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The Power Of Viral Marketing

By David Bell

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by: **David Bell**

You certainly know by now that the term "viral marketing" is not just another dot-com cliché. Quite the contrary, it describes the incredible, unmatched power of the Web to promote your business by marrying email to the traditional concept of "word-of-mouth."

Viral marketing, the concept of making each customer a marketer by encouraging word-of-mouth referrals, is indisputably one of the most effective mediums of ongoing self-promotion a site can employ. It gives Internet companies a cost-efficient, proven tool to increase traffic and lower advertising costs.

Hotmail originally broke through the mold by proving that companies no longer needed to spend millions on flashy advertising to become the best and biggest in the business. With a simple viral marketing campaign they effectively cornered the market with a budget that spent money on original customer acquisition and not over-the-top Super Bowl ads.

However, instead of just standing by idly and hoping it happens, you can actually "drive" viral marketing by crafting an extremely effective viral marketing program targeted to your audience. This article will provide you with the key steps to create a viral marketing program that will power your business to new heights of success, and do it for a fraction of the cost of other promotional efforts.

-DO EVERYTHING RIGHT FIRST

Your potential customers now have the power to tell colleagues, friends and family about great web site experiences in greater numbers and far faster than we could have imagined just a few years ago. Think of the power of a dense email address book and a few mouse clicks. In fact, that is the "fuel" behind viral marketing. The downside is they can do the same thing regarding bad experiences with the same efficiency and speed. Research has shown that people share bad experiences up to 5 times more often than they tell about good ones. Before you post a site to your server and invite people to

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visit it, everything should be quality tested and in perfect order. While software makers can sometimes get away with shipping buggy software, you can't issue a "patch" to a site that has already turned off your target audience because in this market, your audience will go somewhere else, fast. And instead of gaining customers "geometrically", you'll be losing them exponentially.

–TWO TOOLS: Buttons and Links

There are two basic tools in your viral marketing arsenal: buttons and links. The idea is that with a single click a visitor can share your site with others, and those people in turn can do the same. The goal in designing and placing these buttons and links is to make them obvious, easy-to-use, and perhaps even rewarding to use. By making your buttons more obvious, you give the visitor a visual cue to pass your site on to a friend and take an active role in the creation of your own viral marketing campaign. You can take an even more active role and move beyond mere suggestion by actually offering your visitors an incentive to pass something on.

–ELEMENTS OF SUCCESS

The analysis is pretty straightforward. For your buttons and/or link to work, you've first got to get it in front of your target audience of potential customers. Second, your potential customers have to be able to readily tell what it is that has been artfully put in front of them. It's that old three-click rule – if you can't find what you want on a site in three clicks, you're going to surf elsewhere, and if you can't understand what you're reading immediately, you're going to tune out. Part of what needs to be clear to potential users is what they need to do and exactly how they can do it. If you fail in any of these elements or if you confuse your message with unnecessary complications, your potential customer is gone, and you've blown your possibly one shot at a few seconds of their attention.

Your referral tool needs to, at the minimum, accomplish seven critical things: Stand out from the clutter of the page. Be instantly understood. Embody a clear call to action. Give clear instructions on how to act. Be placed effectively. Offer an incentive. Make the offer simple, clear and obvious.

–BUTTON VS. LINK

Button: Eye-catching, can be graphical. Link: Line of blue text. Both viable, both serve their respective purpose. The tool you choose will depend on two factors: 1) what you want your visitor to share with others, and 2) the context in which your visitor will be sharing. If you want people to share content items such as articles or white papers, you can use either a button or a link, although a button is more appropriate as it's more attention getting. Also, if the context is your site as a whole or a specific product or a service on your site, then a button is preferable because eye-catching buttons can be designed and placed by using simple code that will load almost regardless of browser or bandwidth. However, when the context is email, whether mailing to your own opt-in list, doing a targeted promotion, or simply sending "Thank you" emails when customers submit an order, you are better off sticking with a link. Many of your potential customers don't have email that supports HTML, and even if they do, a button can easily get chewed to bits in cyberspace when moving across platforms and programs. A good rule of thumb is site = button and email = link.

–OPTIMIZE YOUR BUTTON

To optimize the design of your button, look back to the seven elements of success. To fulfill the first rule, and to stand out from the clutter of the page, the button needs to be small enough not to take up too much above-the-fold real estate, but not so small that it won't be seen. Simplicity is the key here – your button should have a pleasing and eye-catching design, not one that will give the viewer a headache from Flash overkill or frightening color combinations. If your user doesn't know what your aesthetically pleasing button is for, they're probably not going to use it. This is where you need to do what your elementary teacher always admonished you to do: use your words carefully. Clearly spell out in straightforward terms what the button is for, why you want your user to use it, and finally, how they go about using it.

–PLACE YOUR BUTTON

Now it's time to place the button, and there are multiple placement options depending on what you want your visitors to share and in what context the item to be shared appears. Remember that your button is a call to action, so the best placement is at the point in your process where your visitors are the most engaged, and motivated. The number one location for a product referral is the page where

the product appears and appears by itself or differentiated from other products. Not only will your visitor not yet be preoccupied with billing addresses and credit card numbers, you also do not run the risk of losing a referral opportunity because you placed the button deeper in the ordering process, where the likelihood of an abandoned shopping cart rises.

If you provide a referral tool for an article or white paper, the best spot for the button is at the beginning of the article or white paper for shorter pieces and at both the beginning and the end for pieces more than a page in length. Like most surfers do not read every line of text on every site, it is likely many of your visitors will also not be reading every single sentence and paragraph of what they might send on, especially if they're doing preliminary research or idly surfing.

Other prime locations for referral buttons, depending on your site and on your needs, are your home page, your product or service pages, and on any special offers. Ask yourself what it is you want visitors to your site to pass along and place buttons accordingly. Place the button close to names, icons, or logos that you expect to catch attention, while also keeping the important basics as close to the top of the page as possible. Web sites, like newspapers have a "fold" (i.e., what's seen before the user has to scroll) and anything considered of paramount importance should be placed above the fold.

–OPTIMIZE YOUR LINK

A link is a link is a link. Not exactly a lot of design flexibility, is there? The best you can do, and what you should do it if you can, is to create links that carry at least a part of your message. A very simple example would be

. The real key with links is to accompany them with a

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short, clear, and compelling message. Also, underline or color the text of your link so that it is obviously a link.

–PLACE YOUR LINK

Again we go back to our earlier point that the call to action works best when the visitor has been fully engaged. If you want people to share an article or white paper, the link goes at both the beginning, when they're first interested about the material, and at the end, when they've read it. If it's in an email, you put it at whatever point in your message that you've given your reader the strongest incentive to act. Place it too early in the process, (before that special offer or promotion), and it is like suddenly demanding money from your customer when they are only halfway through the purchasing decision process. You not only won't gain a customer, you will lose one customer with exceptional word-of-mouth potential.

–THE SECRET INGREDIENT

Consider Three Scenarios: People love your site, but you don't give them any tools, much less any incentive, to share it. People love your site, and you give them an easy and obvious way to share it.

People love your site, and you not only give them an easy and obvious way to share it, but you actually reward them for doing so.

Which scenario will result in the most referrals? Which scenario would you yourself respond to best? Adding referral tools is a great start, but when you also add an incentive, you've given your visitors no reason not to act, and your response rate will skyrocket accordingly. As e-sales guru David Weltman, successful CEO and former IBM advisor, says, "What you get is referrals on rocket fuel."

But before you start handing out incentives, consider what your target audience will value and appreciate. To a tech-savvy audience, an offer of a free "Outhouse Construction for Numbskulls" manual will be less compelling than, say, free shipping or entry in a contest to win a new monitor.

–IN CONCLUSION

When used properly, nothing can match the power of viral marketing. It is so effective because it is based on personal opinion, much the same way an editorial carries more weight than an advertisement because it's coming from a trusted source. You trust your friends and colleagues to send you material that is interesting, useful, and pertinent to you personally. Trust will always be more powerful than flashy design and expensive ad campaigns, and when information comes from someone you trust, it is much more powerful.

You can employ a team of designers and programmers and copywriters to build you a beautiful and functional site. You can pay for content, buy advertising, and even purchase lists of email addresses. The one thing you can't buy when growing your business is the trust of your users and the recommendations from current customers to potential new ones. That's achieved only with viral

marketing.

David Bell

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Viral Marketing - Making Your Site Sell Itself

By Gabriel Adams

Do you remember making snowmen when you were a kid? Remember how you started with a little ball of snow, and kept rolling the ball until it became a large ball? Did you ever roll your ball of snow down the hill and watch as it got bigger and bigger and bigger!?

Well, that's how viral marketing works. You start a viral marketing campaign, give it a push, and it goes under its own power, getting bigger and bigger. Of course, all the while it is creating traffic to your website and generating sales for you. Quite an attractive setup, huh?

Truth be told, a successful viral marketing campaign requires some time, effort, and investment to get it started, but if you do it right, it's worth it.

A good viral marketing plan could be broken down into three parts:

1– The bait To start with, you need a free gift that you can give away. It must be extremely valuable, because you want people to share it with their friends, etc. Some examples would be an ebook, a video, a forum, etc.

2– The hook Once you have created your bait that you're going to distribute to people (and they to others, and they to others, etc, etc), you need a hook. You need a way to bring all of these people who are enjoying your free gift back to your website to buy. If you're giving away an ebook, embed links to your website in the ebook. Depending on the product, you'll have to use different kinds of hooks - be innovative!

3– Marketing Yes, that's right! You have to market your viral marketing campaign. (This is the push that you give your snowball to send it rolling down the hill.) You have to promote your free gift, so that people start using it and distributing it.

Viral marketing can be an extremely effective marketing method - but it will require some time, effort, and lots of ingenuity on your part. Happy marketing!

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