glucose meter manufacturer wants to get closer to diabetics who use its product so it can keep them up to date on new meters. The manufacturer offers a month's worth of free test strips used in the meters to the first 5,000 diabetics who come to a special page on its web site to register. It sends an e-mail announcing this with a link to three bulletin boards run by activists in diabetes healthcare issues.
- **Toy promotion:** A fast-food chain is taking delivery of a 500,000 toys of a popular action figure from a hit movie. The chain sends an e-mail with attached photo to the heads of two unofficial fan sites for the film and let them know that the action figures will be given away with a purchase of standard meal.
- **An internal memo:** A CEO, wishing to radiate some news informally through the management ranks, sends an e-mail to his top executives with the information and suggests they might wish to pass it on to their managers.
- **A publication promotion:** (This modifies a real example.) A fan publication wants to raise awareness with potential readers. It sends an e-mail to heads of fan bulletin boards in which there are photos of 20 back-sides of celebrities and a challenge to match the celebrity to her butt. The

quiz includes the name of the publication.

These ideas may seem familiar because most have been tried in different media already, but not always online. The point is that viral marketing can accommodate PR promotion and message sending like this, if it is done carefully.

At least, it is something to think about.

# # #

*James L. Horton is the founder of online-pr.com and a practitioner with more than 20 years experience in public relations.*