

When Marketing goes Viral

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When asked to name their favourite viral marketing campaign, most people would have to think for a while, and might even need to be prompted before they could actually name one. That's not because viral marketing campaigns aren't successful, in fact the exact opposite is true. It's because truly great viral marketing campaigns don't feel like marketing campaigns at all.

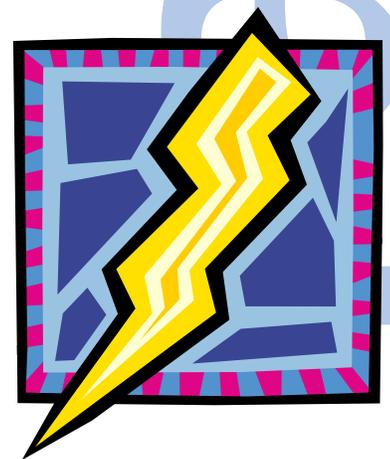
A Google Search for the definition of 'viral marketing' throws up dozens of suggestions and Wikipedia¹ defines it as '*marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness or to achieve other marketing objectives through self-replicating viral processes*'. There's no doubt that the Internet has played a key role in the success of many recent viral marketing campaigns and greatly increased the speed with which a campaign can spread. Originally called 'word of mouth' marketing, the concept however has been used by savvy professionals long before the computer even existed.

"Despite popular belief, the Internet is not the father of viral marketing," says C.W. Park, contributor to MarketingProfes.com. "Viral marketing has been around for as long as people could communicate. The only contribution made by the Internet is that once the word is out, it can get around faster than ever before².

Viral marketing - whereby others tell and spread the story for you - is a lot like lightning: What appears to be a spontaneous event, occurring often out of nowhere, is actually the concentration of a whole lot of energy, resulting in a big flash and thundering sparks.

Also like lightning, the success of viral marketing efforts is often difficult to replicate - lightning rarely strikes the same place twice. But, with an understanding of what viral marketing is and a strategically integrated approach to communications, viral marketing can be profoundly "electric."

In fact, some marketing experts believe that viral marketing campaigns have a greater return on investment than practically any other promotional strategy, if done well. Successful viral marketing campaigns boost brand awareness, engage target audiences, lead to media coverage or sales, and create brand champions among followers. In this Blue Paper we present research on what makes something go viral, how to develop a viral marketing strategy, how to integrate this strategy with an overall marketing plan and how to keep the momentum



¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viral_marketing

² Park, C.W. "I Heard It Through the Grapevine: How to Create Word of Mouth Marketing." MarketingProfes: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals. 26 Feb. 2001. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofes.com/Tutorials/wordofmouth.asp>

after the lightning hits.

The scoop on viral

Some people adamantly correct the term viral marketing, arguing that something isn't viral but rather it goes viral. Viral marketing is not the act of marketing viruses nor is it an infection with a cure. The term viral marketing is used because it acts in much the same way as a virus does.

A virus often goes completely undetected until it has grown to win by sheer weight of numbers. It attaches to a host and uses a host's resources to grow, and in the right environment this growth is exponential. Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in a message's exposure and influence. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands and beyond³.

Executed through practically any variety of marketing channel that has a direct connection to the consumer, viral marketing is a promotion strategy that leverages the human love for sharing information. Think: Entertaining videos featuring product placement, funny emails, outrageous offers or discounts offered via social networks and more.

Viral marketing often also has a greater power to co-opt people than other marketing efforts. Meaning that brands with viral marketing strategies absorb people into its customer base through subtle social influence, as opposed to messages that tell a customer to buy. Social influence leads to credibility and inspires many to keep up with the Joneses and tell the Smiths to do the same⁴.

Traditional advertising and marketing methods tend to push a message directly to the consumer. Viral marketing content is created to do the same, but with the conscious intention of inspiring audiences to share that content with their friends, family members, colleagues and social media contacts and followers.

The term 'viral marketing' is said to have first been used by venture capitalist, Steve Jurvetson, in a newsletter to describe network-enhanced word-of-mouth



³ Wilson, Dr. Ralph. "The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing." *Web Marketing Today -- E-Commerce, E-Mail Marketing, Internet Marketing - Wilson Internet*. 1 Feb. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/viral-principles.htm>>.

⁴ Park, C.W. "I Heard It Through the Grapevine: How to Create Word of Mouth Marketing." *MarketingProf: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals*. 26 Feb. 2001. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/Tutorials/wordofmouth.asp>>.

marketing⁵. While based on many similar concepts of word-of-mouth marketing, viral marketing has actually become its own niche of communications.

“Virality is something that has to be engineered from the beginning,” explains marketer and entrepreneur, Josh Kopelman. “It’s harder to create virality than it is to create a good product and a good product is what initiates word-of-mouth. That’s why we often see good products with poor virality, and poor products with good virality.”⁶

In essence, the spread of word-of-mouth is inspired while viral is manufactured.

For example: OfficeMax’s Elf Yourself Campaign⁷

Despite being for an office supplies retailer in the United States there is a chance that you will have heard of the campaign, if not the company itself. Bear with us. OfficeMax gets much of its annual sales within the back-to-school season. But in 2006, it sought to expand its sales base, establish itself as a retailer to visit at Christmas and to distinguish itself from competitors.



“When you think of holiday shopping, you don’t immediately think office supplies,” noted Bob Thacker, OfficeMax senior vice president of marketing and advertising.

Thacker needed an exercise in brand differentiation, but he wanted it done in a fun way to which customers would respond. His team hired two agencies to create special websites that would help elevate the brand perception of OfficeMax through humour and entertainment, including www.elfyourself.com.

This fun website allowed visitors to upload up to four photos and record a personal message through a freephone number. The face or faces were then attached to an animated Elf body, the voice was processed to sound elf-like, and the result was a dancing or talking Elf that could be forwarded to friends or posted on a personal website or blog.

Then, Office Max worked with several online journalists and blogs such as The New York Times’ ‘Bits’ blog and US Weekly magazine’s blog to spread interest

⁵ Partner, Lynda. “Viral Marketing: Email Style.” *MarketingProfs: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals*. 08 Oct. 2002. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/2/partner1.asp>>.

⁶ Kopelman, Josh. “Let’s Just Add in a Little Virality.” *Redeye VC*. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://redeye.firstround.com/2009/11/lets-just-add-in-a-little-virality.html>>.

⁷ Lande, Laurie. “How a Viral Campaign Gave OfficeMax Brand Recognition.” *MarketingProfs: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals*. 5 Feb. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/casestudy/74>>.

about the campaign.

Within days, the site had an impressive 36 million visitors, and 11 million elves were created. More than 100 YouTube users uploaded personal Elf Yourself videos. The results were strong enough for OfficeMax to repeat the campaign the following year.

For Christmas 2007, the elf site again proved enormously popular. It grew virally, with millions of users sending Elf Yourself email greetings to friends and more than 400 people uploading their Elf Yourself video to YouTube. People around the world were creating their own personalised Elf Christmas Cards that many readers will remember or have heard about - even if you didn't realise that retailer OfficeMax was behind the campaign.

In 2008 ElfYourself.com rolled out their 'dancing elves' campaign which attracted more than 193 million site visits with 123 million elves created and the site was featured on CNN, 'ABC World News,' Fox News 'Good Morning America,' 'Today Show,' USA Today. Furthermore, a follow-up survey found that 63% of participants who shop for office supplies at least 10 times per year were aware of Elf Yourself while 95% of those who visited Elf Yourself claimed they would likely visit Elf Yourself again in following years. More than one-third of those who visited Elf Yourself said the site influenced their decision to visit OfficeMax, and about one-third of visitors said the site improved their perception of OfficeMax.

Viral success.

Why it works

Broadly speaking, viral marketing works because people are human - they are curious and they like to share information, especially when this information is relevant to their interests, needs or sense of humour.

Taking a closer look at successful viral marketing campaigns reveals a few common factors that cause marketing efforts to go viral, all based around how ideas are consumed and shared.

Seth Godin, author and marketing expert explains that for an idea to spread it needs to be sent and received.

No one 'sends' an idea unless⁸.



⁸ Godin, Seth. "What Makes an Idea Viral?" Seth's Blog. 27 Sept. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2005/09/what_makes_an_i.html>

- They understand it
- They want to share it
- They believe that spreading it will enhance their power (reputation, income, friendships) or their peace of mind
- The effort necessary to send the idea is less than the benefits

Godin breaks it down further to explain that alternately, no one 'gets' an idea unless:⁹

- The first impression demands further investigation
- They already understand the foundation ideas necessary to get the new idea
- They trust or respect the sender enough to invest the time

Once an idea - a viral marketing campaign - is shared it gains momentum. Ultimately, businesses and marketers interested in pursuing viral marketing efforts need to understand not only what makes viral marketing work, but what it is that their audiences are interested in, what sparks their curiosity and are willing to share. Then, businesses need to determine how to provide relevant content to them in a unique and unexpected way. Once this connection can be made, the viral effect takes shape to get people talking about your idea, product or campaign.



Who has it worked for?

Best Job in the World: Even if you think you've got the best job in the world, you will surely have been tempted by the Australian Government's 2009 advertisement for a caretaker for a series of small islands in the Great Barrier Reef. The 6-month contract offered a salary of \$100,000 and the successful candidate had to live on-site and post weekly video blogs to promote the area. Launched by Tourism Queensland via traditional media and the Reuters news agency the competition website received a massive 1 million hits within a day of its launch. Interestingly the aim had been for 400,000 throughout the entire campaign! \$70 million dollars of publicity was generated and 34,000 people applied for the post which eventually went to charity fundraiser Ben Southall from Petersfield, Hampshire. Ben's latest campaign for Tourism Queensland was a 'Best Expedition in the World' project from May to September last year which involved kayaking and sailing 1,600 kms along the Queensland coast through the Great Barrier Reef¹⁰.

Hotmail: Back in 1996 Hotmail's offer of free email was pretty unusual. In order to spread the word they attached a message to the bottom of every email sent by

⁹ Godin, Seth. "What Makes an Idea Viral?" Seth's Blog. 27 Sept. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <http://sethgodin.typepad.com/seths_blog/2005/09/what_makes_an_i.html>.

¹⁰ <http://islandreefjob.com/>

a Hotmail user which read: Get your free email at Hotmail. By clicking the word 'Hotmail' the recipient was taken to the company's home page where the free email service was fully explained and they could sign up for their own account. Using the contacts and credibility of existing users, in just two years Hotmail had grown to 12 million subscribers.

Cadbury's Gorilla: At the start of 2007 following from an outbreak of salmonella at one of its factories the previous year, Cadbury's launched a television advertising campaign¹⁰ to claw back some of its lost credibility. Starting with their classic purple background and the words 'a glass and a half full production' the advert immediately harked back to the company's roots and strong reputation. Older viewers would immediately remember the claim that Cadbury's contains 'a glass and a half of full cream milk in every bar'. The camera pans out to a gorilla, concentrating hard and focusing its full attention on something off screen. The soundtrack becomes recognisable as the Phil Collins track: In the Air Tonight. By totaling hooking the viewer in, using imagery and sound that is familiar to most generations and entertaining them along the way Cadbury's ticked all the boxes. The advert immediately appeared on YouTube receiving 500,000 views in the first week which rose to 6 million by the end of 2007. 70 Facebook groups opened up dedicated to the campaign and the company reported a 20% increase in consumer confidence and sales throughout the world.



When to consider a viral strategy

In this area of marketing, the content truly does have to fit the medium and the audience has to be carefully considered. This kind of strategy is ideal for building buzz or excitement, shocking audiences with cause-related statistics or images, organising a community around an interest or appealing to younger, active online users. Additionally, this kind of strategy is often all about the packaging. Fundamentally, do due diligence as a marketer and discover who your audiences are and what they are receptive to sharing. Online tools like blogs and social networks are great testing grounds for shareable content. Try entering the viral marketing landscape by testing smaller campaigns first and building on successes.

Developing a viral marketing strategy

A viral marketing strategy should be approached in the same way as any other marketing strategy: After conducting research and pinpointing a target audience, it's time to develop the game plan. Keep in mind that viral marketing is about spreading your ideas. One of the most important aspects of developing a viral marketing campaign is to step back for a moment and consider your objectives.

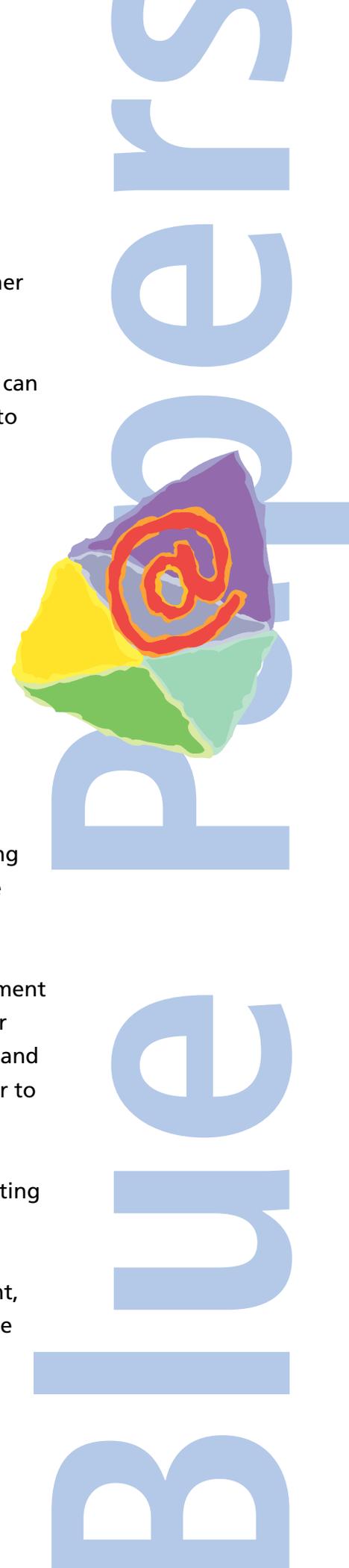
Among the objectives that work well with viral are:

- Increasing brand exposure - branded viral messages will boost brand recognition and recall, can lead to media coverage and help audiences associate your brand, your viral message and your products or services.
- Reinforcing other marketing efforts - viral marketing campaigns can become somewhat sustainable if they are used as a complement to other efforts.
- Growing your opt-in email list - viral messages sent or shared via email can inspire new opt-ins to your list from emails that have been forwarded to them from friends.
- Designing loyalty programmes - businesses can use measurement data to seek out individuals who share the most content on the most frequent basis and reward them with discounts, coupons or other offers to thank them and build relationships.
- Driving website or social media traffic - don't forget to link your viral message to your website in some way to push people there for more information be sure, also, to incorporate the use of social media in the sharing and engagement in viral messages.
- Generating revenue - viral e-mails with links to your website, advertising opportunities on viral websites and other revenue opportunities, while probably quite small, are available.

If your business is looking to see a spike in online traffic, social media engagement or media impressions, a one-and-done approach often is sufficient. But, if your business is looking to use a viral marketing campaign to launch conversations and build relationships, it will need to be tied into other marketing efforts in order to be sustainable.

After outlining objectives, it's time to delve into the elements of a viral marketing campaign strategy. Below are the six basic elements businesses and marketers should include in a strategy. A viral marketing campaign doesn't have to incorporate all of these elements, but Dr. Ralph Wilson, e-commerce consultant, argues that the more of these elements a viral marketing strategy includes, the more powerful the results are likely to be¹¹.

¹¹ Wilson, Dr. Ralph. "The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing." *Web Marketing Today -- E-Commerce, E-Mail Marketing, Internet Marketing - Wilson Internet*. 1 Feb. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/viral-principles.htm>>.



An effective viral marketing strategy:¹²

1. Gives away products or services

Most viral marketing programmes give away valuable products or services to attract immediate attention. The word Free attracts the eye which then sees other desirable things that a business has to offer which brings valuable email addresses, advertising revenue and e-commerce opportunities.

2. Provides for effortless transfer to others

Viruses only spread when they're easy to transmit. In viral marketing, the medium that carries your marketing message must be easy to transfer and replicate: email, website, video, graphic, software download. Digital formats make copying easy. Simplify the marketing message so it can be transmitted easily and without degradation.

3. Scales easily from small to very large

Success of viral marketing campaigns can be difficult to predict. While it's often best to expect a smaller level of success, be prepared to handle a large success, too. Don't create a viral marketing website with servers lacking the capacity to support a large influx of traffic. Don't offer a discount or freebie if your business can't follow through. Let's not forget Hoover's Free Flights fiasco back in the early 1990s.

4. Exploits common motivations and behaviours

Clever viral marketing plans take advantage of common human motivations. The desire to be cool. The desire to be liked, to be thought of as funny, to be understood, to be admired and appreciated, to be part of a group. The resulting urge to communicate produces millions of websites and billions of email messages. Design a marketing strategy that builds on common motivations and behaviours for its transmission, and it's sure to be a success.

5. Utilises existing communication networks

Social scientists tell us that each person has a network of 8 to 12 people in their close network of friends, family and associates. A person's broader network may consist of hundreds, or thousands of people, depending on their job or their social media platform of choice. Use these networks to your advantage: Learn to place your message into existing communications between people, and you rapidly multiply its dispersion.



¹² Wilson, Dr. Ralph. "The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing." *Web Marketing Today -- E-Commerce, E-Mail Marketing, Internet Marketing - Wilson Internet*. 1 Feb. 2005. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.wilsonweb.com/wmt5/viral-principles.htm>>.

6. Takes advantage of other peoples' resources

The most creative viral marketing plans use other peoples' resources to get the word out. Viral videos, for example, are shared on others' social networks. Affiliate programmes place text or graphic links on others' websites. Authors who give away free articles, seek to position their articles on others' web pages. A news release can be picked up by hundreds of periodicals and form the basis of articles seen by hundreds of thousands of readers. Now someone else's newsprint or web page is relaying your marketing message. Someone else's resources are depleted rather than your own.

Another consideration to the viral marketing strategy is the tools and means of delivering a viral message. We've briefly hit on a few of these, such as video, email, social media, and websites. Honestly, the list is endless - anything stands to go viral if it is packaged well, targets the right audiences and is shareable in some way, shape or form. E-books, white papers, social media memes, photos, 'leaked' information, the list goes on.

More tips for a successful viral marketing strategy from the Old Spice® Guy

For two days in July 2010, towel-clad spokesman, Isaiah Mustafah, became known as the "Old Spice Guy" as he responded to users' Old Spice references on YouTube. Short YouTube video clips featured Mustafah charming users with witty remarks and cheeky banter. Links to the videos [appeared on Twitter](#) practically instantaneously¹³.

The resulting user stats were impressive: Upload views on YouTube = more than 83 million; subscribers to the YouTube channel = 140,000; Twitter followers = 92,000; Facebook Likes = 686,000. Lightning had struck and it was a very, very loud bang¹⁴.

Old Spice (and agency Wieden + Kennedy) hit on a few key elements to make this happen¹⁵:

- **Make sure your strategy is brave but playful.**

Old Spice is ... well, old. Hailing back to the 1930s, the brand has long been associated with middle-aged men or stocking fillers from granny. The marketers on the Old Spice Guy team hit gold by meshing the ironic

^{13, 14, 15} "Old Spice Guy's Viral Coup: How He Did It." MarketingProfs: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals. 19 Aug. 2010. Web. 06 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/short-articles/1986/old-spice-guys-viral-coup-how-he-did-it>>.



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attitude towards the brand and inversed its persona, creating a Manly Man so impossibly smug (yet so self-deprecating) that he was lovable.

- **Don't be afraid of relinquishing content ... or control.**

People began sharing and even imitating the "[The Man Your Man Could Smell Like](#)" video ad almost immediately; it was clear that users were both inspired and having fun. Old Spice let them be - allowing word about its content to spread.

- **Remember to acknowledge users while staying true to the original viral message.**

Old Spice's decision to have Mustafa answer questions worked because people love acknowledgement. The material was also thoughtful and well-written without breaking the universe created around the Old Spice Guy persona, bathroom, towels and all.

- **Integrate your viral message with other media.**

Old Spice used social media to begin with and then quickly began integrating it with other efforts, such as television ads and in-store product displays. They knew that integrated and inspired media makes the content a medium in itself.

- **Always, always, always make efforts to continue the discussion.**

Old Spice marketers knew that all viral campaigns don't last forever. They decided to bow out while on top with a perfectly timed [goodbye](#). Additionally, Old Spice launched a second TV ad featuring Mustafa and the Facebook and Twitter accounts are still active and still true to the original campaign.



Getting the lightning to strike more than once

The key to viral success is to follow up, measure and try-try-try again.

"The formula for success includes a combination of great and free content that provides valuable information - or is groundbreaking or amazing or hilarious, plus a network of people to light the fire," shares David Meerman Scott, author of "The New Rules of Marketing and PR"¹⁶.

"While I think it's difficult to purposely create viral marketing buzz, it is certainly

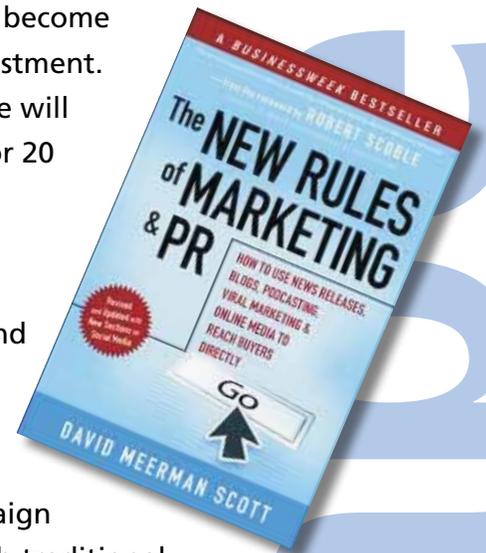
¹⁶ Collier, Mack. "Going Viral With Your B2B Marketing." *MarketingProfs: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals*. 8 Mar. 2008. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/articles/2008/2650/going-viral-with-your-b2b-marketing-qa-with-david-meerman-scott>>.

possible,” says Meerman Scott¹⁷.

He also argues that the key to viral marketing success is thinking like a venture capitalist: A typical venture capitalist follows a maxim stating that most ventures will fail, a few might do okay, and – hopefully - one will take off and become a large enterprise that will repay investors many times the initial investment. In the case of viral marketing campaigns, go forth knowing that there will be failures, some will gain minimal interest and a handful out of 10 or 20 created will truly go viral¹⁸.

“If we apply the venture capital analogy, we might suppose that one needs to think of hundreds of ideas and then choose a handful to fund or in this case, create,” said Meerman Scott¹⁹.

To take the analogy one step further, measurement is needed to report back that return on investment. It’s best to measure the campaign in relation to other marketing efforts and similar to the ways in which traditional marketing efforts are measured: Media impressions, social media engagement, website traffic, email open rates, click-thrus, video views and more. The point is that there is measurement in place - this way, the misses can be built upon in the quest to find the hits, to get lightning to strike again and again.



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17, 18, 19 Collier, Mack. “Going Viral With Your B2B Marketing.” *MarketingProfs: Marketing Resources for Marketing Professionals*. 8 Mar. 2008. Web. 05 Oct. 2010. <<http://www.marketingprofs.com/articles/2008/2650/going-viral-with-your-b2b-marketing-qa-with-david-meerman-scott>>.