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What is Viral Marketing?

In this digital age advertisers and marketers have had to devise new methods to reach audiences with their product messages. With consumers increasingly relying on the internet for information, interaction and consumerism the nature of marketing has had to change in line with its audience. Viral marketing relies on social networks to increase awareness of a brand, product, person or event and therefore the network of the internet is the perfect medium.

The term *viral* is used to describe the practice as the self-replicating spread of a marketing message is similar to the spread of a computer virus or physical virus – the message spreads by word of mouth – from one person to another – from one computer to another. The successful element of viral marketing is that the consumer him/herself spreads the marketing message which has been created by the marketer. A successful viral marketing campaign often features controversy, laugh-out-loud or shock value; engages a community, offers a contest, or features a celebrity exclusive. The message has to be unique and engaging and feature a central concept which causes the viewer to share the footage or message with friends - a "must-see" element.

The term *Viral Marketing* was coined by a Harvard Business School professor, Jeffrey Rayport, in December 1996 in an article for Fast Company magazine called *The Virus of Marketing*. He wrote: "Think of a virus as the ultimate marketing program. When it comes to getting a message out with little time, minimal budgets, and maximum effect, nothing on earth beats a virus. Every marketer aims to have a dramatic impact on thinking and behavior in a target market; every successful virus does exactly that."

Viral marketers identify individuals with high social networking potential (an age, interest or peer group who are extremely active and very sociable online) and create viral messages which will appeal to these individuals and their peers and create a word-of-mouth buzz. Viral messages can be in the form of video clips, images, brandable software, flash or games - any form which can easily be passed between social networks via the internet.

A successful viral marketing campaign can pass into everyday culture. One of the most prominent early viral marketing campaigns was for the film *The Blair Witch Project*. The film was released in the UK on October 22 1999. Written and directed by Eduardo Sanchez and Daniel Myrick the film depicted the events of October 1994 when three student filmmakers disappeared in the woods near Burkittesville, Maryland while investigating the myth of the Blair witch. The film centred on the premise that one year later, their footage was found (although they were not) and portrayed the terrifying events (shot on hand-held camera) as real documentary footage. The film was made on the tiny budget of 60,000 dollars by unknown filmmakers and with an unknown cast, yet it went on to gross 250 million dollars worldwide - and has passed into everyday culture.

The film attracted significant word-of-mouth hype prior to release thanks to a clever and innovative marketing campaign, lead primarily by the website www.blairwitch.com, which presented the events of the film as real. The website featured the lead character's journal, photographs, sound bites and images of the alleged actual film canisters recovered from the woods. Word quickly

spread on internet chat sites that the film documented real events and generated huge interest in the film and its website. As word of mouth led ever increasing numbers of film fans to the website the challenge to uncover the mystery intensified and the film's release was hotly anticipated. The Blair Witch virus had spread across the internet and beyond. *The Blair Witch Project's* producers Gregg Hale and Michael Monello have subsequently gone on to create Campfire, a marketing company who hire advertising agencies to create viral marketing campaigns including the very successful *The Art of the Heist* campaign for Audi.

The campaign for *The Blair Witch Project* is widely regarded to have changed the course of film marketing and has been replicated by a number of releases such as Ben Stiller's *Tropic Thunder* and the JJ Abrams-produced *Cloverfield*. Not only does a viral campaign enable a marketer to target a message to specific groups and reach a large cross-section of those groups, but it can also enhance a film fan's experience with extended and spin-off content to engage the viewer long before the release date. A recent and successful example of this was the six-month campaign for the film *Cloverfield* which enticed curious film fans to become engaged in the film's plot and characters long before its release with a series of cryptic clues on linked websites and trailers. Director Matt Reeves described his film as "a monster movie for the YouTube generation" and the film's marketing campaign engaged the digital generation like no other before.

Cloverfield was released in the UK on 1st February 2008. Produced by JJ Abrams (*Lost*) the film centred on five New Yorkers throwing a going away-party for their friend on the night a monster attacks the city. The film is shot on video cameras from the point of view of the characters and depicts the story of their attempts to survive the attack on the city. A teaser trailer screened in July 2007 – the trailer did not reveal the film's name, cast or director and simply featured footage of an explosion and the resulting decapitated head of the Statue of Liberty. It closed with the US-style date 1-18-08. When fans searched this date they linked to the site www.1-18-08.com/ which showed photographs of a New Yorker called Rob's leaving party. The photographs were time-stamped and shaking them flipped them to reveal messages wishing Rob well. This mysterious website gave away very little about the film and fan speculation raged on-and offline.

The release of the full trailer brought with it the official movie website www.cloverfieldmovie.com. The site featured a widget which could be grabbed by users and played the first five minutes of the feature with an intro by Abrams. This could be embedded anywhere – on social networking sites, blogs and personalised pages - enabling the footage to spread across the internet. A competition was launched to personalise the widget and the personalised widget grabbed by most viewers secured the creator a private screening of the film. Simultaneously the viral campaign featured a second strand which used popular social networking sites Facebook and MySpace to create virtual lives for the film's characters Jamie and Teddy. Fictional websites were also created for Slusho (a Japanese drink which plays a minor part in the film) and manufacturers Tagruato (who play a small part in the film but have significant impact on the plot). All of these creations added to the hype around the film's release as fans scoured the internet for clues about the plot - which, proud of their discoveries and deductions - they shared online.

Both *The Blair Witch Project* and *Cloverfield* campaigns were embraced by the fans and certainly enhanced the films' reputations and box office receipts, however, not all viral campaigns have been so well received. The integrity of viral marketing has been brought into question through the activities of stealth marketing and astroturfing. As viral marketing is a form of social marketing it can be manipulated to sell a product to consumers who do not realise they are being marketed to - this is stealth marketing. Marketers can misrepresent the source of a message to represent the viewpoint of an independent individual when a marketing company is the actual source.

An infamous example of a stealth marketing campaign which backfired was Sony's *All I Want for Christmas is a PSP*. The 2006 advertising campaign became the centre of a major viral marketing backlash receiving widespread criticism on the internet, criticism in the media and a poor reception from the gaming community when it was discovered that US marketing company Zipatoni had developed the alleged fan site www.AllIWantforChristmasisaPSP.com. The site was a commercial veiled as a blog which chronicled the quest of two target-demographic teens, Charlie and Jeremy, to get a PSP for Christmas. The site featured text messaging, misspellings and a PSP-themed rap video. The teenage PSP fans were actually discovered to be actors and Sony and Zipatoni were

accused of astroturfing – creating a marketing campaign mimicking grassroots behaviour to disguise the commercial nature of the message. Sony responded: “Busted. Nailed. Snagged. As many of you have figured out (maybe our speech was a little too funky fresh???), Peter isn't a real hip-hop maven and this site was actually developed by Sony. Guess we were trying to be just a little too clever. From this point forward, we will just stick to making cool products, and use this site to give you nothing but the facts on the PSP.”

Love it or loathe it, viral marketing embraces social and technological changes in contemporary society and therefore proves a very effective and relevant tool to reach a digital audience.

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