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## **Viral marketing as an innovative form of marketing communication**

**Abstract.** Viral marketing is considered to be part of internet marketing. A virus as an information carrier spreads among people and gradually “infects” subsequent internet users<sup>1</sup>. The paper mainly aims at indicating contemporary forms and applications of viral marketing on the internet. The paper is based on secondary reports concerning the spread of viral information as well as the author’s experiment conducted on Facebook relating to the viral message.

**Keywords:** viral marketing, viral promotion, marketing communication, social media

### **1. Viral marketing**

Viral marketing consists in initiating a situation when potential customers will spread among themselves information concerning a company, services or products. This is a special form of internet marketing activities mainly based on the interactive aspect of the internet as well as networks of connections between participants of the internet market.

Considering the specificity of „viruses” viral marketing can be classified as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> P.R. Michalak, D. Daszkiewicz, A. Musz, *Marketing wirusowy w Internecie*, Helion, Gliwice 2009, pp. 9-10.

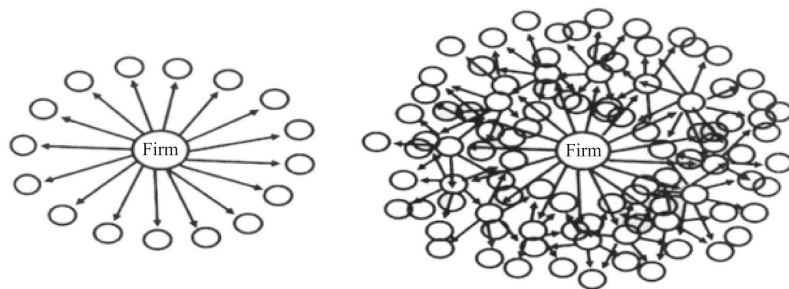
- viral products (e.g. tutorials),
- viral prices (e.g. flexible price lists),
- distribution viruses (e.g. wiki-wiki systems),
- promotion viruses (e.g. viral advertising).

The biggest advantage of using viral marketing consists in enhancing recognisability of a brand on the Internet through word of mouth marketing and recommendation marketing – increasing confidence in the brand which results in increased profits from sales<sup>2</sup>.

There are many causes to development of viral marketing in particular:

- development of the Internet and corporate activity in this area,
- development of social media,
- decline in efficiency of other promotional forms,
- worsening confidence of customers towards brands and companies,
- growth in importance of the brand which is being recommended.

The above areas must draw attention to connecting viral marketing to the growth in importance of these brands which are used and trusted by acquaintances.



Drawing 1. Comparison of the traditional marketing model to the viral marketing model

Source: M. Hughes, *Marketing szeptany. Buzzmarketing*, MT Biznes, Warszawa 2008, p. 13.

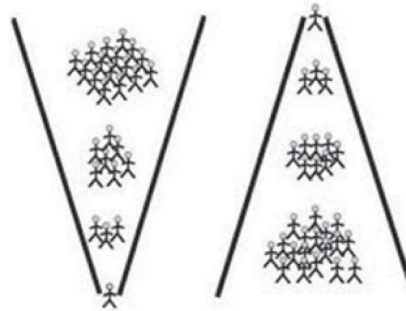
When comparing a standard marketing message with a viral one, we may notice that the viral message spreads rapidly. Drawing 1 compares the two marketing models – traditional and word of mouth marketing in a simplified way<sup>3</sup>. In both cases the impact of an individual promotional action has been presented.

By means of viral marketing information reaches a significantly higher number of recipients than in case of the traditional model of conveying information.

<sup>2</sup> A. Burgiel, *Marketing oparty na komunikacji nieformalnej jako sposób przeciwdziałania regresowi tradycyjnego marketingu*, in: *Ekspansja czy regres marketingu?*, ed. T. Zwierzyńska-Bubałło, pp. 222-223.

<sup>3</sup> M. Hughes, *Marketing szeptany. Buzzmarketing*, MT Biznes, Warszawa 2008, p. 13.

When considering a participant in communication (a potential buyer of products) an effect of receiving and transmitting synergy occurs. It can be presented in the form of “information funnel”<sup>4</sup> – traditional and viral communication is compared in drawing 2.



Drawing 2. Comparison of the traditional marketing model to the viral marketing model

Source: [http://www.optimizeandprophesize.com/jonathan\\_mendezs\\_blog/social\\_media\\_optimization/](http://www.optimizeandprophesize.com/jonathan_mendezs_blog/social_media_optimization/) [20.05.2012].

The recipient of the information becomes its sender and an initiator of further content spreading. The information flow would not be possible but for development of Web 2.0 and social media where interaction in communication most often occurs.

## 2. Viral marketing vs. other modern communication forms – an attempt to systemize notions

Viral marketing cannot be “detached” from other modern communication forms. One may mention word of mouth marketing and recommendation marketing which are often confused with viral marketing. According to the author it is worthwhile trying to organise these notions in view of customer related activities.

**Word of mouth marketing** consists in activities which aim at causing media hype around a particular product at little financial expense and which make customers pass information about products or services on to other potential consumers. Word of mouth marketing is believed to be an interesting story and not

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.optimizeandprophesize.com/jonathan\\_mendezs\\_blog/social\\_media\\_optimization/](http://www.optimizeandprophesize.com/jonathan_mendezs_blog/social_media_optimization/) [20.05.2012].

only a traditional conversation about the product. This modern form of marketing is becoming more popular in a rapidly changing environment of a company. Word of mouth marketing is based on stimulating consumers' conversations and conveying true information about advantages and disadvantages of a product or a service. The essence of word of mouth marketing lies in sincerity and objectivity of opinions and its activities do not break principles of business ethics<sup>5</sup>. Examples of word of mouth marketing are as follows: viral marketing, brand blogging, trendsetting and casual marketing"<sup>6</sup>.

**Consumer recommendation marketing** focuses on advertising a product through customers' experience with this specific product. As a consequence, customers convey naturally credible recommendations which result in making decisions about buying.

Having considered the above definitions one may say that:

1. Word of mouth marketing: a reference to reality and the Internet is a broader notion.

2. Viral marketing: a reference to the Internet environment – a virus spreads rapidly in the net.

3. Recommendation marketing: a reference to the Internet environment as part of Word of mouth marketing connected to building a brand image and trust towards products.

It is worthwhile noting that viral marketing is a form while word of mouth marketing – the contents, recommendation marketing is a way of building customer's confidence.

### 3. Marketing message as a promotional virus and its mutations

Viral promotion is an excellent example of a modern marketing form. It is based on novel ideas and unconventional approach towards creating marketing messages. It is worthwhile remembering that it does not often reach the target however this is not its main assumption. Recipients constitute a multilayer group and this is a success factor of the campaign of this innovative form of marketing<sup>7</sup>.

A promotional virus may be constituted by:

– an advertisement – most often on You Tube or in other social media,

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<sup>5</sup> K. Szczurek, *Marketing szeptany czy raczej szemrany?*, <http://biznes.interia.pl/news/marketing-szeptany-czy-raczej-szemrany,1469718> [20.05.2012].

<sup>6</sup> J. Piśkuła-Malachowska, *Marketing szeptany jako forma komunikacji przedsiębiorstwa z konsumentami*, in: *Zarządzanie i marketing*, Zeszyty Naukowe Politechniki Rzeszowskiej No. 272, Rzeszów 2010, p. 359.

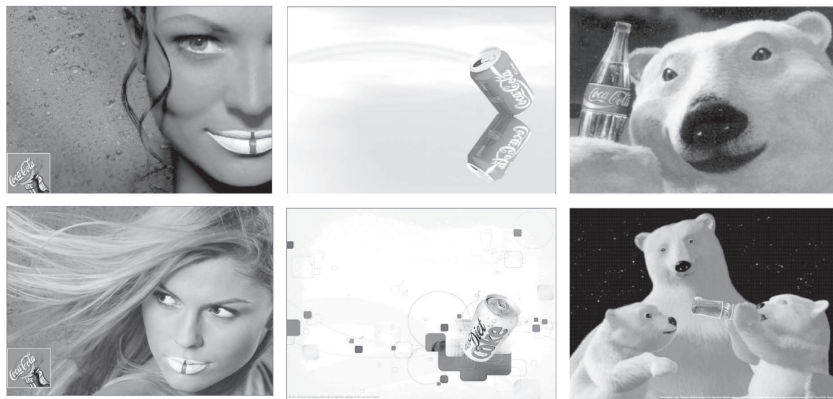
<sup>7</sup> T. Olejnik, *Broń wirusowego rażenia*, "Marketing w Praktyce" 2008, No. 5, pp. 46-50.

- sales promotion – in the form of electronic gadgets, screen savers, discount vouchers etc,
- public relations – building a brand image through providing interesting, useful information from the point of view of the internet user or the products user.

Standard promotional viruses are as follows:

1. **Promotional gadgets as a virus.** More often network gadgets are used as tools in viral marketing. These are as follows: screensavers, interactive games, desktop wallpapers and mobile phone wallpapers etc.

All types of gadgets are identified with a specific brand of a product. For example Coca-Cola provides Internet users with screensavers, wallpapers and other electronic gadgets in the form of viral marketing (drawing 3).



Drawing 3. Coca Cola electronic gadgets

Source: <http://www.megatapety.eu/index.php/Napoj/Coca%20Cola> [25.02.2012].

Thanks to this marketing effort Coca Cola has gained more popularity especially among young people who follow trends. Thanks to these efforts the company is strongly advertised and its image is even more recognised<sup>8</sup>.

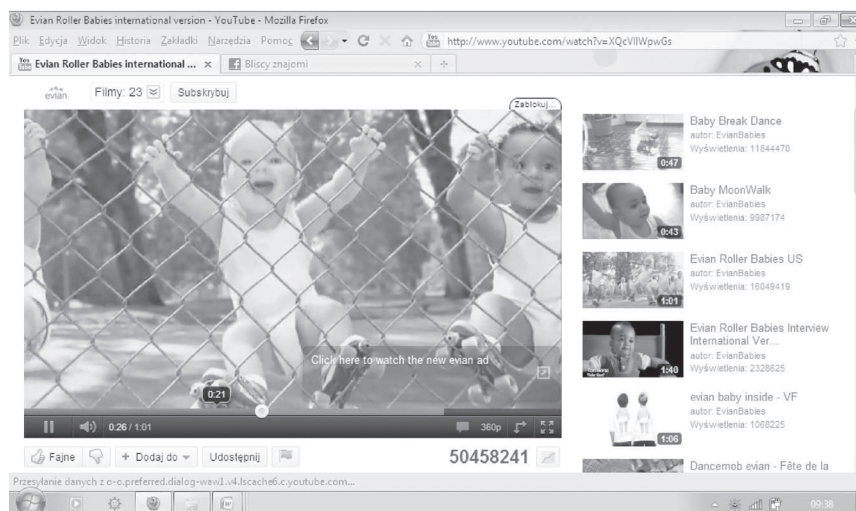
2. **Viral advertising in You Tube.** Viral marketing is most often associated with daring and unique campaigns which include funny or shocking videos in the world's most popular social service as YouTube.com<sup>9</sup>.

"Roller Babies international version"<sup>10</sup> of Evian is an example of applying efficient viral advertising on You Tube (drawing 4).

<sup>8</sup> J. Adamczyk, *Marketing wirusowy*, <http://www.e-marketing.pl/artyk/artyk73.php> [25.02.2012].

<sup>9</sup> You Tube, [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) [25.02.2012].

<sup>10</sup> Evian, "Roller Babies international version", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQcVIIWpwGs> [25.12.2012].



Drawing 4. Evian's "Roller Babies international version" viral advertising

Source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XQcVilWpwGs> [25.12.2012].

The advertisement pictures babies rollerblading. The advertisement is nice and has an emotional impact on viewers. Over 12 thousand people expressed their view on it and over 50 458 241 "liked" it. The link to this advertisement spread through various channels: e-mail, information communicators, social communicators, the table on Facebook etc. Users sent information to acquaintances, they passed it on so it spread rapidly. You Tube modified it and new forms of babies' activities in advertising were created etc. The brand built a virtual community around the advertisement in the viral form.

Apart from standard forms of Internet viruses there are "**viral mutations**". Examples of mutations are as follows:

1. **Interactive advertisement.** Interactive advertising is a multimedia message whose aim it is to initiate interaction with users of the virtual community. These are advertisement dedicated to You Tube as in the television form they would not have a possibility to affect the recipient in the dialogue form. A good example is the advertisement of Tipp-Ex "A hunter shoots a Bear"<sup>11</sup>.

2. **Profiled multimedia videos.** Videos are adjusted to the behavioural profile of the recipient, they are placed on appropriate sites, uploaded by means of P2P programmes, attached – these are very often advertisements of products which for various reasons are not present in the other media (e.g. duration, censorship)

<sup>11</sup> Tipp-Ex, "A hunter shoots a Bear", <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nRVFeIWdIfg&feature=related> [25.02.2012].





Drawing 5. Viral internet game

Source: [images.thecarconnection.com/med/2011-suzuki-kizashi\\_100334625\\_m.jpg](http://images.thecarconnection.com/med/2011-suzuki-kizashi_100334625_m.jpg) [20.05.2012].

or stopped being broadcast. Usually funny, intriguing or though provoking. These can be videos, pictures, sounds Power point presentations, animations etc.

3. **Videosharing.** Videosharing activities allow for less aggressive way of reaching a potential customer. Activities at videosharing sites aim at reaching the highest number of internet users.

4. **Interactive games.** Advergaming means combining marketing with games in order to promote products and enhance the knowledge of a brand or devotion to it<sup>12</sup>. However from wider perspective advergaming may be viewed as a marketing tool which is based on advertising game placed on the internet or an application which can be uploaded to a mobile device. It is assumed not to be invading the recipient, it provides him with entertainment and pleasure and thus the user have a long and intense contact with the game.

An Internet game as a virus is an excellent tool for building brand awareness. During the game customers spend more time than in case of other advertising means. Thus the more the player is involved in the game the more this emotional involvement is transferred to the advertised brand. By spending nice time with the website we become more affectionate towards the brand which we favourably associate with fun and relaxation. An example of a viral game is presented by drawing 5<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Definition "Advergaming", [www.copyrider.pl/slownik-marketingowy](http://www.copyrider.pl/slownik-marketingowy) [20.04.2012].

<sup>13</sup> [images.thecarconnection.com/med/2011-suzuki-kizashi\\_100334625\\_m.jpg](http://images.thecarconnection.com/med/2011-suzuki-kizashi_100334625_m.jpg) [20.05.2012].

Viral marketing will contribute to creating and strengthening a positive image of a corporation. By forwarding the game customers will spread not only information about the company, services or products. Additionally they will build awareness marki and strengthen its positioning. Games are able to convey all information about a new product or brand. They can teach customers how to use their products, enumerate useful information about the products, its advantages, applications and advantages over other products.

#### **4. Viral marketing in the customer-company communication in view of research reports and research of one's own**

According to the research of an American company called Jupiter Research 15% consumers encouraged by the viral campaign bought a particular product<sup>14</sup>. About 85% of consumer encouraged by the viral campaign forwards the information to 6 people.

People asked where they have encountered viral marketing most often did not remember the place or they indicated You Tube (30%) in the first place. Other places – table.

Table. Place of encountering viral marketing

Place	%
I don't now	34
You Tube	30
Facebook	19
Myspace	2
Twitter	2
Blog	2
Social media portals	11

Source: Elaboration of one's own on the basis of: JupiterResearch report, "Viral Marketing: Bringing the Message to the Masses", 2011.

According to the above information from table 1 one may say that the main places of sending and contacting respondents with viral marketing are social media areas; You Tube, Facebook, other social portals and blogs. About 70% of respondents receive viral content and do not treat it like spam<sup>15</sup>. Information is

<sup>14</sup> JupiterResearch report, "Viral Marketing: Bringing the Message to the Masses", 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem.



received with interest (about 55% of recipients) 1 out of 3 cases sent to at least 4 acquaintances.

Viral marketing is the next form of communications activities which initiates growth in interest on the part of companies as well as present recipients in social media. In 2010 common marketing activities consisted in: e-mail marketing, search engine optimization and event marketing<sup>16</sup>.

In order to check the spreading of a viral message, the author has designed a virus called „Futurystyczne Rybki”<sup>17</sup> – a futuristic restaurant under the ocean bed. The virus has been designed on the basis of the following guidelines:

- the virus has been design on the basis of an intriguing message of an emotional nature,
- the creation of the virus has been preceded by researching the target group-the products must respond to needs of the target group,
- in order to spread information an existing social network has been used (Facebook) – a virus must have an area to spread,
- the activities have been facilitated by other sources – it is worthwhile putting information about the virus on other websites, it should be present in search engines in order to increase the scope of the impact,
- the control over viral message spreading was ethical and compliant with the rules of the social media.

The virus has been spread on Facebook, among 240 persons. Within 3 days the author registered 1840 accesses and one person gave access about 7 times (related system). The feedback mainly concerned the name of the restaurant and searching a given place on the internet.

It is not only interesting how fast information spreads but also a question arises:

1. What is the finiteness of sending information in this form?
2. What is the main objective and information premises of transferring such information?

Answers to these question important from the research point of view have become a premise of further research whose results are being gathered at the moment.

Respondents have a positive attitude towards information included in viral videos which transfer the content in a non-intrusive and humorous way. From the point of view of companies advantages of viral marketing are emphasised namely: low cost of reaching the recipient, wide reception, communication with

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<sup>16</sup> Socia Media Marketing Report: Indrusty Report 2011, <http://www.socialmediaexaminer.com/SocialMediaMarketingReport2011.pdf> [20.05.2012].

<sup>17</sup> A. Dejnaka, Wirus multimedialny „Futurystyczne Rybki”, eksperyment związany z marketingiem wirusowym, luty 2012.

the customer in the form of a dialogue, building a friendly brand open to needs of the customer.

It may be worrying that strong trust in viral application impost wider dangers. These are as follows:

- impossible control of the message transfer,
- the virus has a life of its own,
- the advertisement may be presented in an unfavourable light on the social website on the contrary to company's intentions,
- internet environment is intensively opinion generating, it may strengthen not only positive advertising but may also enhance criticism and spread gossip to the detriment of the brand.

It is worthwhile mentioning other threats- at present Internet applications of viral marketing carrying the message infringe ethics of acting on the Internet or they impersonate a funny video and download user's data without their knowledge and consent when the user clicked on the application.

## Summary

Together with development of the Internet and its growing number of users as well as the increase in importance of social websites over the last few years, internet marketing has gained a new less limited area of operations. It has resulted in development of the so called modern e-marketing which comprises blog marketing, social marketing, word of mouth marketing, viral marketing. Viral activities on the internet most often comprise intriguing advertising videos which internet users send among themselves. The principle of word of mouth marketing is used, stories which circulate among potential customers are supposed to enhance product awareness and make the product symbolic. One has to remember that a virus may constitute other than advertising and marketing tool. Effectiveness of viral marketing to a large extent depends on ingenuity of its creators and the form of presented content.

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