

Viral marketing: what is it and how can it help me?

The impression that some business people have formed of the concept of 'viral marketing' can be of irritating jingles or time-wasting games passed around the internet by teenagers (remember the vastly annoying crazy frog or dancing baby?). But viral marketing can be much more than this, and it has a huge part to play in any business.

Most businesses know about 'referral marketing' – where you ask happy existing customers to recommend your services to a friend, family member or colleague. Referral marketing has the advantage of costing less in hard currency because you're not paying out for expensive full colour adverts in magazines or 30-second TV commercials, but it does cost more in time, with a focus on customer service and client management.

Viral marketing at its simplest form is just referral marketing transferred to the internet.

How does viral marketing work?

The key to viral marketing is to get a visitor to your webpage to 'recommend this page' to someone else who they think will be interested. They will be referring your webpage to another potential customer, who will hopefully then go on to buy your products or services – and then go on to recommend you to their own contacts.

The viral agent:

But what is it that makes existing customers or visitors want to refer your webpage?

The answer is the 'viral agent'. This is the key content on your webpage which will excite them enough to refer it to someone else.

I know what you're thinking; my business is hardly exciting, so viral marketing won't work for me. But viral marketing isn't necessarily about flashy videos, music tracks, video gimmicks and games. It's about the thing which is going to excite your potential customer. It should be something specifically about your

product, service, project, organisation, community or venue which is useful to them, and / or which gives them a good experience.

This is where the creative side comes in - to create something which is based on the core of your message. There's no point having a viral agent about milk bottles when your website is about jam jars, as you will only attract people interested in milk bottles. And there's no point in creating something which will appeal to teenage boys if your branding and target market is aimed at female company executives.

A viral agent can be anything from interesting and relevant text content, hints and tips, 'how to...' demonstrations and tutorials, interactive reference sources, product manuals, fact files, member communities, and 'explore the latest...' features to volatile content such as breaking news, audio interviews, e-cards, 'use this to...' ideas, 'create a costing' calculators, special offers, vouchers and tasters. Think about what would attract you – what would be sufficiently interesting and relevant for you to think of alerting your colleagues, customers or friends about its existence?

It isn't enough though to just have a viral agent; you also need to prompt visitors to tell others about you. This can be done in the form of an 'email a friend' or 'recommend this page to a colleague' link, or an offer with an incentive for both recommender and recipient.

You also need to convert your visitor into a customer. Ask yourself what you want them to do next (contact you? give you some information? buy something?), and what on your website will encourage them to do this.

How can viral marketing help you?

If your viral agent is well focused and well designed, then your potential customers will refer you to their friends and colleagues, who in turn will do the same to their own contacts, and so on. You will create **a network of people visiting your website who are already interested in your content.**

With good website design, good customer benefits and products and strong embedded calls to action, you have the opportunity to convert a good percentage of your new visitors into customers.

This type of referral marketing sits well alongside more traditional marketing approaches, such as search engine optimisation (SEO), and pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns. The advantage of viral marketing is that

it increases your exposure to **interested** potential customers and you can have as many different viral agents as you have different types of customers.

The keys to viral marketing:

1. Know your target market
2. Find something about your product, venue, service or organisation which will be useful, impactful, interesting and exciting and will create a good user experience. This is your 'viral agent'.
3. Make it easy for people to refer you to others.
4. Back up your viral agent with an impactful, user-led, action-creating, well-targeted website.
5. Follow up with ways of making it easy for existing customers to refer you online to others.

For more information, ideas, and quotes about viral marketing contact us and we'll be happy to discuss your needs and requirements:

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