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# Viral Marketing


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# Viral Marketing

Viral marketing refers to the application of traditional word-of-mouth marketing to the online environment. Originally developed by Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper in 1997, the term is used to describe online techniques designed to generate peer-to-peer conversation and buzz about a company, brand, product, or service. A message that contains something of value or appeal is diffused throughout members of a given social network, and ideally across networks, in an exponential fashion, much like the spread of a virus in medical parlance. The rapid adoption of digital and social media tools by politicians has led to an increased visibility and impact of viral marketing efforts in political campaigns, particularly since the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign. Common viral marketing techniques include, but are not limited to, a systematic and strategic deployment of viral e-mail messages, YouTube videos, blogs, microblogs (such as Twitter), social networking Web sites, podcasts, online games, and text messages.

While word-of-mouth marketing, broadly defined as the sharing of information about a product between a consumer and members of their social network, has been an important topic of research for several decades, the interest and application of viral marketing rapidly grew in recent years with the emergence of Web 2.0, social media, and the diffusion of mobile or handheld devices. These technological evolutions not only fostered a consumer culture that encourages peer-to-peer sharing and participation, but more importantly, they created an online environment that allows individuals to transcend any geographic and time constraints to interact and maintain relationships with friends, family members, or other members of their social networks.

Viral marketing can be characterized as enhanced word-of-mouth communication that has several advantages. First, viral marketing has a much higher diffusion reach and speed. Traditional word-of-mouth marketing relies mostly on face-to-face communication with close friends, and is therefore limited by the size of a person's social network and physical boundaries. In contrast, viral marketing can instantly reach a much larger group of people, one can easily tap into his or her strong-tie and weak-tie social connections

with the push of a button on his or her computer or smartphone.

Second, success in viral marketing is easier to monitor. Whereas the spread of information or messages in traditional word-of-mouth is difficult to measure because interpersonal conversation leaves little to no tangible records, one of the biggest advantages of online marketing is its tracking ability. Digital transmission of information leaves a digital trail that can be documented by social media monitoring or search analytic services. Ultimately, the data collected during the viral diffusion process leads to better analysis and evaluation of a viral campaign on tangible communication (such as awareness and attitude change) or business (such as sales and referrals) outcomes.

Finally, viral marketing creates added value for the brand or product. While traditional word-of-mouth marketing generates conversation about a brand or product, a person's engagement with the brand or product may come to a stop once the face-to-face communication ends. The nonlinear nature of the Web and the interactive capability of social media that viral marketing relies on can create opportunities for brand engagement and consumer interaction well after the viral message is received. Further, because journalists and news organizations are increasingly turning to social media for information, viral marketing campaigns can also generate additional coverage and publicity in traditional mass media.

## Characteristics and Advantages

A successful viral marketing campaign shares two important characteristics. First, the initial "seeding" of the virus must be done with the right people. Consistent with Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory of communication, ideas flow from a source (including brands, media, or celebrities) to opinion leaders, and from them to a wider population. In the context of viral marketing, the opinion leaders could be active media users who have strong professional expertise or reputation. Otherwise, they could also be individuals with a large number of social connections who also tend to act as connectors between different social groups. As opinion leaders exert influences on their networks to share the viral message, its dissemination is amplified and can exponentially grow.

The second critical factor lies in the viral message. In order to prompt the forwarding or sharing behavior, the message must present some value to the receiver. Such value could manifest in the forms of information, functionality, entertainment, or emotion. The classic example that Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper cited in 1997 was the initial growth of Hotmail.com, which included free e-mail, account offers on all outgoing e-mail and thus spread the message within the sender's social network. More recent examples of viral marketing tend to contain humor, sexuality, violence, or interactive elements that are used to add a sense of value to the receiver.

When successfully done, viral marketing can provide a number of advantages to an organization. First, it incurs very little expense because peer-to-peer sharing is free. Therefore, viral marketing may significantly reduce or even eliminate

the need to buy media space for promotional purposes. Second, since viral messages come to individuals from their friends or family, they may be viewed as more credible than traditional marketing messages. Finally, individuals forwarding viral messages are more likely to know the interests and preferences of the recipients, thus making the targeting more effective and allowing the message to better break through the media clutter.

### Use in Political Campaigns

There have been numerous instances where viral marketing messages or campaigns became an important part of the contemporary political process. The political use of viral marketing can be approached from three perspectives: (1) viral marketing efforts implemented by politicians, particularly during electoral campaigns; (2) viral marketing efforts implemented by civic organization



Posters promoting the viral video campaign Kony 2012 in Warsaw, Poland, in April 2012. This 30-minute documentary film was produced by Invisible Children, a nonprofit charity that sought to bring to light the activities of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and its leader Joseph Kony in Uganda. It broke all viral viewing records with more than 100 million views in less than a week, and raised \$20 million.

or grassroots groups to advocate certain policies or causes; and (3) user-generated content that has “gone viral” with the implicit or explicit intent to influence politics.

One of the earliest examples of politicians tapping into the power of viral marketing was Howard Dean. In his bid for the Democratic presidential nomination during the 2004 presidential primary campaigns, Dean utilized Meetup.com to organize scores of passionate supporters, who went on to spread the word and recruit their friends and families to Dean’s campaign. The campaign gained momentum on the ground, and received more mainstream media coverage. Eventually, Dean failed to win the Democratic primary, but his campaign made political history. In subsequent political races, politicians adopted and improved upon various aspects of Dean’s Web strategy. For example, nearly every e-mail message that George W. Bush’s campaign sent out in 2004 provided recipients a way to forward the content to other people.

The second way that viral marketing efforts may influence politics is when they are used by civic organization or grassroots groups to advocate certain policies or causes. For instance, one of the most popular videos to go viral on the Web in recent years was the *Kony 2012* short film produced by Invisible Children, a nonprofit charity aimed at bringing awareness to the activities of the Lord’s Resistance Army and its leader Joseph Kony in Uganda. The 30-minute documentary incorporated elements of information, human interest, and emotional appeals. It took only six days from its initial release to reach 100 million viewers, making it the most viral video in history. Despite success on the Web, the organization failed to create much offline activity in its “Cover the Night” event, and the campaign got lost in the media clutter. Other examples in which viral marketing became an integral part of social movement or advocacy efforts include the Arab Spring and Occupy Movement; both took advantage of the reach and effectiveness of viral techniques in social media in their push for social change.

Finally, in contrast to the two scenarios described above where viral marketing messages are purposefully designed and distributed by an organization to achieve a strategic purpose, the last category can be attributed to the Web

2.0 culture of user-generated content and the incessant passion to “upload” and share everything. With the proliferation of camera phones and video recording and editing devices, many political spectacles on the campaign trail, such as speeches, rallies, or even television and radio interviews all become potential viral materials when political gaffes, missteps, and embarrassing political moments are digitally captured and uploaded by audience members.

These amateur videos may originally be intended for viewing by friends or family. However, the viral elements that these messages contain (such as humor, surprising information, and ridicule) allow them to become viral in an unexpected and accidental fashion, creating real political consequences for candidates. Some examples that fell in this category include Senator George Allen and his “macaca” comment in the 2006 Virginia Senate race, and Governor Rick Perry, who forgot the name of the federal agencies he wished to cut during a televised debate of the 2012 GOP presidential primary. A video of Governor Mitt Romney’s unscripted “47 percent” comment in a fundraiser created a firestorm for his campaign.

## Conclusion

Whether used in the context of electioneering or facilitating social movements and carried out in a strategic or organic fashion, relatively low-cost and high-impact viral marketing messages represent an “equalizer” that could potentially level the playing field for many political actors. However, as seen in numerous examples in the past, effective viral marketing alone does not necessarily lead to success, suggesting that ultimately politics occur on the ground, not on the Web.

Politicians and organizations must find ways to translate the publicity and passion generated online into meaningful and significant offline actions. One of the many reasons that Barack Obama won the 2008 presidential election was his campaign’s ability to convert online followers into donations and votes. Similar arguments can be made about the success of the Arab Spring revolutions and failure of Invisible Children to create turnouts for offline events. An actual organizational network is the critical factor that carries the success of viral marketing efforts to the next level.

Although viral marketing is a promotional technique once primarily used in the business realm to promote a brand, product, or service, the adoption of social media tools by politicians have made them important communication and strategic tools. With the rapid growth of social media and digital communication technologies, one can expect that viral marketing will continue to shape the contemporary political process in different shapes and forms.

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**See Also:** Arab Spring; Campaigns, Presidential (2004); Campaigns, Presidential (2008); Meetup.com; Occupy Movement; Peer-to-Peer; Podcasts; Social Networking Web Sites; Strong-Tie and Weak-Tie Social Connections; Web 2.0; YouTube.

### Further Readings

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one would suggest that there was no viral lift. Viral lift is used to understand the placement of a story on a Web site and the propensity for that information to be shared by others. This is important for understanding social media and political communication because it provides a clear way of relating paid content to word of mouth. In this sense, the viral lift-seed ratio is not an approach to purchasing advertising but is a specific metric that can be used to evaluate the diffusion of information.

A popular form of online advertising pricing is cost-per-click, or CPC. This only charges an advertiser when a user clicks, which is distinct from impression- or CPM-based pricing, where an advertiser pays for the number of times their advertising appears on a Web site, regardless of user activity. The viral lift ratio provides a way of evaluating the number of clicks that a media element has received, and the propensity for that media to generate additional unique impressions outside the context of other conversion goals.

Often, conversion goals involve tracking a user's progression through a Web site experience until they reach a particular point, such as a donation receipt page. In many political contexts, the goal may be to spread information, without necessarily tracking a particular form of conversion task. In this sense, the benefits of the number of views that a campaign is paying for, through clicks, can be refined into a relatively simple number.

The viral lift-seed concept is situated between impression- and click-based pricing, depending on the pricing scheme employed for planting the viral seed. Effective use of analytics is critical for calculating viral lift; sources of traffic to the advertisement or post need to be documented for further analysis. Calculating viral lift can be done using a number of analytics platforms, or even by hand, given the basic data. Multiple links can be placed on different paid media platforms pointing toward a single content element, which would require that a campaign independently track their viral lift among multiple seed location vendors.

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## Viral Seed/Viral Lift

Viral seed/viral lift refers to a ratio between total and paid clicks on an online media asset. Viral seed refers to paid clicks, or clicks coming from advertising that a campaign paid for. Viral lift is the total number of clicks on the asset. As a ratio, lift is described as the total number of views divided by the number of paid views. A ratio of

### Seeding Strategy

An important lesson from other marketing areas that can be applied to social political communication is that the quality of seeded content is more