

VIRAL MARKETING: IMPACT ON BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

The entrepreneurs in India are looking forward to enter into more challenging and expanded opportunities for doing business through advanced technology and more focused marketing strategies to sustain in competitive environment. Viral marketing is not an age old term, but a strategy that stimulates people to pass on messages to other people and creates potential for growth in the message's impact and exposure. Viral marketing is marketing through internet- blogs, mails, social networking sites, e-books, brand able software, images or text messages etc. Viral marketing provides various benefits to marketers such as low cost, high speed, high credibility, ability to reach global audience, more profits, more exposure etc. Business organizations are adopting viral marketing as a part of their promotional mix in a technology driven society. This article provides an overview of viral marketing bringing out the positive and negative aspects of viral marketing.

KEYWORDS: *Viral Marketing, Social Networking, Environment, Viral Process.*

Introduction

In literal sense, viral means anything which spreads fast among users like virus and viral marketing refers to a technique in marketing a product or service where users use pre- existing social networks in spreading the advertiser's message to others in the hope of creating a craze or with a motive to create improvement in product sales. Forwarding electronic messages containing advertising is voluntary rather than a paid testimonial or mass advertisements. Friends, family members, work colleagues or people having similar interests are most effective targets. Video clips, interactive flash games, eBooks, branded software, images or even text messages keeping in consideration the humor, the artwork or the medium appeal to people with high social networking potential. Viral marketing is difficult to define, but it is used in many contexts to describe various innovative ideas.

In internet and online advertising, viral marketing is a type of marketing technique that relies on and encourages people to pass along a marketing message by word of mouth (or word of e- mail) marketing. Viral marketing online uses blog and social networks to produce positive word of mouth brand awareness. In fact, viral marketing is a strategy that stimulates people to pass on marketing messages to other people thus creates the potential for the enormous growth in the exposure and impact the message. In other words as defined in Wikipedia, Viral marketing is a technique that seeks to exploit pre-existing social networks to produce exponential increases in brand awareness, through viral processes similar to the spread of an epidemic. It is word of mouth delivered and enhanced online; it harnesses the network effect of the internet and can be very useful in reaching the large number of people rapidly. I also includes any advertising that propagates itself in the same way as viruses. The only difference is that viral marketing uses digital media. The concept refers to a message that spreads to other people because the first recipient liked it and chose to send the message on to others, using what some people prefer to call 'word of mouse' communication

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Thus, viral marketing is the revolutionary way by which any information passes across a million people rapidly within a short period of time.

Objectives of the Paper

- To study the viral marketing process.
- To study the positive as well as negative aspects of viral marketing in business organizations.

Research Methodology

Research Methodology is the process used to collect information and data for the purpose of making business decisions. In this paper, we have taken information from publication research, surveys and other secondary data from reliable sources.

History of Viral Marketing

Viral marketing has been tied to the popularization of the notion that ideas spread like viruses and this idea gained popularity in 1990's. In 1996, Jeffery Rayport, a Harvard business school professor, wrote an article for fast company entitled 'the virus of marketing' in which he used the term "viral marketing" and "v- marketing". In 1997, Draper Fisher Jurvetson, claimed to have coined the term to mean network enhanced word of mouth and persuaded hotmail to include a promotional pitch for its web-based email with a clickable URL in every outbound message sent by hotmail user. In 2000, fast company published an article "unleash your idea virus" by Seth Godin that highlighted how ideas that spread fastest win." In 2004 and in 2005, Face book and YouTube launched viral videos that became more and more popular and viral marketing reach buzzword status. In 2006, viral content site and platform buzz feed was founded. In 2008, search volume for "viral marketing" between 2004 and 2012 reached its peak. In 2012, Jonah Peretti, cofounder buzz feed shared his list of tips "13 ways to make something go viral" on Face book stories. In 2013, the first ever viral summit in Las Vegas, attempted to identify similar trends in viral marketing methods for various media. Jonah Berger has given key drivers behind virality-STEPPS (social currency, triggers, emotions, public, practical value, stories). Other expressions for viral marketing used by different researchers are interactive marketing, internet word of mouth, word of mouse, organic, referral, word of keyboard and buzz marketing. The different words/terms have the same meaning or purpose and organizations can use this cheap and effortless method to promote thin products or services. Viral marketing is a credible marketing buzz around a new product release through social networks providing positive ROI for the marketers.

The 21st century has challenged business organizations to prosper financially and even survive in constantly evolving, growing and changing environment. Marketing plays a crucial role in facing these challenges by introducing new products and enriching people's standards. All business functions gain importance if there is a sufficient demand for products and services resulting in profits. Success of any business activity depends on marketing ability. Marketing is a process for creating, communicating, delivering and exchanging offerings that create value and bring satisfaction to customers, clients, partners and society at large. Traditional marketing techniques still hold well in today's environment but marketers have to take decisions keeping in mind competition, consumer behavior, technology and dynamic economic forces. More sophisticated, professional and goal- oriented marketing strategies are introduced frequently to improve the conventional business patterns. No doubt, print advertisements in the form of (newsletters, billboards, newspapers, and advertisements), radio/ television commercials, public relations etc. are still effective to cater some customer segments, but with advanced tools and medium of advertising, business organizations can reach customers within seconds. Internet, sms, mms, emails, blogs, mobile apps, social networking services and other technologies help the marketers to achieve marketing objectives. With the advent of technology, word of mouth (WOM) is replaced with viral marketing and has gone digital. People get information about one product or branch and spread the word around to other people, which can lead to multifold growth of brand awareness.

Internet and technological advancements have supported the customers to spend more time in virtual world rather than in real world.

Literature Review

Research studies show that viral marketing or internet 'word of mouth' communication is far more effective means than traditional marketing methods.

Seth Godin in his book "what is viral marketing" has explained the concept of viral marketing as "an idea that while it is spreading actually helps market one's business or cause". He has pointed out the

critical element of viral marketing that is 'it's built in'- it is built into hotmail, YouTube etc. He has also quoted that "being viral is not the hard part but the hard part is making that viral marketing actually produce something of value not just entertainment for clients."

Kevin Allen in his book "viral marketing 100 success secrets" has discussed secret strategies, buzz marketing tips and tricks, interactive marketing, and comprehensive view of viral marketing. He has provided an answer to ever-changing dynamic technological environment and tools with the development of viral marketing strategies in business.

David Meerman Scott in his book "the new rules of viral marketing and PR" has included the guidelines, to use news releases, blogs, podcasting, viral marketing and effectiveness of online media on buyers directly. He has also explained the ways to leverage the potential that web- based communication offers the business and how personal link can be established with the people who make the business work. He has also emphasized that the power of internet can create compelling messages for customers and including them to the buying process.

Victoria Fairbank has conducted a study on "effectiveness of viral marketing on the internet" and assessed the effectiveness of viral marketing in terms of generating potential sales, increasing brand awareness, and influencing consumer's purchasing decisions. The study has concluded that business needs to use a variety of viral marketing techniques, in order to market, effectively on the internet.

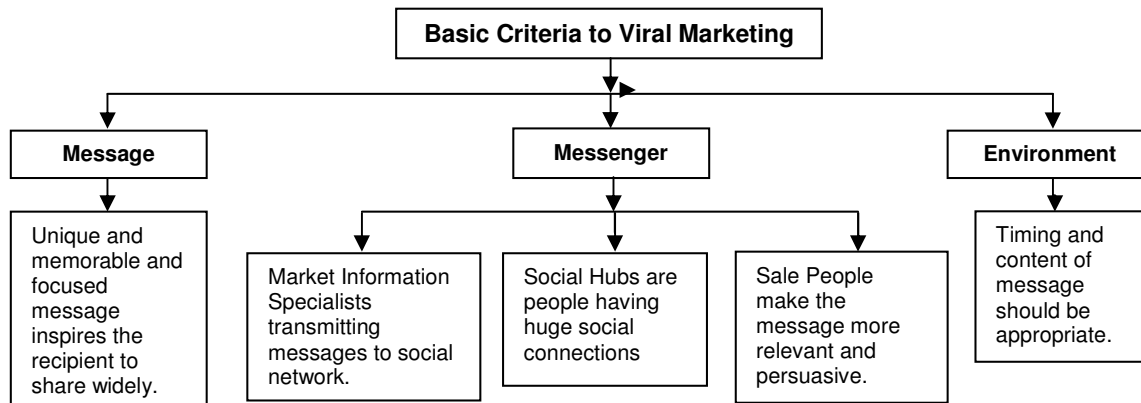
Spero and stone in their study 'agents of change: how young consumers are changing the world of marketing' has analyzed the young adult's relationship with digital media. Consumer marketing organizations need to learn to meet the requirements of audience by combining creative ideas and strategies with a transformed approach to marketing sales and services, using information and communications technology. Teens through online world can develop personal relationships and learn new things and show loyalty for brands.

Ashutosh Nigam in his article entitled "influence of viral marketing on brand equity building with reference to online social networking sites" has examined that parameters like e- discussion, websites, online chat, email etc., have effect over the brand equity of different products and services. The study has concluded that viral marketing has a positive and significant relationship with brand equity dimensions. Positive word of mouth about brand helps in reducing distribution of free products to target consumers as networking sites give facilitating platform to build positive brand image.

Relevance of Viral Marketing

To survive in the competitive world or to adapt to the surroundings, several business strategies have been used by the organizations to cater to the needs of the market. Among such strategies, viral marketing is one of the smarter and faster forms than traditional form of marketing. These days, people share their good and bad experiences about particular products and services over the internet and give recommendations to others. People get hold of the right products and generate reactions quickly and easily. YouTube advertisements cost a fraction as much as a TV commercial, but if it motivates people to share message, it can have major impact on brand recognition. Social media networks such as Facebook, twitter, LinkedIn, Google+, Flickr, You Tube are the main sources of viral marketing strategy. Viral marketing is one of the least expensive options for any business organization to promote the products. It can either help in making organization's reputation as the most successful or happening one or break an organization's image. More the number of people come across this type of advertising; the greater is the potential for success. The importance of viral marketing is heavily backed by being able to use networks, creativity and imagination. Viral marketing is an attractive alternative for organizations rather than purchasing mass media to spread the word.

In today's world of digital marketing, no other marketing than viral marketing is in a trend. Business organizations can resort to Pass-long, Buzz marketing, Incentive viral, Undercover marketing, User managed database, for spread of messages. Renowned marketing philosophers Kaplan and Michael Haenlein have emphasized on giving a right message to the right messengers in the right environment, which is the key to success for any business organization. India is set to become the world's fastest growing e-commerce market. The rapid growth in new internet users in the country and heavy investment in the e-commerce industry has fuelled the growth story. Internet users in India have grown six times from 50 million in 2007 to 300 million in 2014. Morgan Stanley Report says that the size of the Indian internet market is expected to rise to \$137 billion by 2020.



Types of Viral Messages

Viral messages are those messages that pass from person to another through social networks. Successful marketers identify individuals with high social networking potential (SNP), communicating compelling information to motivate to purchase the offer and pass information through their social network as under:

- **Quiz Based Content:** Messages can be shared online through blog posts or by points or answers selected by the questionnaire participant. Buzz feed and various other types of quizzes attract new participants and increase the user's final experience. Winning moment promotions can also be displayed to inform the users about their win.
- **List articles:** These kinds of posts help the reader to have the central idea of the post. For example, Ten strategies to make business more profitable on internet. Twitter, Face book is the other channels for customer engagement.
- **Controversial Content:** It attracts quality traffic online, script the post with latest updates, most burning news and controversies. For example: Racial Discrimination issues, Right of women etc.
- **Motivational/ Attention Grabbing Content:** Face book, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and other social networking sites help the people to share inspiring or emotional messages resulting in a broad audience. For example, someone needs money to get kidney transplant, free medical assistance to flood affected area.
- **Case Studies:** Case studies being explanatory in nature are valued by people. It also helps in providing real facts and considerable outcomes. For example: Mumbai Dabbawala.
- **Top Posts:** Top posts based upon latest trends, fashion updates, top personalities, home remedies, music lists, inspirational stories about real people etc. provide an influential formula for viral messages.
- **Pass-along:** Such messages can be shared with a number of friends through e- mails or by word of mouth. For example: short funny clips of video, TV advertisements etc.

The important factor for creating a good viral message is the content and base of the message.

Elements of Viral Marketing

- **Content Based Campaigns:** The medium and content of viral campaigns should be simple but compelling and evoking emotional levels of the consumers or persons viewing it. High quality content is the key to success. Dove's evolution is the great example, which was viewed by millions with the simple idea of helping increase women's self- esteem (and sales).
- **Exploitation of Common Motivations:** Viral marketing strategy should be built on common motivations and behavior for its transmission. Uploading interesting, educational, unpredictable or entertaining video can offer viewers a chance to engage in the product and experience at the time of requirement. For example, old spice has gone viral with clips that combine a sense of humor with unexpected plot twists.
- **Communication Networks:** Social scientists believe that each person has a network of 8-12 people in their close network of friends, family and associates. Any person's network may consist of scores, hundreds or thousands of people, depending upon the status or position in the society.

Besides, e-mail lists, newsletters, e-books, Face book, twitter, LinkedIn etc. can put viral marketing efforts on steroids.

- **Use of Other's Resources:** Viral marketing plans can use other's resources to get the word out. Affiliate programs such as placing text or graphic links on other's websites, putting interesting, educational/ entertaining and good value articles through videos or on other's web pages help in catching interest of others and making viral marketing more effective.
- **Offer Valuable Products or Services for Free:** Most viral marketing programs offer valuable products or services to attract attention. Certain incentives should be provided to pass the message to others resulting in ending up with a lifelong customer.
- **Meaningful and Relevant Messages:** Viral marketing campaigns should aim at reaching the audience in their interest of languages, images and medium. Common concerns, keeping the advertisement positive and inspirational and not making any fake claims ensures the relevance of message to the persons. A good advertising content should be shared through e-mail as well as on social media sites. Small as well as large campaigns can be given on same media.
- **No More Focus on Traditional Marketing:** Viral marketing plans should focus on creating a good and interesting story rather than focusing on you, your product or service and your company. For example: when sony made their Bravia TV advertisement, the product was not seen throughout the advertisement but yet everyone remembers it.
- **Reinforcement:** Even, after grabbing the complete attention, a onetime viral message can quickly be forgotten. A series of viral messages or by way of providing them more information can strengthen the effectiveness of viral campaign.
- **Target Appropriate Audience and Channels:** Viral marketing campaigns should find out targeted audience and channel as well. Wrong channel would not lead to reach the targeted audience. For example, if targeted audience falls among 18 to 24, middle class women, then it might be a good idea to incorporate interest into marketing channel to go viral.

Positive Aspects of Viral Marketing

Viral marketing provides various incentives creating value addition to customers by inspiring them to spread the message among others. For the growth and success of online businesses, viral marketing works well in getting tremendous exposure, more traffic, increased profits etc.

- **Low Cost:** Viral marketing incurs a very little expense as the individual passing on the referral carries the cost of forwarding the brand message, whether it is in the form of games, videos, posts or articles. Viral marketing is indeed a great way to reduce promotional costs as enough advertising is done without spending huge amounts, by existing visitors. Organizations can gain attention about their brand from people residing in other countries. Viral marketing helps in providing a greater reach with lower financial cost.
 - Hotmail Microsoft's free web- based e- mail service, rapidly gained widespread awareness amongst internet users, by adding a simple message to the footer of every mail sent out by hotmail users. People signed up like crazy, taking the number of hotmail users to millions. The cost incurred per subscriber was very low.
 - Vistara, the joint venture airline from Tata Group and Singapore Airlines has re- entered the airline business in India. The campaign has managed to create a connect around the brand promise
- **Exposure:** Viral marketing campaigns work the networking sites to provide exposure, greater visibility through peer to peer endorsement to a brand. Good content based and creative marketing unleashes the interest of people, resulting in building a brand connection and awareness. Viral marketing identifies new and ongoing opportunities required for the growth of existing brand.
 - For example, Face book uses advanced tools for its paying adverts to give them exposure to select demographic of clients ensuring to reach the target market.
 - Naukri.com has used viral marketing strategy to reach to unbelievable heights and created a permanent niche in its respective field in a very short span of time, by becoming first online job exchange in India.
- **Better Popularity:** Viral marketing drives people to the website aimed at boosting website traffic, more clicks and more conversion. If twenty people are interested in your site, product, services or messages, they will most likely share the information with their friends, family members or

colleagues. These twenty people that have referred you to will be most likely tell their friends to. Internet or social networks have facilitated the information transfer speedier. Viral marketing strategies help people to download particular apps and share these with others.

- Sony Music India managed to market the YouTube video of Kolaveri Di in 2011 on Face book. Instantly, it became viral on social networking sites and became the most searched YouTube video in India and an Internet phenomenon across Asia and has created a huge difference in the world of publicity.
- Mudra Group had crafted silent National Anthem in 2011, which was flashed across screens in all the big cinemas, before the commencement of a film. The special kids in video presented the Anthem on the theme 'Patriotism knows no language'. The message was conveyed through digital space as well as social media platforms such as Face book providing viewers the opportunity to share their ideas on the subject worldwide.
- Candy Crush game is an example of viral marketing strategy.
- **Credibility:** Viral marketing helps in achieving substantial audience through personal recommendations or social contacts, resulting in increasing credibility among people. Positive comments about services, discussions or one event leading to another brings more traffic on websites and create awareness of brand among customers.

Credibility is also improved if a good content in the form of quality articles, e-courses, e-Books, reports provides solutions to people's problems.

 - BBDO India for P&G India's in Feb 2016 has released a new film on YouTube #Share the Load, conveying the message that men should start setting the right example for the generations to come, bringing about household equality. The video has gone viral with over three million views within five days of its release.
 - HDFC bank stays in touch with their customers through Face book, LinkedIn, Twitter, YouTube and their official blog. Social media helps in generating feedback from users and in promoting banking products with interesting puzzles/ jigsaws based on financial terms.
- **High Response Rate:** Extensive use of internet affiliate marketing and extensive social networking helps the entrepreneurs to promote the business globally. Organizations can use social media page as a customer support centre where customers post their feedbacks, inquiries, concerns and questions. These posts can be responded back via e- mail since viral marketing depends on word of mouth, it reaches out to a wide range of audiences. Recipients of the message are more likely to respond through this method than otherwise. Viral marketing can use modern service of mobile phones to get more people in short period of time. Vodafone's campaign featuring the zoo creatures in 2009 have become an international sensation, collecting millions of online views worldwide, positioning the zoo creatures.

Negative Aspect of Viral Marketing

Viral marketing involves high risk giving no guarantee of 'go viral' of the campaign.

- **Dilution of the Brand:** Any marketing strategy aimed at promotion of brand through e- mails in the presence of competitors using the same structure, may run the risk of losing message among all e- mail messages received by people on daily basis. It becomes difficult for people to decide, which messages they should give consideration to. The message is likely to be ignored instead of increasing its web- presence. Viral videos may also hurt company's brand sometimes.
- **Negative Impact:** Another disadvantage of viral marketing is lack of control over people as it depends on others to promote products. Sometimes, people start posting negative remarks about a particular product on blogs or message boards. As a result, people take it as true information regarding that product and business suffers a lot in terms of relations with its suppliers, customers and partners. Unpleasant content, indifferent audiences, pitiable design affect one's brand images. Many innocent marketers also suffer when customers get annoyed at number of e-mails addressed to them from viral marketers. McDonalds, a fast-food biggie, started a new social media campaign with the hash tag of *#McDStories*. The original plan was to share how much McDonalds care about their employees, staff-members, partners, collaborators and customers. The campaign started successfully with two stories about their employees and suppliers. Eventually, the hash tag *#McDStories* became the *go-to* medium to share all the bad stories about McDonalds, the quality of their food, their customer service and the disturbing tales of animal abuse. McDonalds later admitted that "*#McDStories* didn't go as planned.

- **Ethical Issues:** The purpose of viral marketing is defeated, if people have concern for private issues such as use of personal data by the sites or organizations selling personal information to others. Sometimes, it becomes difficult for marketers to create a trust among customers and their perception. Sometimes, viral marketing leads to spam threats also.
- **Difficult to Measure:** Internet marketing campaigns are hard to measure. The messages move quickly from one person to another but it is very difficult to measure the effectiveness of the campaign. For example, in spite of millions of views for products or services, there is no way of knowing whether the product or service is purchased by those viewers or not.
- **No Guarantee:** There is no guarantee that viral marketing is going to work by creating the best possible video that travels the world in few seconds. If the video does not reach the desired customers, it would end up investing huge amounts without receiving anything in return. Sometimes, videos may not be liked by the persons and it may not go viral. On the other end, all may not have internet connections or particular software, technological skills to view the messages. It may not take place for a comprehensive and diversified marketing strategy and objectives.

SWOT Analysis

Business organizations can resort to SWOT analysis to check the effectiveness of viral marketing. SWOT analysis can help by providing a suitable strategic table using various online tools for online campaign to attract positive buying behavior of the customers.

- **Strengths:** A business organization can make use of its resources, abilities, features or brand name, services etc. over its competitors. A strong culture based on honest team group, welcome to feedbacks, respond quickly and effectively, adaption to dynamic environment, allocation of resources in efficient manner, innovative ideas, aimed at lowering marketing costs, value provided to customers, putting content in a relevant way on social media etc., can strengthen the organization to have a competitive advantage in the market.
- **Weaknesses:** Business organizations may not be successful in implementing their strategies which may lead to failures, decrease in profits or not coping up with the dynamic environment. Shortage of resources, inefficient managerial skills, inadequate technological base, delayed deliveries, false issues, limited exposure on social sites, no track of campaign effectiveness, adaption to social media principles etc. may hinder the organization's capability to achieve its objectives or goals.
- **Opportunities:** Business organizations can make the use of conducive environmental factors and market forces and tap key areas to provide value to customers. Exploiting competitor's weak positions and focusing on creating more presence on social sites by advertising, offering discounts, understanding consumer behavior, analyzing consumer's feedback, organizing various online contests, quizzes, games, making use of internet usage by expanding market share all over the world, delivering right messages to customers to have a positive response, partnerships with advertisers to lower costs, exploring new targets etc. can bring effectiveness to the ongoing strategies.
- **Threats/ Challenges:** Various factors whether political, social, technological, economic may affect organization's strategies or campaigns. Change in customer's preferences, competitor's moves, various brands in the market, engaging true customers, controlling legal and confidentiality risks etc. are the obstacles that need to be tackled for the successful implementation of strategy.

SWOT analysis help the business organizations to frame an integrated, holistic and planned approach keeping in view of external as well as internal factors for their success and growth in dynamic environment.

Viral Marketing Campaigns

Through viral marketing, both large as well as small scale businesses can reach a large number of people with contagious content regarding messages, products or ideas. Every marketing campaign aims at grabbing customer attention through exceptional ideas using digital or social media; considering time, people and environment.

- **Google Maps:** educates consumers in a wonderful way, making them more independent in searching any location. Corporations like OLA and Uber are making the most of Google Maps. Google Maps have more than one billion downloads helping consumers as well as business owners.
- **Swachh Bharat Abhiyan:** as promotional video on digital media has touched the right chord of people aiming at making India cleaner by educating merits of cleanliness. Madhya Pradesh State

Tourism Development Corporation's 'MP Mein Dil Hua Bachche Sa' has bagged the prestigious AFI award for best campaign in 2016. The advertisement became very popular and became the talk of the town due to its creative execution.

- **Paytm-Paytm Karo:** Most talked about brand of 2016, Paytm due to demonetization, the campaign- Ab ATM nahi #Paytm Karo, has helped the people to move from cash to card and became successful in creating awareness among millions of Indians regarding cashless payment option through social media.

Conclusion

No doubt word of mouth publicity is a very old marketing practice but viral marketing presents an opportunity to the organizations to make an online presence to tap new targets in very cost effective ways .viral marketing can promote products or services using social media tools (face book ,twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn or using video clips, interactive games, e-books, images, text messages, blogs etc in a technological advanced environment to support a measurable business goal Marketers may not profit today or tomorrow ,but 'something free ' in the minds of customers will be profitable for the seller in the long run.

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