



# Two hearts in three-quarter time: How to waltz the social media/viral marketing dance

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## KEYWORDS

Web 2.0;  
User-generated content;  
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Viral marketing;  
Word-of-mouth

**Abstract** The concept of viral marketing has been discussed in the literature for over 15 years, since Jeffrey Rayport first introduced the term in 1996. However, the more widespread use of social media has recently pushed this idea to a whole new level. We provide insight into the relationship between social media and viral marketing, and illustrate the six steps executives should take in order to dance the social media/viral marketing waltz. We define viral marketing as electronic word-of-mouth whereby some form of marketing message related to a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way—often through the use of social media applications. We consider the three conditions that need to be fulfilled to create a viral marketing epidemic (i.e., giving the right message to the right messengers in the right environment) and present four different groups of social media viral marketing campaigns (nightmares, strokes-of-luck, homemade issues, and triumphs). We conclude with five points of caution that managers should heed when trying to launch their own viral marketing campaign.

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## 1. One. . . way: Viral marketing goes social media

The bubonic plague, also referred to as the Black Death, is widely considered to be the deadliest pandemic in human history. Between 1348 and 1350 it killed more than 35 million people across Europe, corresponding to approximately 50,000 lives lost per day. Yet, as compared to more recent epidemics, these figures seem modest; according to

the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2010), approximately 60 million Americans contracted the H1N1 virus between April 2009 and April 2010—more than 150,000 per day! Although only 265,000 were actually hospitalized and 12,000 perished, many of us won't soon forget the panic surrounding this 'swine flu.' Now, consider an epidemic of another sort. On July 14, 2010, Procter & Gamble uploaded a 30-second video spot via the social media application YouTube, to promote its Old Spice brand. This video, entitled *The Man Your Man Could Smell Like*, was viewed 23 million times in 36 hours—representing 15 million 'infections' per day. If H1N1 had spread with the same rapidity, 60 million infections would have been reached after

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less than a week, and the 35 million casualties of the Black Death would have taken no more time than a long weekend.

Admittedly, watching an online video is certainly not comparable to getting infected by a potentially deadly disease. Nevertheless, these numbers illustrate the incredible speed with which so-called ‘viral marketing campaigns’ can spread at a time when social media start to rule the world (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Viral marketing allows firms to promote their products and services with very low budgets and still reach the same levels of awareness that are usually only achievable with high-frequency TV advertising. Viral marketing enabled *The Blair Witch Project* and *Paranormal Activity* to become blockbusters, although the individual budget of each movie was less than the average salary of one starring Hollywood actor. Brands such as Evian (Roller-Skating Babies), Burger King (Subservient Chicken), and Old Spice have all benefited from viral marketing epidemics, while JetBlue, Heinz Ketchup, and others have suffered severely at the same hands.

What is this new form of advertising that allows average people like Stephen Voltz and Fritz Globe to become celebrities and spokespeople of firms, while at the same time being such a headache to multinationals like Microsoft and Sony? We intend to answer these questions and to illustrate the six steps of waltzing the social media/viral marketing dance:

- One. . .way: Viral marketing goes social media
- Two. . .concepts: Word-of-mouth and viral marketing

- Three. . .conditions: How to create an epidemic
- Four. . .groups: Social media viral marketing campaigns
- Five. . .pieces of advice: Spreading the virus
- Six. . .degrees of separation: From epidemics to immunity

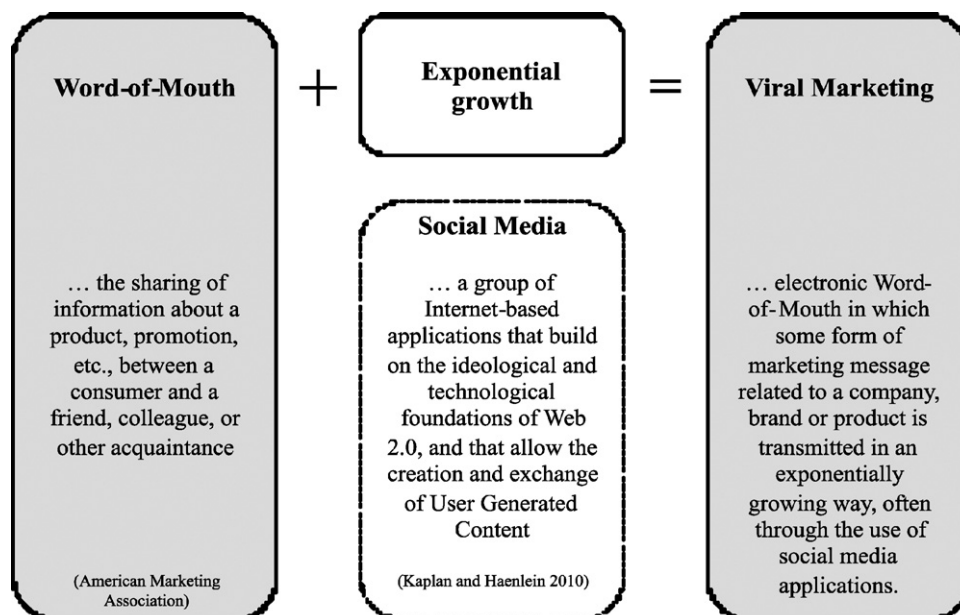
## 2. Two. . .concepts: Word-of-mouth and viral marketing

Before we discuss how successful viral marketing epidemics can be created, which different types of viral marketing campaigns exist, and what firms should consider when trying to launch a viral message, it is first necessary to clearly define what viral marketing stands for and how it links to related concepts, such as word-of-mouth and social media (see Figure 1).

### 2.1. Word-of-mouth

*Word-of-mouth* (WoM) is a topic that has been of interest to marketing researchers for more than five decades. It can loosely be defined as the sharing of information about a product, promotion, et cetera, between a consumer and a friend, colleague, or other acquaintance (MarketingPower, 2010). WoM has been shown to substantially influence consumer attitudes and behaviors, and to be up to seven times more effective than traditional print advertising in impacting brand switching decisions

Figure 1. Relationship between word-of-mouth and viral marketing



(Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). Despite what one might initially think, WoM is not a purely altruistic behavior: it offers advantages to the sender, as well as the receiver. For senders, WoM is an opportunity to help others and to improve their self-confidence in doing so (Phelps, Lewis, Mobilio, Perry, & Raman, 2004; Smith, Coyle, Lightfoot, & Scott, 2007). For receivers, it reduces decision-making time as well as risk (Chiu, Hsieh, Kao, & Lee, 2007), as friends tend to be perceived as unbiased sources of information (Smith et al., 2007).

In recent years, there has been an extensive amount of research investigating WoM in online space. Similar to traditional WoM, electronic WoM—such as book reviews exchanged on pages like Amazon.com—has been shown to influence purchase behavior (Chevalier & Mayzlin, 2006) and to lead to the acquisition of higher value customers (Trusov, Bucklin, & Pauwels, 2009). This presents interesting managerial implications, as the inherent anonymity of online feedback mechanisms can make such platforms subject to strategic manipulations by companies which would like to increase their sales through favorable comments (Dellarocas, 2003, 2006). Also, the relative ease with which electronic WoM can be collected and analyzed allows firms to use comments exchanged via newsgroups and the like for marketing research purposes (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). This approach, which is referred to in the literature as netnography (Kozinets, 2002), can lead to valuable insights due to its ability to observe consumers in an unobtrusive way.

In comparison to traditional WoM, electronic WoM has two main advantages. The first lies in its higher diffusion speed for new pieces of information. When WoM is exchanged using traditional face-to-face communication, diffusion is limited by the size of the social network each individual maintains. Given that, on average, people have only three close friends (Marsden, 1987) and a total social network of no more than 150 (Hill & Dunbar, 2003), chains of WoM communication and customer referrals tend to die out quickly. In contrast, WoM exchanged electronically can reach a much larger group of other customers. Second, electronic WoM is substantially easier to monitor than traditional WoM, which can only be measured using a relatively tedious process (Reingen & Kernan, 1986). This allows for better analysis of the impact of WoM on tangible business outcomes (e.g., sales, profits) and, ultimately, the calculation of return-on-marketing measures.

## 2.2. Viral marketing

We define *viral marketing* as electronic word-of-mouth whereby some form of marketing message

related to a company, brand, or product is transmitted in an exponentially growing way, often through the use of social media applications. Viral marketing has two defining elements. The first is a growth, or reproduction, rate greater than one; this implies that each receiver passes the message to more than one other person. For example, when initially seeded to one person, a viral marketing message with a reproduction rate of two would be transferred to 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 (et cetera) new people in the following periods. If the reproduction rate exceeds one, the resulting growth pattern is exponential: similar to that which can be observed for other phenomena in business (e.g., compound interest), physics (e.g., nuclear chain reactions), biology (e.g., bacterial growth), and epidemiology (e.g., spread of a virus).

The second characteristic usually associated with viral marketing is use of social media applications. *Social media* can be defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). It is an umbrella term describing different types of applications such as collaborative projects (e.g., Wikipedia), blogs/micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter; see Kaplan & Haenlein, in press), content communities (e.g., YouTube), social networking sites (e.g., Facebook), virtual game worlds (e.g., World of Warcraft), and virtual social worlds (e.g., Second Life; see Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009b). Social media applications are particularly suited for viral marketing, as the community element embedded in them makes it convenient to transmit the marketing message to a large group of people. Some researchers therefore use the terms ‘viral marketing’ and ‘social media marketing’ interchangeably (Kozinets, de Valck, Wojnicki, & Wilner, 2010).

Viral marketing is a relatively recent phenomenon and has been discussed in the literature under a variety of different terminologies such as word-of-mouth (Goldenberg, Libai, & Muller, 2001), buzz marketing (Thomas, 2004), stealth marketing (Kaikati & Kaikati, 2004), and word-of-mouth marketing (Kozinets et al., 2010). The term ‘viral marketing’ was borne of an article written by Harvard Business School’s Jeffrey Rayport (1996). Published in the business magazine *Fast Company*, “The Virus of Marketing” makes reference to the exponential growth pattern inherent in viral marketing by comparing diffusion of the marketing message with the spread of a virus. Successful viral marketing should lead to a growth pattern similar to major epidemics such as the Black Death in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Spanish Flu in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and Swine Flu in the

21<sup>st</sup> century. The more resistant and durable a viral marketing virus is, the better!

### 3. Three . . . conditions: How to create an epidemic

To make viral marketing work, three basic criteria must be met: the right people need to get the right message under the right circumstances (see Figure 2). Next, we provide additional detail on each of these elements, drawing on prior research in the areas of marketing and sociology, as well as the work of Malcolm Gladwell (2002).

#### 3.1. The messengers: Market mavens, social hubs, and salespeople

The first critical element in creating a viral marketing epidemic entails finding the right people to spread the message. Consistent with classical laws of concentration, 20% of messengers can be expected to carry 80% of the load; it is, therefore, especially crucial to select wisely the initial hosts for the epidemic. Three groups of messengers are required to ensure the transformation of an ordinary message into a viral phenomenon: market mavens, social hubs, and salespeople.

*Market mavens* are defined as individuals who have access to a large amount of marketplace information, and proactively engage in discussions with other consumers to diffuse and spread this in-

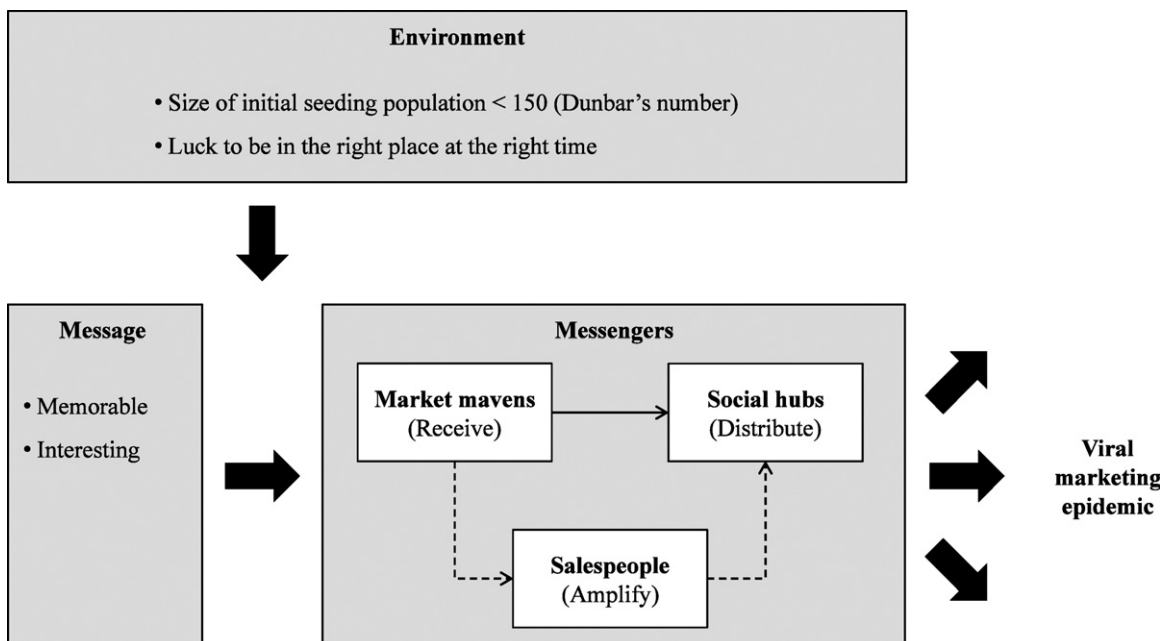
formation (Feick & Price, 1987). As individuals attuned to the pulse of things, market mavens are typically among the first to receive the message and transmit it to their immediate social network. Once a market maven hands over the message to a social hub, a viral epidemic has begun. *Social hubs* are defined as people with an exceptionally large number of social connections (Goldenberg, Han, Lehmann, & Hong, 2009). They often know hundreds of different people and have the ability to serve as connectors or bridges between different subcultures. The exceptional social network of social hubs can facilitate immediate transmission of the message to hundreds, if not thousands, of other consumers.

Yet, in some cases, a direct link between a market maven and a social hub is just not enough. While market mavens may know the message earlier than others, they might not be particularly convincing in transmitting the information. In this case, *salespeople* could be needed to receive the message from the market maven, amplify it by making it more relevant and persuasive, and then transmit it to the social hub for further distribution.

#### 3.2. The message: Memorable and interesting

Even the most perfect combination of market mavens, social hubs, and salespeople is of limited value when the news itself is not adapted to become viral. Only messages that are both memorable and sufficiently interesting to be passed on to others

Figure 2. The three basic conditions for creating a viral marketing epidemic



have the potential to spur a viral marketing phenomenon. In medical terms, this is equivalent to the difference between having flu, which is usually only contagious for several days, and being a carrier of the herpes virus, which establishes a lifelong infection. While ordinary flu tends to die out quickly and affects a small number of people, herpes can turn into a true epidemic and impact thousands of individuals. Long infectious periods and diseases for which no antidote exists are an epidemiologist's nightmare and a marketer's dream come true; well, at least in a marketing sense.

Making a message more memorable and interesting, or simply more infectious, is often not a matter of major changes but minor adjustments. One option is to rely on true stories about real people ('My brother has a friend, John Doe. . .'), which are often more persuasive than corporate advertising. Another option is to use rumors, especially positive ones that reflect well on the person telling them, as they have a particularly high chance of being transmitted to others (Kamins, Folkes, & Perner, 1997). And then there are the obvious safe bets like practical short lists (e.g., 'The ten best ways to lose weight'), humorous or even hilarious messages, and sex. More generally, messages with viral potential must trigger an emotional response in the receiver (Dobele, Lindgreen, Beverland, Vanhamme, & van Wijk, 2007). Effective messages often contain an element of surprise, combined with other emotions that can be either positive (e.g., joy) or negative (e.g., disgust, fear). So, don't shoot the messenger if your viral campaign doesn't take off. It may just be the message's fault!

### 3.3. The environment: Dunbar's Number and ordinary good luck

In addition to getting the right message to the right people, two other environmental conditions make the difference between success and failure in the domain of viral marketing. First, messengers will only pass on the message when they think it's not already something everyone knows about. The peculiar thing is that 'everyone' usually means 150 contacts, as this is the maximum number of people with whom an individual can maintain stable social relationships in their daily life. This threshold is often referred to as Dunbar's Number, and is related to the size of the human neocortex (Hill & Dunbar, 2003). Companies may fail in trying to create a viral marketing epidemic because they spread the initial message too broadly. Instead of concentrating on having as many seeds as possible, firms should instead focus on having an infectious message (leading to a high reproduction rate) and seeding it to many

disconnected subcultures. Platforms that have the ability to host different subcultures simultaneously, such as virtual social worlds (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2009a, 2009b), are therefore particularly well suited to kick off viral marketing phenomena.

Second, some plain old good luck is needed to glue everything together, as it's often just not the right time and/or place to launch a viral marketing campaign. This ambiguity makes viral marketing hard to understand for companies: actions which worked well in the past, or for one's competitor, may simply be ineffective in a specific case. Consider the viral marketing campaign launched in May 2009 by Starbucks. The coffee vendor encouraged its customers to take pictures of themselves in front of the company's new billboards, and post the shots to the micro-blogging application, Twitter. At the same time, film producer and political activist Robert Greenwald saw this as a perfect opportunity for promoting his latest documentary about unfair labor practices at the coffee chain; he, too, asked people to take pictures of themselves—but while holding signs criticizing the company's practices. Many responded to Greenwald's calling, and soon about half the photos distributed on Twitter were very different from those initially intended by Starbucks. Why things like that happen, we don't know; maybe sometimes, it's just not your day!

## 4. Four . . . groups: Social media viral marketing campaigns

Viral marketing campaigns emerge from an interaction between the firm and its customer base. The initiator can, therefore, be either a company or a group of consumers. And like any other marketing action, viral marketing campaigns can result in positive or negative outcomes. Combining these two dimensions results in four different types of viral marketing campaigns: nightmares, strokes-of-luck, homemade issues, and triumphs (see Figure 3). Next, we provide examples of each of these four different types via case studies, illustrating how companies can either encourage good things or avoid bad things happening to them.

### 4.1. Nightmares: The case of JetBlue

Valentine's Day 2007 is probably not a date that David Neeleman, founder and CEO of American low-cost airline JetBlue Airways, holds in warm memory. This has nothing to do with his personal life—David and his wife, Vicki, are the happy parents of nine children—but rather with the company he founded in 1998. The chain of events started quite unspectacularly, when a

**Figure 3.** The four groups of social media viral marketing campaigns

<b>Outcome</b>	<b>Positive</b>	<b>Strokes of luck</b> (e.g., the Diet Coke & Mentos Experiment)	<b>Triumphs</b> (e.g., Burger King's Whopper Sacrifice campaign)
	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Nightmares</b> (e.g., the case of JetBlue)	<b>Homemade issues</b> (e.g., Charlie's and Jeremy's Sony PSP blog)
		<b>Customers</b>	<b>Company</b>
<b>Initiator of viral marketing campaign</b>			

JetBlue flight from New York to Cancun was delayed on the tarmac due to a brutal ice storm. Instead of solving the issue rapidly, it took JetBlue nearly 9 hours to gather materials to defrost the plane (partly because the equipment was frozen, itself). This resulted in a near-complete breakdown of JetBlue's operations, with thousands of flights cancelled and hundreds of others delayed; the firm was unable to reschedule flight crews because of internal IT systems problems.

Not surprisingly, customers were outraged and vented their anger in a wave of negative comments on blogs, micro-blogs (e.g., Twitter), and social networking sites (e.g., Facebook). The fury lasted for several days, as JetBlue had to cancel nearly a quarter of all its flights the following weekend (February 17/18). The impact of this incident was even more substantial because JetBlue had worked hard in the previous months to build a positive image and an excellent reputation. *Business Week* even wanted to crown the firm as one of four companies with the best customer service, and planned to promote this prominently on its cover page. Yet, due to the "worst operational week in JetBlue's seven year history" (McGregor, 2007, p. 58), the magazine changed its mind at the last minute and replaced JetBlue with retailer Nordstrom.

On Monday, February 19, David Neeleman (2009) issued a public apology for the cancellations and sent a letter to the airline's clients. Instead of trying to find excuses or to cover up the situation, he admitted that he was "humiliated and mortified" by the systems failure, and expressed his deep regrets to the

customers affected: "We are sorry and embarrassed. But most of all, we are deeply sorry." He also took precise action and introduced JetBlue's Bill of Rights, which provides detailed rules for compensation in case JetBlue should need to cancel any future flights. Of course, firms should try to avoid getting into such trouble. But, if this is not possible, the JetBlue example illustrates that admitting your mistakes and saying 'I'm sorry' can go a long way.

#### 4.2. Strokes of luck: The Diet Coke and Mentos experiment

What happens when you throw some Mentos candies into a bottle of Diet Coke? Lawyer Stephen Voltz asked himself this question in November 2005, while waiting for his friend Fritz Grobe, a professional juggler and comedian who was making some final preparations for his evening show. To find the answer—that gelatin and gum Arabic in the Mentos will chemically react with caffeine, potassium benzoate, aspartame, and CO<sub>2</sub> gas in the Diet Coke, producing a geyser effect—Voltz and Grobe conducted a series of experiments. The two researchers discovered that best results can be achieved by drilling holes in the Mentos, stringing six of them on a paperclip, and drilling another hole into the cap of the Diet Coke bottle. This sequence can lead to a geyser 20 feet high!

In spring 2006 Voltz and Grobe posted to content communities Revver and YouTube, a video entitled *Experiment #137*, involving 500 Mentos and 100 bottles of Diet Coke. Within 24 hours the video received 4,000 hits, and views increased by 1,000 per hour. As of this writing, *Experiment #137* has garnered more than 12.5 million views. The Diet Coke and Mentos experiment got so popular that Voltz and Grobe were invited to be on the David Letterman show, to perform the experiment on live television. Perfetti Van Melle, Mentos' parent company, reacted immediately by shipping thousands of free Mentos to Voltz and Grobe to support their work. Additionally, the company hired Olympic snowboarder Ryan Thompson to stage his own Diet Coke/Mentos geyser at a ski resort in Colorado, and launched a website ([www.mentosgeyser.com](http://www.mentosgeyser.com)) which invited users to submit their personal experiment videos in exchange for free iTunes downloads. All this resulted in a 20% increase in sales for Mentos during summer 2006.

Interestingly, Coca-Cola displayed a very different reaction. On June 12, the company issued a press release stating that it would hope "people want to drink Diet Coke more than try experiments with it" since the "craziness with Mentos" would not fit the brand personality of Diet Coke (Schneider, 2007). The firm subsequently sent two T-shirts and

baseball caps to Voltz and Grobe, with a note wishing them all the best. Yet, only 4 weeks later, Coke decided to transform its corporate websites ([www.coke.com](http://www.coke.com) and [www.coca-cola.com](http://www.coca-cola.com)) by adding the content community The Coke Show, to encourage users to post user-generated content. And finally, toward the end of the summer, both Coca-Cola and Google approached Voltz and Grobe to negotiate a deal, the details of which were never revealed. So, even if you are not the early bird, you might still catch a worm or two if you put enough money on the table.

#### 4.3. Homemade issues: Charlie's and Jeremy's Sony PSP blog

One of the key rules of social media usage is honesty: deception of the social media community is strongly frowned upon, and often met with anger (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Yet, sometimes even the most successful firms seem to forget this basic tenet. Consider consumer electronics giant Sony Entertainment. In 2006, Sony decided to create a fake blog entitled *All I Want for Christmas Is a PSP*. This blog was supposedly managed by 'Charlie,' an independent "designer/artist/playa" and owner of a Sony PSP entertainment console, in order to convince the parents of his best friend 'Jeremy' to buy their son a Sony PSP for Christmas. Besides this immediate objective, the blog also wanted to offer an independent platform for all young adults who would like to have a PSP, but for one reason or another had not yet convinced their parents to buy them one.

Sony tried hard to make the blog appear real. For example, the company attempted to use language it assumed the target group audience would speak themselves, including typos and abbreviations. It also introduced new characters along the way, including 'Cousin Pete'—who, by the way, was not 'related' to either Charlie or Jeremy—a hip-hopper who enriched the blog with videos of himself. Unfortunately for the company, Sony neglected some basic elements of ensuring the appearance of credibility. For instance, the blog was registered by a company named Zipatoni which, at that time, was one of Sony's advertising agencies. Furthermore, the hip-hop videos of Cousin Pete were so obviously scripted and staged by professional advertising copywriters that the target group immediately recognized them as fakes. That's another rule of social media usage Sony Entertainment and Zipatoni did not obey: be unprofessional (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Combined, these mistakes resulted in the blog going viral; but, not at all as Sony had anticipated. When faced with furious comments, 'Charlie' ini-

tially denied any relationship to Sony: "We don't work for Sony. And for all you dissin' my skillz I'm down for a one on one rap off or settling it street stylez if you feel me playa." Only some weeks later, the blog was taken down and Sony admitted to having made a mistake:

Busted. Nailed. Snagged. As many of you have figured out (maybe our speech was a little too funky fresh???), Peter isn't a real hip-hop maven and this site was actually developed by Sony. Guess we were trying to be just a little too clever.

Yet, at that point, the brand was already damaged and the hip-hop videos of 'Cousin Pete' became a source of continuous amusement on YouTube.

#### 4.4. Triumphs: Burger King's Whopper Sacrifice campaign

'A friend is worth more than gold,' the old saying goes. While this may apply in real life, it's certainly not the case in Facebook, as Burger King's Whopper Sacrifice campaign clearly illustrates. In December 2008, the fast food chain giant created a Facebook application whereby users were encouraged to remove 10 people from their list of virtual friends, in order to earn a coupon for a free Whopper sandwich.

Although the campaign ran for only 10 days, after which Facebook disabled the application, it was a tremendous success. More than 82,000 Facebook users downloaded the software and subsequently sacrificed 233,906 of their friends, generating over 20,000 free Whopper coupons. As featured in *The National Post* and *The New York Times*, advertising agency CP+B—which was in charge of the project—estimated that the Whopper Sacrifice campaign generated about 35 million media impressions. The effort was capped off by a TV commercial in which Burger King used the campaign to illustrate the value of its products: 'Americans love the Whopper more than they love their friends!'

This outstanding triumph demonstrates the aforementioned importance of a high-impact message, launched in a perfect environment: the basic rules of creating a viral marketing epidemic. With respect to the message, the idea of 'defriending' people was appealing and memorable through a combination of humor and sarcasm, without being too extreme. It had a direct relationship to Burger King, by measuring the value of the firm's flagship product in terms of number of friends sacrificed. Each 'defriended' person received notification that they had just been sacrificed for a 10% share of a Whopper, and were encouraged to download the application for themselves in order to 'toss your

friends before they toss you.’ This resulted in a substantial viral element. Regarding the environment, previous research has shown that Facebook friendships are entered into rather casually, with some users having several hundreds of friends (Lewis, Kaufman, Gonzalez, Wimmer, & Christakis, 2008). This implies that a Facebook ‘friendship’ probably corresponds more to acquaintanceship in real-life terms. The Whopper Sacrifice campaign provided people with the opportunity to prune their list of acquaintances, and to do so in an innovative and funny way.

## 5. Five . . . pieces of advice: Spreading the virus

Viral marketing is as much an art as it is a science. Nevertheless, in order to increase the odds of creating a successful campaign, there are some basic rules companies should follow when spreading a virus (see Figure 4). Next, we describe these rules in more detail and provide examples of companies which have either followed them very closely, or disregarded them completely.

### 5.1. Viral marketing is only as good as the remaining marketing mix

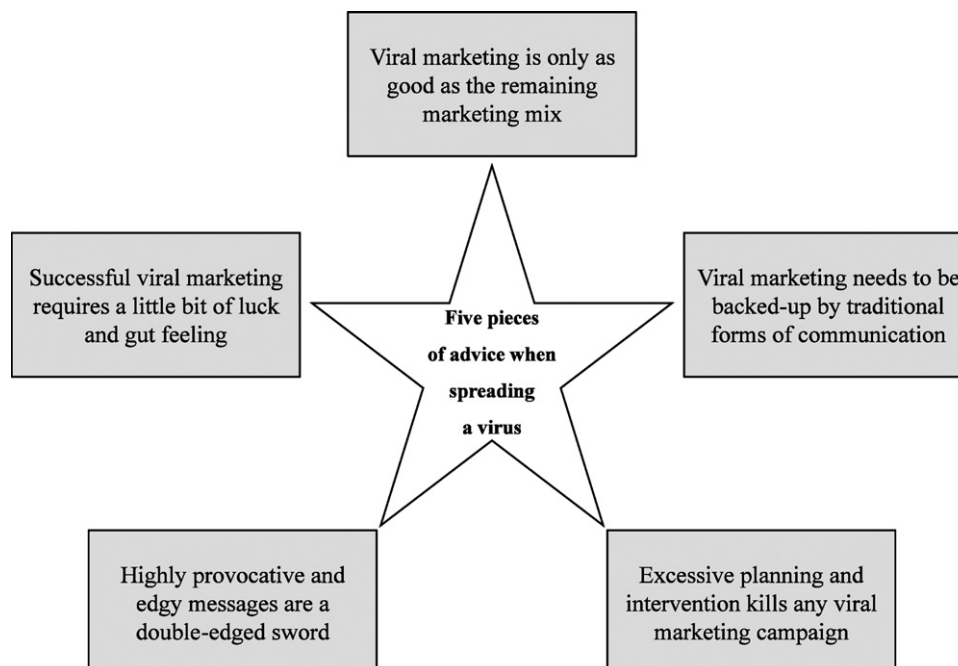
Despite all the advantages of viral marketing, one needs to be realistic. Even the most successful buzz

cannot heal a bad product, inappropriate price, or insufficient distribution. To reveal its true potential, viral marketing needs to be accompanied by changes in the rest of the marketing mix. Consider Burger King’s Subservient Chicken campaign for some inspiration. In 2004, Burger King launched a viral marketing epidemic around an interactive website ([www.subservientchicken.com](http://www.subservientchicken.com)) where users could give commands to a human dressed in a chicken costume. The program was a huge success, not least of all because the advertising agency in charge of it also modified other major elements of the firm’s marketing mix. According to CP+B President Jeff Hicks, the company redesigned most anything it could: from employee uniforms, to drive-through areas, to ketchup packets. Viral marketing might draw customers to stores, but they need convincing reasons to come back once the hype is over!

### 5.2. Viral marketing needs to be backed up by traditional forms of communication

The buzz surrounding viral marketing epidemics usually tends to die out quickly, and doesn’t last longer than a couple of weeks at best. Remember that viral marketing is all about excitement, and nothing tends to be more boring than yesterday’s news. To maintain momentum, firms therefore need to complement viral marketing with more traditional forms of communication. A good example of this is

Figure 4. Five pieces of advice when spreading a virus





Wilkinson's *Fight for Kisses* advertisement. To support the launch of its newly-developed disposable razor, Quattro Titanium, the company relied on a viral marketing story about a baby fighting his father for kisses from the baby's mother. This campaign consisted of an animated video and an interactive computer game, combined with a series of press announcements, radio spots, and sponsorship of the France–Ireland rugby match that took place during the same time period. Despite its limited budget of only €62,000 (about US\$90,000), the campaign was a huge success and resulted in a five percentage point market share increase within the target group. If all forces act in concert, they can indeed move mountains!

### 5.3. Excessive planning and intervention kills any viral marketing campaign

As with any communication exercise, viral marketing campaigns need to be carefully planned prior to their launch. Once the virus is set free, however, less control and intervention is preferable. Specifically, companies should not try to ask their customers to spread the virus if they are reluctant to do so. A truly compelling viral marketing campaign needs to stand on its own feet and develop its own dynamics. A case in point is mineral water company Evian, whose Roller-Skating Babies campaign has been crowned by the *Guinness Book of Records* as the most viewed advertising spot, with more than 45 million online views. The company engaged in careful planning prior to launching the video by choosing the right topic (Evian already had an advertising campaign based on babies 10 years earlier), the right music (a remix of a 30-year-old rap song), and the right messengers. But once the virus had been unleashed, Evian limited its role to reacting to—instead of proactively influencing—the viral phenomenon. Too many cooks spoil the broth, in viral marketing as well as in the kitchen.

### 5.4. Highly provocative and edgy messages are a tricky business

Good viral marketing messages need to be both memorable and interesting. That said, firms must exercise caution and beware of using messages that are too provocative; there is often a very fine line between being provocative and being inappropriate. Computer manufacturer Microsoft learned this the hard way during promotion of its Perfect Dark Zero game for the Xbox 360 platform. In the context of a viral marketing campaign, users were invited to provide the name and email address of a person who Joanne Dark, the assassin within Perfect Dark Zero,

should 'take care' of. This person subsequently received a message with a video, showing a body wearing a toe tag bearing the recipient's name. Needless to say, most reacted with either shock or disgust. Unless a company and brand want to be remembered for bad taste, they had better be careful with messages that are too edgy.

### 5.5. Successful viral marketing requires a little bit of luck and gut feeling

As noted, environment represents one of three factors that can differentiate between good and bad viral marketing campaigns, and some fraction of it is always beyond the control of the firm. Executives therefore need to accept that the transition between careful planning and viral marketing success is subject to 'random' noise and that failure is always a possibility, even with the best planning and best intentions. What worked well yesterday, or is working well for the competition, does not necessarily guarantee success today. The viral marketing failure of Heinz Ketchup provides a case in point. In 2007, Procter & Gamble organized a highly successful video contest, *Be the Next Pepto Star*. Users were encouraged to create funny 60-second videos portraying the five symptoms aided by Pepto-Bismol (i.e., nausea, heartburn, indigestion, upset stomach, and diarrhea) and to upload them to YouTube. Heinz Ketchup tried to copy the campaign some years later, and it turned out to be a disaster. People uploaded videos in which they used Heinz Ketchup as toothpaste or acne cream, and publicly accused the firm of looking for cheap labor to create ads. Why does an idea work in one setting and not another? The answer is hanging somewhere in cyberspace.

## 6. Six. . .degrees of separation: From epidemics to immunity

Over 40 years ago, researchers Jeffrey Travers and Stanley Milgram (1969) conducted an experiment with 296 individuals from Nebraska and Boston. Each participant received a letter and the name of a person the letter should be sent to. Participants were asked to either forward the letter directly to the target person, in case they knew that person on a first-name basis, or to send it to another person they knew who would be more likely to know the target person. Many letters evidently got lost along the way, but those that arrived had—on average—passed through six intermediaries: a result implying that the mean social distance between two random individuals

in the U.S. is as low as six. This observation is now often referred to as 'six degrees of separation' or the 'small world phenomenon.'

Though the small world experiment has subsequently been criticized for methodological flaws, it illustrates very well the tremendous reach that can be achieved through interpersonal communication. It is exactly this characteristic that makes viral marketing a valid alternative to many traditional forms of advertising. Pepsi, for example, made the decision to not run any TV ads during the 2010 Super Bowl. Instead, it used an estimated US\$20 million of the saved budget for the Pepsi Refresh Project, an interactive online platform where consumers, businesses, and non-profit organizations can submit and vote on ideas that have a positive impact and make the world a better place.

On a more abstract level, the small world experiment also shows that infection and immunity might only be a few steps apart. Just as people can build up resistance to illnesses, viral marketing could lose its potency sometime in the future. In this sense, it will likely share the same destiny as telemarketing and television advertising, which have become increasingly ineffective over recent years. Even today, voices are raised against using consumers as advertisers: consider, again, the Heinz Ketchup example, as well as related research on the effectiveness of customer referral programs (Ryu & Feick, 2007).

One thing seems certain, though, at least for the time being: today, viral marketing is still in the early stages of its life cycle. And, the tremendous potential it offers companies at very limited cost should make every executive think seriously about engaging in this new form of communication. So, beware—the next virus might be just around the corner!

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