Chapter VII

Viral Marketing: The Use of Surprise

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Abstract

Viral marketing involves consumers passing along a company’s marketing message to their friends, family, and colleagues. This chapter reviews viral marketing campaigns and argues that the emotion of surprise often is at work and that this mechanism resembles that of word-of-mouth marketing. Examining the literature on the emotion of surprise, the chapter next explains how a surprise is created and shared. Overall, the chapter shows how surprise can be a useful tool in a viral marketing campaign. Lastly, conclusions of interest to managers are drawn.
Introduction

Viral marketing has been described as “the process of getting customers to pass along a company’s marketing message to friends, family, and colleagues” (Laudon & Traver, 2001, p. 381). Like a virus, information about the company and its products and services is spread to the customers, the customers’ customers, and so on, and a huge network will rapidly be created. For example, the message of GET YOUR PRIVATE, FREE E-MAIL AT HTTP:\WWW.HOTMAIL.COM spread to 11 million users in only 18 months (Kelly, 2000), and PayPal acquired more than 3 million users in its first 9 months of workings (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2003). Viral marketing has now gained tremendously in popularity, and world-known companies have jumped on the bandwagon: Budweiser, Kellogg’s, Levi’s, Nestlé, and Virgin Cinemas. However, there is still only a limited understanding of this marketing technique (Borroff, 2000). Consider also Helm (2000) who contends that “definitions and backgrounds are hardly focused” (p. 158). Other authors argue in a similar vein (Brodin, 2000; De Bruyn & Lilien, 2003; Diorio, 2001). For example, De Bruyn and Lilien (2003) posit that “it is difficult to...explain why and how [viral marketing] works” (p. 4).

Brewer (2001) agrees that viral marketing – otherwise known as referral marketing (Brewer, 2001; Murphy, 2002) - is “the process of getting customers to pass along a company’s marketing message to friends, family, and colleagues” (Laudon & Traver, 2001, p. 381), but adds that the cost of viral marketing is only incremental. Viral marketers make use of consumer-to-consumer communications, which are both rapid and cheap (Laudon & Traver, 2001). Helm (2000) understands viral marketing as a type of advertising that is almost like an online version of word-of-mouth advertising (c.f., Beckmann & Bell, 2000). Viral marketing does not necessarily have to take place over the web. However, with the Internet facilitating consumer interconnections dramatically (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2003) viral marketing has become a buzzword for viral marketing campaigns happening through the Internet. Viral marketing can be used for both promoting and distributing products (Helm, 2000).

Brodie (2001) argues that one of the oldest examples of a viral marketing campaign is the Gospel and the Christian missionaries preaching the life and teaching of Jesus. One of the probably most famous viral marketing campaigns is that of The Blair Witch Project where the budget for the movie’s release was