

The Voluntary Virus - Martin Higgins

First, as background, let's recap the baby-step voluntary viral basics with these excerpts from *Connecting Online: Creating A Successful Image on the Internet* by Emily Avila and Greg Sherwin, co-authors.

“Consumers Hate Advertising

“Consumers have known this all along. Marketers had to wait till there was an accountable, trackable medium like the Web before they would admit it. Click-through rates are below 1/2 percent and not improving (perhaps even worsening).

“Focus groups and usability testing have shown that any method that tries to force more ad visibility not only doesn't work, but actually angers users. For example, interstitial ads provoke near-violent clicks as users rush to close the pop-up box before it can load. Animated ads, ads with sounds, Flash-based ads... they all motivate users to scroll the ad out of sight, so the user can get back to reading, or at least avoid an animation-caused headache. ...

“Consumers Love Word of Mouth

“Viral Marketing has been the Web's killer marketing application. Because (see above) Consumers Hate Advertising, but luckily, Consumers Love Their Friends. You can pummel your Web users with ad after ad with no results. But a single mention of your site from a friend, and they will click over faster than you can say "CPM.”

“With cynicism at an all-time high, an overwhelming number of sites, and the endless barrages of banners, users filter out all but the most trusted, most reliable information -- that is, they will listen to their friends' recommendations, open their friends' e-mails first, and take their friends' advice over the most cleverly phrased ad message. ...”

A few points to note regarding the excerpts above:

- Notice that the popular dissection of voluntary viral marketing (as pretty well characterized above) never seems to go much deeper than mere recognition of the observable virus-like effect- recognition of a viral, peer-to-peer, spread. Certainly not unique to this particular excerpt, this perspective is largely universal in both the advertising and interactive industries. The mistake being made here is in equating *the abstract spread of a message* with the *definition of a form of authored marketing*. That's like suggesting that *motion* is a *car*. A wave through a field is not to be confused with the cause of the wave. The viral spread of a message is a result, *an effect*, not an engine itself.
- The insight in the excerpt above- that “people trust their friends, not advertisers”- is excellent, and truthful insight, and illustrates why (once it has happened) it's an effective way to get a consumer to view a message, but is nowhere near an explanation of what *drives* that virus-like spread. That insight is just the reason that consumers will *look at* a message once- for the first time- but speaks nothing to what fuels the subsequent and continuing sharing of the message.
- Another popular belief is that the *facilitation* of a viral spread *is* “Viral Marketing”. In other words, that the inclusion of a “send to a friend” button (or similar feature/attribute) on a piece of content *is* viral marketing. But once again, that doesn't *drive* the spread either. That does decrease the friction in a *potential* virus-like spread,

but simply does not address the driver- the motivation- the reason a message is shared, or sent onward by the next user.

The VIRAL EFFECT

So *why* does the Viral Effect happen? We now know what the effect is, we know why it's effective, and we know how to assist it.

But what inspires a person to share something with her friend in the first place???

Understanding the answer to *that* question is the key to understanding and ultimately architecting a successful Viral Effect. All of today's hailed solutions (as above, those that are popularly considered the total of Viral Marketing) are merely straightforward, viral-flow*facilitation* tactics.

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, an often-quoted e-commerce consultant in viral marketing circles, advances "The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing", which can be found on-line. Five of his six so-called principles are essentially friction easing tactics that again help facilitate a viral effect, but don't address our question above, and therefore, aren't useful in our quest to *instigate* or *cause* a viral effect. But one of his principles does touch the surface of our answer:

"Give away valuable products or services."

His ensuing description of the principle unfortunately doesn't flesh out the idea much further. In fact, in my admittedly limited research I was frustrated to find that there were painfully few thoughts anywhere advising on the measurement or design of appropriate "valuable products or services".

But at least one thing seems consistent and clear: as with all interactive efforts, this marketing model (whatever it is best called) and the resulting Viral Effect are inexorably subject to:

Axiom #1:

ALL user interaction is based on the user's perception of value. Universally this means that the ONLY reason ANYONE interacts with ANYTHING, in the interactive space, is because they believe there is value for them behind that interaction."

Or as I've stated at Red Sky Interactive: **Every Click is a Wish™**

This applies to every click ever clicked, and is *not unique to Viral Marketing!* So how can we narrow the field? Surely there is more- surely we can develop a more useful understanding of "value" and it's relationship specifically to "sharing behavior" so that we may measure our work, and better judge whether it is likely to inspire a viral effect.

An Approach to an Answer

There are many communication theories that find relevance in online media. The theory that stands out to me, called the **Narrative Paradigm**, argues that humans are *storytelling animals*. As such we are constantly in search of new and novel "story elements" to improve the quality of our communications and therefore raise our status in society.

Bringing an intelligent insight to a conversation, a new joke at the water-cooler, opinions regarding a newly released film or current market conditions; appropriately offered to her audience, these can all raise the speaker's social status.

Since the Web is virtually a medium *designed* to exchange data, valid status-raising communication often manifests not as language, but as the sharing of little known sites, information, resources, or content. These are what I call digital "story elements" that, at their best, when shared, will raise the "speaker's" social status in the eyes of her audience. Further, I would argue that *it's exactly this self-interest in raising social status that is at the heart most successful Viral Effects.*

Valuable content = Content's potential to raise the speaker's social status.

Another relevant communication theory, the Social Exchange approach, views interpersonal exchanges as analogous to economic exchanges where people are satisfied when they receive a fair return on their expenditures. Clearly there is a desire on the part of the speaker to offer "valuable" story elements to her audience; satisfying the audience's investment (emotional investment, time spent, perhaps even the downloading of a large file...?).

Low pay-off on the audience's investment will actually lower the speaker's social status- as well as the original author's (our client), although as far as the speaker is concerned, *her* status is the only one she'll be concerned about.

O.S.C.A.R.

Working toward the goal of intentionally architecting a rise in a "digital speaker's" social status, there are a number of features that we must consider in designing the piece of content that we hope will inspire the impulse to share, and thus result in a viral effect:

Ownership. The reason a level of ownership is valuable to the speaker is that ownable, shared content can be reflected back on the speaker's persona- vicariously emanating from her mouth. In doing so the speaker's social status is again raised for having "spoken" the story element- even if it *is* someone else's in actuality. The *ultimate* form of "owned" content is a piece that the speaker actually makes herself, with little or no outside input. These are truly her thoughts, ideas and messages. Her story elements. This sits toward the *most valuable* end of the full "Ownership spectrum".

However, we want her to distribute *our* content, so while we automatically lose some points by layering our ownership (our client's brand) *with* hers, we can still turn this to our advantage. On the other end of the spectrum (the *least valuable* end) is a piece of sharable content that is authored by someone else, and yet is designed in such a way that it completely negates the sender's involvement, or ability to vicariously own the piece. For example, a large corporation that has too heavily branded the content.

We have already established that "consumers hate advertising" so the degree to which the content appears to be advertising, or solely the voice of a brand, results in negative points against our quest to have it sent on as it disallows speaker ownership- essentially overpowering the sender's brand.

The ideal place on the spectrum we can hope to rest is where- the content is produced by a brand, but where significant room is left for "speaker" ownership. This could take the form of dramatic user customization, or simply keeping the brand in the background (hidden behind a link even) to allow the *Speaker's brand to become dominant.*

On the “most aggressive” end of the scale, refrain from including the marketer’s brand in the content altogether, letting the content truly stand on its own without sponsorship of any kind. Then, simultaneously issue a number of press releases, which acknowledge creation of the content. This both allows near-complete ownership for the speaker, but will also build a level of on-line respect for the brand that will flow from our next topic:

Scarcity. The story element must be designed to appear scarce. Unique story elements are valuable to the storytelling animal. It means that the speaker will be bringing something to the conversation that has not been previously heard by her audience. The more certain she is that the story element is a rarity, the more confident she will be that her audience will regard her communication highly, thus raising her social status.

On the flip-side, how do you feel when you send something to your friend and they reply- “yeah, I saw that already...”. Your social status has been lowered. So in turn, high points go to the piece that appears to be rare, largely unknown and not distributed widely already.

Control. No one likes to be manipulated. Walk into a car lot and feel your shields go up full. Salesmen historically exploit the average person’s desire to keep their social interactions on a pleasant level by putting them in a position where the only way to get out of spending money is to be downright rude to the salesman’s face- something that most people will avoid at great cost. For this and many other reasons only salesmen know, audiences have a sense of deep skepticism at the slightest whiff of being tricked into a scam.

Unlike the real world, there are no salesmen on the web, rather merely graphic abstractions which can be readily ignored- even rudely ignored if you consider users closing ad windows before they can even load, etc (slamming the proverbial door in the salesman’s face!). In fact, the interactive space is based fundamentally on the notion that the *user is in control*. Anything else is inauthentic to the medium. This is why traditional advertising and sales tactics fail so miserably in this regard.

Negative points will be accrued for your content if you too forcefully or obviously try to push the user to do anything- even “send to a friend”. You cannot appear desperate in your quest to have the piece be distributed virally. As soon as it becomes a power struggle, you’ve lost. Rather, more points will be accrued if you allow the user to “invent” the notion of sending it to a friend, for herself- independent of the host’s suggestion.

The impulse must be hers. One interesting solution for the right target audience might be to avoid the convention of even including a “send to a friend” button, and instead, facilitate the downloading and saving of the content for the “speaker’s personal use”. We all know how easy it is to attach a file to an e-mail- it’s really not much harder than filling out all the “send to a friend” info. If the user actually embraces the content, chances are, they will send to a friend anyway!

Authenticity. Closely related to “Control” above, most content that achieves a viral effect appears- to the “speaker”- not to have been architected with any of the above features consciously considered by the author. Rather, the naked, surface value of the piece appears to be the only feature considered.

Again, if the user senses that they are being manipulated, the content will lose points. Care must be given to designing and wrapping the content in such a way that it appears to be casually standing only on its surface value, and not some insidious human behavioral studies!

Relevance. This is probably the most subjective of all the following features, and is what is usually meant regarding the term “value”. This speaks to quality: the timeliness, craftsmanship, and creativity of the piece. If

it's a joke, what's the subject, does it happen to relate to current events, and how funny is it? If it's news, how accurate and up to date is it?

If it's a service, how helpful is the offering? Essentially, *does it "speak the target audience's language"?* Obviously the higher the piece's relevant quality the higher the piece will score. Because of the nature of the net, "relevant content" will always be culled out organically- from the most unlikely of places regardless of who created it. The challenge for someone hoping to cause a viral effect is developing an expertise for conceiving relevance.

(Red Sky's Planning efforts are tremendous help here, bringing consumer insight to the creative teams responsible for conceiving relevant content.)

Each of the features above are linked to the others, but working together they dictate the Viral Effect potential of a given piece of content.

The Relevant Brand vs. Ownership

As one considers the ideas above, one may identify possible exceptions. For example, what if a brand *is relevant*? In other words - what if inclusion of the brand mark itself, actually raises the relevance (and therefore value) of the content. How does that sit with the description of "ownership", where normally, heavy branding might actually detract from the value of the content?

There aren't many of those brands around, quite frankly. And despite our pride, and our best wishes and desires, a level of humbleness on this point is critical- as we say in the voluntary viral business, you'd only be fooling yourself.

But in the rare instance that a brand mark itself (and what it stands for) *is* truly valuable to the target consumer, by all means- it must become part of the content. However, care must still be taken to ensure that the brand is displayed to an appropriate degree, one that doesn't undermine the speaker's sense of *control*.

But in doing so, a marketer can expect a level of elasticity (or desensitization) when it comes to the hard line of *ownership*.

Also, I think it's fair to advance that relevance is by far the most important feature of all five, but I am quick to add that a failure in any of the others will sharply prohibit the chance of achieving a maximized viral effect.

I'll close with the "OSCAR Equation":

Ownership + Scarcity + Control + Authenticity + Relevance (OSCAR)

Potential to raise the speaker's social status + "Valuable Content" + appropriate facilitation tactics = Maximized Viral Effect

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