



The Virus of Marketing

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Think of a virus as the ultimate marketing program. When it comes to getting a message out with little time, minimal budgets, and maximum effect, nothing on earth beats a virus. Every marketer aims to have a dramatic impact on thinking and behavior in a target market; every successful virus does exactly that.

As much as we may fear or hate viruses both biological and computer varieties these self-perpetuating, self-propagating entities have important lessons for marketers. With neither a marketing department nor an ad agency of their own, the most prominent biological and digital viruses have become brand names. Every marketer I know is desperately searching for the new approach to marketing in the post-mass-market economy. It's time to stop shying away from the ominous sound of it and embrace the enemy: viral marketing or v-marketing, if the term is too harsh. Here are six rules on how to succeed at v-marketing.

Rule 1: Stealth is the essence of market entry

Most marketers know that getting into the consumer's mind is the toughest part of the challenge; the usual response is simply to turn up the volume. Viruses are smarter: They find a way into the host under the guise of another, unrelated activity.

PepsiCola is one company that has begun to experiment with v-marketing. Its Mountain Dew campaign offers kids the chance to send 10 proofs of purchase and \$35 to qualify for a Motorola pager. Cool! The kids have to subscribe to the paging service themselves, and Mountain Dew reserves the right to beep their newly equipped customers with Dew-related messages on a weekly basis. So every time the pager goes off, it reminds the kids indirectly who's responsible for getting them that way-cool piece of social technology.

Rule 2 : What's up-front is free; payment comes later

Viruses are unusually patient little buggers. Many will lie dormant in their host for years before demanding payback; digital viruses often burrow into an unsuspecting hard drive and wait for their trigger date such as Michaelangelo's birthday before making their presence known. It's a corollary to stealth: no payment up-front.

Consider how Intuit's wildly popular Quicken program got its start. It all spread from a single campaign that contained a basic message: order the product and pay nothing. If you aren't productive within eight minutes of opening the box, tear up the invoice.

Of course, most users were not only balancing their checkbooks within eight minutes but also discovering that they couldn't live without this software. The result: 70% global market share in personal-financial-management software with minimal expenses for traditional marketing or selling. Plus an installed base to drive pricier sales of ancillary products such as checks and upgrades.

Rule 3: Let the behaviors of the target community carry the message

Viruses do not spread by chance. They let the high-frequency behaviors of their hosts -- social interaction, email, Websurfing -- carry them into new territories. The lesson for v-marketers: fashion your messages so that the target markets will transmit them as a part of their core interests.

This tactic that works best when absolutely no one is masterminding the campaign. On America Online, for example, there are scads of chat rooms for investors; Motley Fool is only the most prominent. Not long ago, these communities got hold of a couple of high-tech stocks Iomega and Presstek that key members of the group "talked up" as hot investment opportunities. Both stocks enjoyed a skyrocketing hundred-fold increase, carried by the hospitable hype of the online hosts. When the mainstream press caught on, critics rushed in to pop the bubble. But compared to their starting points before AOL came along, Iomega and Presstek still trade at hugely inflated prices.

Rule 4: Look like a host, not a virus

Because they are able to masquerade as something they are not, viruses are able to avoid being rejected by human immune and computer operating systems. They enter human cells and mimic genetic material, or they enter software systems and mimic existing code. The message to v-marketers: be the host.

One consumer marketing company, albeit one with lots of money, has perfected the tactic. Consider Nike's "Just Do It" campaign. All it takes is megabucks to hire the world's most sought-after celebrity athletes, to buy television time at \$40,000 a second during the Super Bowl, and to saturate the retail channel with product promotions and giveaways. But none of that worked as well as Nike's ubiquitous tag line, "Just Do It." The phrase is practically an entry in the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary under the listing: American culture. Everyone from cynical marketers in ad agencies to prison guards in B-movies is using the phrase without irony. Every time they use it, they're endorsing Nike products.

Rule 5: Exploit the strength of weak ties

Sociologists have long noted that individuals with many casual social connections have a larger influence on communities than do individuals with fewer strong connections. Viruses thrive on weak ties. The movement of viruses over the Web -- a practically infinite collection of weak ties in countless virtual communities -- is a prime example.

In business, such tactics are the instinctive practice of companies engaging in multilevel marketing: marketers such as Tupperware, Amway, and Mary Kay Cosmetics, for instance. In each of these businesses, the strategy is to find a collection of individuals who excel at developing a large number of weak ties -- and use those ties to sell products and services. Tupperware, for example, gets someone in a social community, such as a suburban neighborhood, to host a party featuring Tupperware. Everything

about the party is ostensibly noncommercial: it's her house, her food, her friends. But the social interaction is funded by the sale of Tupperware products. What's social is indistinguishable from what's commercial a powerful business network built on weak social ties.

Law 6: Invest to reach the tipping point

Viruses do not become epidemics until they reach the tipping point. In other words, the virus must expand through the host population until it reaches a certain threshold of visibility and scale. Think of it this way: a virus doubles each year. In year one, it's only 1% of the host and scarcely detectable. In year two, it's still minute, only 2%. But in year five, it's 16% -- and suddenly it's an epidemic. V-marketers must understand that they're playing the same game because the impact of exploiting weak ties does not come overnight.

That's why Microsoft's true leverage with its DOS and Windows operating systems took a decade to pay off. Today Microsoft operating systems run on an estimated 85 million PCs the world over. That's why CNN was viewed as a joke by the mainstream press -- until suddenly everyone from Saddam Hussein to Bill Clinton was getting real-time news exclusively from the 24-hour network.

And it's why an idea like v-marketing, which may look like an unpleasant, unlikely metaphor at first, will take a few years to win acceptance. But it will be essential to the success of lots of fast new businesses. And the sooner they know it, the better they'll do. So spread the word.



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