

Viral marketing: Is your message contagious enough?

Euromonitor International

18 December 2007

This month, Yahoo led its homepage with a story on the best viral ads of 2007. A hyperlink to 'Contagious viral videos of the week' highlighted four of them; amusing film shorts radiating 'attitude' and surprising enough for viewers to want to email them on to their friends. They're designed to strike a chord with trend-savvy 'onliners', particularly Generation X & Yers.

Key trends

- Peer-to-peer entertainment;
- On the edge and other essential ingredients;
- Risk - whether ads 'take' with consumers or get 'reworked';
- On course for a more sophisticated, niche consumer.

Commercial opportunities

- Web 2.0 is boosting peer-to-peer advertising so viral ads hold promise for many brands;
- Insist on quality content to distinguish your ad from the mass of lower quality user-generated video content;
- The best ads earn extra exposure on dedicated content sites, enter real world consumer debates, and are shown on mainstream broadcast media (e.g. this year's Cadbury's 'Gorilla' ad).

Background

Viral or buzz marketing - which most often involves disseminating promotional video-clips across the internet - is an increasingly accessible option for advertisers. The term no longer evokes fears of something that could disable IT systems. Its techniques have been embraced by blue-chip advertisers including Unilever and Volkswagen.

Viral is a great term for these often risqué chain letter-style subtly branded video-clips or games, launched on the web in the hope that consumers cannot resist passing them on to like-minded friends and contacts, making them self-replicating. Piggybacking online communications, these ads thereby gain credibility from 'peer to peer endorsement'. Indeed, a recent Nielsen survey found 'word of mouth' recommendations to be the most trusted form of ads by consumers worldwide. The best examples of these 'word of mouse' ads take on an almost cult status, becoming the focus of real world discussion and re-telling - meaning more kudos and publicity for the relevant brand/product/service.

The top five viral ads that in 2007 were the most successful internationally in attracting online viewers, as ranked by the GoViral online marketing agency, include the Cadbury Gorilla Drummer, Ray-Ban - Catch Sunglasses and Blendtec - Will it Blend (featuring an iPhone mashed in a blender by a 1950s 'geek' scientist). The 'top four' viral ads Yahoo spotlighted include the ubiquitous one from Dove, urging parents to 'talk to their daughters before the beauty industry does'.

Viral marketing exists in other forms too. For instance, it is often used by social networking sites such as Facebook when users email their non-affiliated contacts. The first commercial widget has been launched on web TV application, Joost, as Coca-Cola has developed 'Coke Bubbles', a tool enabling users to superimpose their thoughts and comments onto viral video clips.

Peer-to-peer entertainment

In its latest report, mobile communications giant Nokia claims that in the next five years, up to 25% of all entertainment will be created, distributed and shared among consumer-based peer groups rather than coming from traditional outlets. Their prediction of 'circular entertainment' is the result of information gathered from 900 million customers about their lifestyles, and behaviour.

Among the emerging trends they identify are: 'Immersive Living' and 'G Tech'. 'Immersive Living' represents the blurred boundaries in the lives of people who live in 'Second Life' as much as they do in the 'real world'. 'G Tech' refers to the idea that entertainment is becoming more democratic, emotional and customised. Viral marketing fits snugly with both these trends.

On the edge and other essential ingredients

For most viral ad fans and creators, these ads work because they're on the edge. This suits their internet medium, famed for its lack of boundaries, allowing creators to add extra punch that delights. Being provocative, uncensored

and comfortable with expletives is part of the picture for many. This summer, the government of Israel famously used a viral ad, far racier than a TV ad, to draw tourists to the country's natural [female] beauty.

While viral ads are known for their bite, “offend and you're an ineffective ad”, explains, Gil Lavie, founder of pioneering international viral ad creators, Keta Keta (responsible for the abovementioned ad), as these ads rely on consumer choice for ongoing transmission. “The trick in a good ad is not to cause offence to your target audience as this will antagonise them,” he believes. For Lavie, viral ads need to score highly on entertainment value and product relevance to work. With these key criteria in mind, he explains that his team tries to build the brand values into the script for maximal effectiveness. The by-line of the company's Viral-Campaigns.com site, is "Short Consumer-Driven Films' Clients include Fiat, Orange, Vichy and msn. Their 'Make love, not terror' viral ad picked up Future Marketing Awards in New York and London. The agency's new viral ad for UK supermarket comparison shopping site mysupermarket.com is a spoof on the famous '9 1/2 Weeks' erotic scene, the twist being that the blindfolded heroine is fed traditional British fare such as mushy peas that “aren't exactly an aphrodisiac!”.

For Laurence Green of Fallon London, the ad agency behind Cadbury's hit Gorilla campaign, “When people see the ad they are not scrutinising it for meaning... they want to be entertained”.

Risk - whether ads 'take' with consumers or get 'reworked'

Once the e-mail multiplier effect kicks in, brands hope to save themselves the costs of buying traditional media advertising and even reach a new niche. However, the biggest challenge facing businesses is to produce something that stands out from the competition including user-created videos. For Paul Marsden, a consultant at the LSE and co-editor of “Connected Marketing: The Viral, Buzz and Word of Mouth Revolution”: “The creative bar is much, much higher than it is for [traditional] advertising... the trouble is that most companies are not willing to take risks or to break taboos, so their virals don't get passed around, and fall flat ". However, anyone embarking on a viral campaign must also take care not to upset 'onliners' too, many of whom resent any clumsy commercial infringement of their 'blogosphere'. According to Matt Smith of digital agency The Viral Factory, "There's a collective intelligence online that can be incredibly exciting - but can be terrifying as well”.

Another risk is that unlike traditional media distributed within specified geographical boundaries, once an ad is in cyberspace, companies have no idea who will end up watching it. Andrew Corcoran, a viral marketing expert at the University of Lincoln in the UK, says: "If you find your viral is mainly being watched by people in eastern Europe, and your brand isn't available there, you're probably wasting your time”.

Significantly, viral commercials are almost impossible to recall and are often "mutated ". Unilever – makers of the Dove viral ad based on their campaign celebrating full-bodied women, was accused of hypocrisy towards women after ads for its Axe/Lynx male deodorants featured more typical skinny models and stereotypes. An internet 'guerrilla attack' fusing the Dove video urging parents to protect girls from negative images of women with raunchy images from the Axe/Lynx deodorant ads, quickly appeared online.

Other companies have sought to harness this 'engagement' phenomenon. MasterCard found that its series of "priceless" advertisements were being so widely parodied in the USA that it launched a competition encouraging people to create further examples.

On course for a more sophisticated, niche consumer

Older audiences are the new targets for some viral ads that want to disassociate themselves from 'high-school' connotations and appeal to the more sophisticated consumer. While Lavie agrees that a fair number of the company's viral ads revolve around girls and sexual innuendo, the elevation of sophisticated humour in viral ads that meet the trend for a more fine-tuned audience appeal is on the rise. His company have just been approached by a social networking site for executives interested in creating an 'exclusive' viral ad, for example.

Outlook

Viral ads are set to benefit from the rise in web profiling which monitors web user habits to tailor, target and select relevant messages for them. Web profiling will act as a form of 'passive referral' for viral ads, alongside traditional peer-to-peer dispatches.

While most brand advertising campaigns now include web ads, more are likely to opt for viral ads as a way to ride the benefits of consumer-generated Web 2.0 activity in the near future.