

Viral Marketing: More than the Latest Buzz Term

E-Commerce Optimization for 2009 and Beyond

Keeping Up With the Times

In recent years, generating qualified website traffic and increasing profitability has been focused largely on standard search engine optimization (SEO) techniques based on empirical research. Certainly targeting efforts at search engines like **Google** and using reverse algorithmic engineering to gain the attention of bots surfing the internet is a good marketing tactic. There will always be room for such website strategy as link analysis, link building, and keyword density optimization in any marketing campaign. But in order to stay ahead of the competition, a modern business has to do much, much more.

To be effective, marketing – just like any other business initiative – must change with the times. Remember when television advertising was considered the acme of an effective advertising campaign? This came about only after most American households owned at least one TV set – a rarity prior to the 1960s.

The same principles apply to marketing in the current Web 2.0 era. Even a few short years ago, most internet surfers received their news

and looked for information by performing a search using one of the more popular engines such as **Google**, **Yahoo** or **Ask**. Today, that is becoming less and less popular.

Instead, savvy surfers turn to bookmarking sites such as **Digg**, **Del.icio.us**, or **Technorati** or even clicking on tiny URLs posted on social networking sites such as **Twitter** or **Facebook**. In fact, social sites are the number one factor influencing, and changing, consumer behavior globally.

According to 2008 statistics recently released by Nielsen Online¹:

- Visiting social networks and blogging sites has become the fourth most popular activity on the internet.
- Member communities (social networking and blogging sites) are visited by 67% of all people online worldwide.

¹ “Global Faces and Networked Places: A Nielsen Report on Social Networking’s New Global Footprint”. March, 2009. Retrieved from http://server-uk.imrworldwide.com/pdcimages/Global_Faces_and_Networked_Places-A_Nielsen_Report_on_Social_Networkings_New_Global_Footprint.pdf.

- Time being spent at these communities is increasing three times more quickly than overall internet growth.
- Visits to member communities accounts for nearly 10% of total time spent on the internet.
- Social networks are most popular with 68% of those on the internet, while 65% claim email to be the most popular activity.

Additionally, as far back as 2007, Valleywag² reported that the number of blogs being tracked on **Technorati** had ceased to increase, but 'social media properties' (member communities) were experiencing a tremendous rate of growth.

It should be abundantly clear that modern, effective SEO is drifting away from purely using algorithm reverse engineering, instead evolving into an activity more focused on creating social contacts and influencing people. This is often referred to as a 'social science' approach.

The Impact on Marketing

According to Wikipedia, "Viral marketing and viral advertising refer to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness or to achieve other marketing objectives (such as product sales) through self-replicating viral processes, analogous

to the spread of pathological and computer viruses."

This definition is parallel to that accepted by most people in the business of providing marketing and SEO services. Email could be considered an early form of viral marketing since messages were often forwarded to a recipient's contacts.

In regards to marketing and advertising efforts, there is definitely a largely untapped market of consumers all gathering in a handful of member communities just waiting to be tapped. Indeed, most social communities like **Twitter**, **MySpace**, and **Facebook** report growth rates in the high triple digits over the past year.

Types of Viral Marketing

The vehicle for viral marketing can be considered any type of media that encourages one person to forward, and share, it with others. This includes videos, blog posts, podcasts, articles, graphics and more interactive media such as RPG- and ARG-type games.

Another form of marketing which is viral in nature is a meme. This is simply a transmitted idea. In regards to internet marketing, a meme refers to "material propagated through e-mail and Internet forums" (according to Wikipedia). Sites like **Digg** and **YouTube** are often used to spread memes.

Still others refer to 'micromemes', which are simply one person sharing

² "Beyond Blogs". Valleywag. Retrieved from <http://valleywag.gawker.com/tech/notag/beyond-blogs-256580.php>.

what is particularly interesting with a personal group of online friends.

The further memes are disseminated, the quicker they spread. It becomes obvious just how effective this could be for the savvy marketer.

Important Considerations for Effective Viral Campaigns

Before embarking on a viral marketing campaign, there are several considerations to take into account. Today's internet surfers are exceptionally tech-savvy, living in an online world of fast-paced, abbreviated conversations, far-reaching networks of virtual 'friends', and an overload of information found at nearly every online turn.

A successful campaign will not contribute to just so much more spam reaching the greatly diversified global community of online users, it will provide some value to potential customers.

The following are some of the key concepts to consider in regards to viral marketing campaigns:

- Who is your target market?
- Where do they gather?
- Why do they choose one member community over another?
- Which community members hold the greatest amount of influence?
- What type of information interests them?
- What media is most popular?
- What type of content/media

encourages members to share with others?

- How and where do they search for interesting content?

“ Twitter was the fastest growing online member community as of February. ”

- 2009 Nielsen Online

Before placing your viral content on a social community, consider whether or not this placement will be optimized for search engines. After all, if you post content which is not readily available to the larger global online community, is the effort truly worthwhile?

Another consideration refers back to the demographics of your target market. For instance, In the most general terms, a company which provides a product or service to senior citizens is less likely to achieve increased sales by utilizing a viral marketing campaign simply because these consumers are the least tech-savvy and least likely to make use of current technology.

That being said, it is worthy to note that there are very few, if any, examples of offerings from a company that could not benefit in some way from reaching potential clients via the internet. After all, even products aimed at an older crowd are often purchased, or researched, by a younger member of the family.

Examples of Effective Viral Campaigns

You may remember these 'small' contributions to the worldwide web.

Hotmail, Juno, Yahoo Mail

All of these free email services became successful largely due to the viral nature of the service itself. Links to the company were included below each user's signature line, ensuring that the message would reach the target market – anyone who used email. These are all examples of one of the earliest types of viral marketing used on the internet.

The Million Dollar Homepage

Many people will recall this site, started in 2005. It offered a pixel of advertising space on the homepage for to anyone willing to pay \$1 each. Has the advertising proven to be effective? It is doubtful, but word quickly spread after inception and it became the thing to do.

YouTube

There are many reasons that **YouTube** grew from a small site where a few people posted video content to the mega-hit it is today, but viral marketing most assuredly was one of the largest factors. The site offered a way for webmasters to easily embed videos on personal pages without using valuable bandwidth. Because the company thought to properly brand their product, the service quickly spread in a viral manner.

The Obama Girl/Crush on Obama

This rather amateurish video quickly launched both the career of the actress hamming it up for the camera and the company which produced it. Although much of its success can be attributed to its political message and timeliness, it would never have achieved such a following without viral marketing.

“ 40% of all social networkers said they use social networking sites to learn more about brands or products that they like. ”

Selected Glossary of Terms

To better understand some of the key concepts behind viral marketing, here are some of the more common terms used in conjunction with this strategy.

Astroturfing

A deceptive practice whereby a for-profit group organizes an effort which they wish to be considered a 'grassroots' campaign.

Asynchronous Communication

Messages that allow the sender and receiver to communicate across a vast geographic area, such as email.

Blogger Outreach

Part of a public relations campaign whereby a marketer identifies the most influential bloggers and tries to form a relationship to spread content via viral means.

Connectors

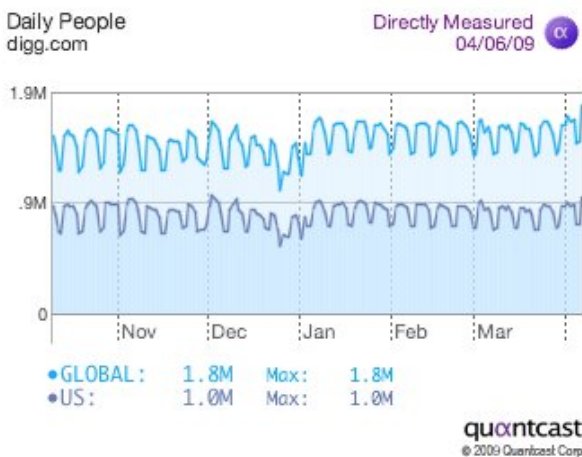
This term refers to people in a member community who can introduce a newbie to a large amount of people, rather like a stranger being taken under the wing of a party hostess.

Copying Fidelity

The ability for content to be successfully replicated, ensuring that as it is spread virally, it retains its original aspects. With today's technology, this is largely a nonexistent concern.

The Digg Effect

The very foundation of viral marketing, this refers to content bookmarked on a social news site such as **Digg** which quickly becomes exposed to a large number of online people in a short amount of time. This can cause a crash of the website.



Going Viral

Content goes viral when it is passed amongst groups of online people. The more people the virus is exposed to, the faster it will replicate.

Guerilla Marketing

Much like military campaigns, this form of marketing campaign is often low-budget, high-risk, and may blur the line of ethics. While it may be effective, it can also be very annoying and seen as spam.

High Frequency/High Reach Sharers

Those internet surfers who most frequently share interesting content. This is an important target market to reach with a viral campaign.

Host

This is where viral marketing starts; the original infection that the marketer hopes will pass along the virus.

Linkbait

Content that is created with the specific purpose of attracting blogger attention. The hope is that it is interesting enough to entice bloggers to create a large number of inbound links. This is a component of SEO strategy to increase traffic and page ranking.

Mashup

Not necessarily a component of viral marketing, but an increasingly popular term used to describe two or more types of content or services to create a totally new type of content or service.

Power Users

Members of a social site who have built up a positive reputation, usually by sharing a large number of links, posting original content, or articles.

The content posted by a power user is more likely to be noticed by the greatest amount of people.

Reciprocity

You share your content, I'll share mine. A key concept behind the success of viral marketing.

Social Bookmarking

The process of sharing content by creating a bookmark available to the general public. Usually a social bookmarking site allows users to rank, vote, or comment on the listed content.

Social Media

This refers to any type of personally-created web content, like a video or graphic, shared on a site such as **YouTube** or **Flickr**.

“ The top 2 most bookmarked domains are YouTube and Flickr. ”

- According to Backtags.com as of April 6, 2009

Social Media Optimization

The process of optimizing a piece of content by using online social networking. Often it involves building links at social networking sites.

Stealth Marketing

This form of marketing combines guerrilla tactics and astroturfing. It utilizes paid actors who pretend to be fans of a particular product or service and use social networking to virally

market these items.

Conclusion

Modern marketing firms now realize that the most effective way to get information about a product or service disseminated to the largest amount of potential clients in the shortest amount of time requires ingenious ways of using the social networking already occurring, and becoming more and more popular, on the internet.

One way to determine the best strategy is to study the behavior of today's internet surfers and online community members. There is a reason that sites such as **Facebook** have realized dramatic increases in the number of its members and the amount of time being spent socializing there. As more and more consumers become physically disconnected from standard relationships, they will increasingly turn to their virtual circle of friends and family for networking and advice.

In order to become, or remain, competitive with the leaders in any industry, it is vital that a company's marketing plan contain a viral campaign.

“ Facebook is the largest online social community based on number of members. ”

- 2009 Nielsen Online
