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Concept of viral marketing and its role in global business perspectives

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Abstract

Viral marketing refers to a technique in marketing a product or a service where users help in spreading the advertiser's message to other websites or the users create a scenario which can lead to multi-fold growth. Viral in literal sense means anything which spreads fast (across users). This term is symbolically used in context with the web or mobile domain. Viral marketing is described as a marketing strategy which inspires users to spread or share the message to other users which can lead to multi-fold growth. It could be a simple message on your smart phone related to a product which was recently launched, a news piece (example- India winning the world cup), or a YouTube video that individuals share with different users. There are various elements required for effective marketing strategy which can make viral. Firstly, product or services should be 'free' for all, and should have easy accessibility. By doing this the marketing team is able to get enough attention from users across the globe, although it might not lead to any profit. The next important element is the transferability part, which simple means that the message can be easily transferred or shared via email, WhatsApp, networking websites, etc. The message should be simple to understand and at the same time it should be short. The other element is that the message should be interesting and intelligently placed. Users should be able to identify with the message. If any influential person endorses your message or product on the website or on their social media or networking site, it can become viral.

Keywords: Networking, viral marketing, Facebook, WhatsApp, YouTube

Introduction

Viral marketing or viral advertising is a business strategy that uses existing social networks to promote a product. Its name refers to how consumers spread information about a product with other people in their social networks, much in the same way that a virus spreads from one person to another. It can be delivered by word of mouth or enhanced by the network effects of the Internet and mobile networks.

Viral advertising is personal and, while coming from an identified sponsor, it does not mean businesses pay for its distribution. Most of the well-known viral ads circulating online are ads paid by a sponsor company, launched either on their own platform (company webpage or social media profile) or on social media websites such as YouTube. Consumers receive the page link from a social media network or copy the entire ad from a website and pass it along through e-mail or posting it on a blog, webpage or social media profile. Viral marketing may take the form of video clips, interactive Flash games, advergaming, ebooks, brandable software, images, text messages, email messages, or web pages. The most commonly utilized transmission vehicles for viral messages include: pass-along based, incentive based, trendy based, and undercover based. However, the creative nature of viral marketing enables an "endless amount of potential forms and vehicles the messages can utilize for transmission", including mobile devices.

The ultimate goal of marketers interested in creating successful viral marketing programs is to create viral messages that appeal to individuals with high social networking potential (SNP) and that have a high probability of being presented and spread by these individuals and their competitors in their communications with others in a short period of time.

The term "viral marketing" has also been used pejoratively to refer to stealth marketing campaigns marketing strategies that advertise a product to people without them knowing they are being marketed to. The emergence of "viral marketing", as an approach to advertisement, has been tied to the popularization of the notion that ideas spread like viruses. The field that developed around this notion, memetics, peaked in popularity in the 1990s. As this then began to influence marketing gurus, it took on a life of its own in that new context.

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The term viral strategy was first used in marketing in 1995, in a pre-digital marketing era, by a strategy team at Chiat/Day advertising in LA for the launch of the first Play Station for Sony Computer Entertainment. Born from a need to combat huge target cynicism the insight was that people reject things pushed at them but seek out things that elude them.

In 2004, the concept of the alpha user was coined to indicate that it had now become possible to identify the focal members of any viral campaign, the "hubs" who were most influential. Alpha users could be targeted for advertising purposes most accurately in mobile phone networks, due to their personal nature.

In early 2013 the first ever Viral Summit was held in Las Vegas. It attempted to identify similar trends in viral marketing methods for various media. According to marketing professors Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein, to make viral marketing work, three basic criteria must be met, i.e., giving the right message to the right messengers in the right environment:

1. **Messenger:** Three specific types of messengers are required to ensure the transformation of an ordinary message into a viral one: market mavens, social hubs, and salespeople. Market mavens are individuals who are continuously 'on the pulse' of things (information specialists); they are usually among the first to get exposed to the message and who transmit it to their immediate social network. Social hubs are people with an exceptionally large number of social connections; they often know hundreds of different people and have the ability to serve as connectors or bridges between different subcultures. Salespeople might be needed who receive the message from the market maven, amplify it by making it more relevant and persuasive, and then transmit it to the social hub for further distribution. Market mavens may not be particularly convincing in transmitting the information.
2. **Message:** Only messages that are both memorable and sufficiently interesting to be passed on to others have the potential to spur a viral marketing phenomenon. Making a message more memorable and interesting or simply more infectious, is often not a matter of major changes but minor adjustments. It should be unique and engaging with a main idea that motivates the recipient to share it widely with friends - a "must-see" element.
3. **Environment:** The environment is crucial in the rise of successful viral marketing - small changes in the environment lead to huge results, and people are much more sensitive to environment. The timing and context of the campaign launch must be right.

Whereas Kaplan, Haenlein and others reduce the role of marketers to crafting the initial viral message and seeding it, futurist and sales and marketing analyst Marc Feldman, who conducted IMT Strategies' viral marketing study in 2001, carves a different role for marketers which pushes the 'art' of viral marketing much closer to 'science'.

Social networking

The growth of social networks significantly contributed to the effectiveness of viral marketing. As of 2009, two thirds of the world's Internet population visit a social networking service or blog site at least every week. Facebook alone has over 1 billion active users. In 2009, time spent visiting

social media sites began to exceed time spent emailing. A 2010 study found that 52% of people who view news online forward it on through social networks, email, or posts.

Social media

The introduction of social media has caused a change how viral marketing is used and the speed at which information is spread and users interact. This has prompted many companies to use social media as a way to market themselves and their products, with Elsamari Botha and Mignon Reyneke stating that viral messages are "playing an increasingly important role in influencing and shifting public opinion on corporate reputations, brands, and products as well as political parties and public personalities to name but a few."

Influencers

The influencers in order to communicate

marketing messages to the audiences you seek to reach. In business, it is indicated that people prefer interaction with humans to a logo. Therefore, it seems that influencers are on behalf of a company to build up a relationship between the brand and their customers. Companies would be left behind if they neglected the trend of influencers in viral marketing, as over 60% of global brands have used influencers in marketing in 2016. The influencer types come along with the level of customers' involvement in companies' marketing. First, unintentional influences, because of brand satisfaction and low involvement, their action is just to deliver a company's message to a potential user. Secondly, users will become salesmen or promoters for a particular company with incentives. Finally, the mass reached influencers are those who have a huge range of followers on the social network. Recent trend in businesses activity is to offer incentives to individual users for re-posting the advertisement messages to their own profiles. A common type of an incentive puts all the re-posting users into a random draw for a valuable gift.

This trend captured by marketers who are used to explore new potential customers. Agencies are placing social media stars alongside singers and musicians at the top of the heap of celebrity types they had worked with. And there are more than 28% of company marketers having worked with one social media celebrity in the previous year. The challenges of strategically maximizing the influence spread in social networks are addressed in management science.

Viral marketing process

In viral marketing the consumers' role is the most important. Without consumers who share the message, a campaign would never go viral. Consumers are talking with their friends about the campaign and their friends are going to tell it forward. They start to share posts via Facebook or Twitter, because usually they don't even recognize a viral campaign as advertising. The consumers act as senders and recipients at the same time.

Active and passive viral marketing

A viral marketing campaign can be spread in an active or passive way. In the active marketing the consumer acts as a distributor. He spreads the message actively to persons in his environment because he likes the content. Consequently, the campaign reaches a huge audience. This is the most common form. In passive viral marketing, the consumer

mainly spreads the message by using the product. He influences his environment by his consumption. A good example for that is the email service Hotmail. At the end of every email the company includes a quote "send via Hotmail" and advantages of using this email service.

Factors of success

Both the active and the passive viral marketing ways are determined by factors of success which decide whether a campaign will turn into a hit or flop. Firstly, the emotions play an important role. The campaign must speak to people and reach them in an emotional way. The second one is the right choice of distribution ways. A campaign should be spread over channels which reach the target group. The third point is the simplification of the marketing message. It should be short and easy to understand. Otherwise it will be too difficult to reach a huge audience. Next point is the chance of using current events to spread the campaign's message to the right target group which will recognize the product. The definition of the target group should not be disregarded for launching a campaign. The companies should think hard about who they want to reach, where and at which time. Nowadays the digital era involves many channels which address different target groups.

Effects on marketing in general

Viral marketing has an enormous influence on classic marketing in general. A lot of companies try to develop sophisticated marketing strategies and excellent campaigns to go viral. Each company tries to be better than the other. This competition leads to an overload of weird, bizarre and funny marketing campaigns. In conclusion it is very hard for a company to launch a viral hit. Besides the classic advertisement appears to be boring in comparison to the very creative and original viral marketing campaigns. This has the effect that consumers get a bit tired of those campaigns. In total this phenomenon has the effect that the marketing in general is changing. It causes a lot of diversification in the companies.

Risks of using the wrong influencer

Risks for the company

The main risk coming from the company is for it to target the wrong influencer or segment.

Once the content is online, the sender won't be able to control it anymore. It is therefore vital to aim at a particular segment when releasing the message. This is what happened to the company Blend Tech which released videos showing the blender could blend anything, and encouraged users to share videos. This mainly caught the attention of teenage boys who thought it funny to blend and destroy anything they could; even though the videos went viral, they did not target potential buyers of the product. This is considered to be one of the major factors that affects the success of the online promotion. It is critical and inevitable for the organisations to target the right audience. Another risk with internet is that a company's video could end up going viral on the other side of the planet where their products are not even for sale.

Risks emanating from the influencers

The most common risk in viral marketing is that of the influencer not passing on the message, which can lead to the failure of the viral marketing campaign. A second risk is

that the influencer modifies the content of the message. A third risk is that influencers pass on the wrong message. This can result from a misunderstanding or as a deliberate move.

Conclusion

Viral marketing is one of the most emerging parts of present marketing system. So finally, the internet makes it possible for a campaign to go viral very fast. These are the challenges, opportunities and threats viral marketing in online shopping. The internet and in particular social media technologies to not make a brand viral, they just enable people to tell other people faster. The internet can, so to speak, make a brand famous overnight. Viral Marketing subsumes Internet-based stealth marketing campaigns, including the use of blogs, seemingly amateur web sites, and other forms of highly attractive campaigns which are designed to create word of mouth for a new product or service.

In the 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.

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