



Going Viral By Lois Carter Fay, APR

Although “viral marketing” has been around for several years, it’s likely that you may not know what it is, but I’ll bet you have participated in spreading the virus without thinking much about it.

The phrase viral marketing was coined by Seth Godin, founder of Yoyodyne (the “first” Internet direct marketing firm which was later acquired by Yahoo!) and the author of several books, including ***Unleashing The Ideavirus***, where he introduced the concept. The book is a quick read and very interesting.

Godin is the king of viral marketing. When he was writing his book, ***Purple Cow***, he generated an enormous amount of “buzz” by releasing an ebook, ***99 Cows***, ahead of it. He sent it out free to lots of people and encouraged them to pass it on. In the ebook he promoted his new print book, ***Purple Cow***, and caused such a stir that practically the minute his book was released, it zoomed to the best seller’s list.

So what is viral marketing? Let me give you a few examples.

Hotmail

One outstanding viral campaign—and it may very well have been the first—that grew like wildfire is the free email provider, Hotmail (<http://www.hotmail.com>). Do you know people who use Hotmail as their email provider? I’ll bet you know LOTS of people who do. That’s because at the very beginning, Hotmail added an ad on the bottom of each outgoing email that said, “Get Your Private, Free Email from Hotmail at www.hotmail.com.” (It now advertises other services.) So, every time someone sent an email to a friend or associate, the message for Hotmail spread ... just like the common cold virus, from one person to another. That’s why Seth Godin named the phenomenon “viral marketing.”

But why does Hotmail do this? Because it gets all its users to come to the Hotmail website to retrieve their email. Hotmail can charge premium prices for its ads, sell you additional email storage and create other revenue streams because it has so many users and web visitors.

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Napster

I'm sure you've also heard about Napster (<http://www.napster.com>), the online music service that used to allow people to download music from each other for free. The service was so compelling and easy to use that practically every college student in the U.S. heard about it and used it before you could say, "Bob's my uncle." Unfortunately, copyright problems abounded and the courts shut it down. Nevertheless, before its demise, millions of songs had been downloaded for free. It is now evolving into a paid subscription download service.

I've seen a few recent viral campaigns that have intrigued me.

Contact Manager

Plaxo (<http://www.plaxo.com>) helps you keep your contact files up to date. It works with Outlook and Outlook Express and, since it's web-based, it allows you to access your contacts from anywhere. The user can quickly and easily send out a "confirming" email to all his email contacts, asking them to update their data. For those of us who don't include anything except name and email address in our Outlook files, this is a very easy way to get everything into that file (by putting all the burden on the recipient...not, in my humble opinion, something you should do! People get angry.).

An email goes out to each contact asking them to update their information, including address, phone, fax, home address, birthday, and other items. And, of course, the email has a footer on it that says how the recipient can also get Plaxo. It was created by one of the founders of Napster. It's free, but there is also a premium product now available.

Embed Photos

Novatix SendPhotos (<http://www.novatix.com>) is a cool little program that allows you to send photos embedded within your email without making the file huge. For those people who are still on dial-up so that they can't receive humongous files, and those who cannot or are unwilling to receive attachments, this is a very inexpensive way to send and receive photos. Again, the viral component is inserted in an email; it says, "Created with Novatix SendPhotos, the easiest and fastest way to share pictures. Check it out: <http://www.novatix.com>" on the bottom of every email.

Google Toolbar

Google is the number-one search engine today. One of the ways that it got to number one was by encouraging everyone to add the Google toolbar on their sites, which allows visitors to either search the Net with one click or search your website quickly and easily for a particular term or product. It also shows the page rank for the web page you visit and it offers a free pop-up blocker. What a bonus for small business people who could never afford the custom programming fees it would take to duplicate this functionality. You can see how Google works at: <http://www.google.com>



Here are a couple of fun viral campaigns that have been around for several months. Do you think these made the rounds on the Internet pretty quickly? I do.

Mind Boggling Math

This idea came to me in an email message that said, "OK, it's up to you to figure this out. This will boggle your mind...Take your time and follow the instructions. After reading each window, click on the boy in the lower right corner. You will be amazed....and no, I don't know how it's done." [Note: 7UP is the sponsor of this site.] Check it out here: <http://www.digicc.com/fido/>

Proof That Women Can Park

Here's a fun one. Go to <http://www.way2park.com> and look in the middle of the page and you'll see a small picture. To the right of the photo are the links to click. Depending on the type of computer you have and the media player that is installed on your computer, click on either "Quick Time Low Resolution" or "Windows Media Player Low Resolution," then click on PC or MAC, and watch the video clip. If you are unsure which player you have, click on Windows Media Player, since that's a Microsoft product. Notice that this is a Mazda ad.

What Can You Do?

Create something viral—or something that people **love** to or are **compelled** to pass on to their friends and associates—and you can really rake in the sales. When you think viral, think fun, compelling or something that everyone wants.

Now...get thinking. What can you do that compels your customers and prospects to forward your email promotion?

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