

# **Forwarding Viral Messages: What Part Does Emotion Play?**

**Angela Dobeles, Central Queensland University**

**Michael Beverland, University of Melbourne**

**Adam Lindgreen , Robert van Wijk, Eindhoven University of Technology**

## **Abstract**

Viral marketing continues to prove a cost effective and efficient tool for the dissemination of marketing messages from firms to clients and beyond. But why is it that some messages are forwarded (and forwarded again and again and again) while other messages do not make it past the first inbox? This paper uses ten viral messages to explore the forwarding behaviour of ten viral messages. Forwarding/non-forwarding behaviour is linked to emotion as a possible motivator and explanation of behaviour. Results indicate that the use of emotion, specifically humour, matched with an original use of technology encourages forwarding behaviour. Males and females are alike in their willingness to forward a message that engages them and to delete a message that does not, for example, make them laugh.

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Spreading a message about a brand, company, service idea and/or new or existing products via some form of electronic communication amongst a network of potential buyers is called viral marketing (Dobeles, Toleman & Beverland 2005). The end results of the successful viral marketing campaigns are peer-to-peer recommendations (increasing the credibility of the message), increases in sales and/or market share, increase profitability and return on marketing investments, reduce costs of marketing, and possibly reach a media-jaded consumer group. While the message media may have changed, to embrace a new technology, the basic criteria of viral marketing requires the same as traditional word-of-mouth, namely, a social network and a message that is powerful enough to encourage passing on. For example, there is something so wonderfully unique and special about a message that we cannot help but forward it, for example, Carlton United's 'The Big Ad'. By February 2006 The Big Ad had been played, from the Carlton website, by over 3.2 million people. The ad was launched on June 21, 2005 (In an email communication on February 24, 2006 from Felicity Watson from the Fosters Group). If the goal of Carlton United was to use peer-to-peer communications to spread the word about their beer, it certainly succeeded. But what was so special about The Big Ad that so many viewed the ad and many forwarded it as an attachment in email messages?

Because a viral marketing message is unsolicited a company faces a risk in sending the initial communication, spamming is frowned upon in the online world and no-one wants to feel used, and the recipient faces the risks of forwarding it on (what if my friends don't find it amusing or feel used themselves?) (Dobeles, Toleman & Beverland 2005). Thus, the authors argue that a viral marketing message must develop an emotional connection between the brand/idea and the recipient to ensure the virus gets spread. Why emotions? Past research has concluded that a viral marketing message needs to be intriguing, passionate, fun, unique or create interest (e.g. incorporating interactive games) in order to be forwarded by recipients (Hirsh 2001). Another researcher found that email content was forwarded when it was

thought to be funny, interesting or emotional enough to have an impact (Masland 2001). Finally, research shows that the highest response rates are reserved for those viral messages that contain violence, pornography, or irreverent humour (Witthaus 2002). This paper considers the impact of emotional appeals and the decision to forward/not forward a viral message in an exploratory capacity.

## **Methodology**

We selected 10 campaigns, each with a different company, product or message affiliation and from a range of companies. Two campaigns sought to promote the company (Amazon and e-Tractions), four campaigns sought to promote new products (Dr Pepper, Honda, Motorola and Rock the Vote), one company was trying to increase awareness (Non Government Organizations), one company was trying to save itself (BNN) and the Smelling Monkey message was not tied to a corporation. Ten interviewees were asked about three main topics, firstly, the extent they felt an emotion was experienced after viewing the campaign, their forwarding/non-forwarding behaviour of that campaign and finally, demographic and gender characteristics. Forwarding or non-forwarding behaviour could then be linked to the six primary emotions. Each primary emotion was given two alternative terms to describe it, three words in all. For example, a campaign could be forwarded because it amazed or astonished in addition to being judged surprising, or a campaign could bring joy, delight or happiness.

## **Viral Messages and the Six Primary Emotions**

### **Surprise**

Overall, surprise was the most dominant emotion and was identified as a reason to forward across each campaign. Surprise is defined as the result of an unexpected action or occurrence, for example a product, service or attribute, is unexpected, and the result is amazement or astonishment (Power & Dalglish 1997; Oatley & Jenkins 1996; Ekman & Friesen 1975). The “Weapons of Mass Destruction” campaign was felt by interviewees to contain the emotional element of surprise, evidenced through reactions to a Google search for “Weapons of Mass Destruction” and the “I feel lucky” option. This campaign proved successful, 30 per cent of people who visited the fake error page went on to other links with Amazon’s home page. This figure is well above average banner click through rates of 4.7 per cent (Gatarski 2002).

### **Joy**

The emotion of surprise appeared to work more effectively when linked with another primary emotion, for example, joy. Pairing emotions appears to create a more successful campaign than when an emotion is used on its own. Recipients experienced joy after viewing the “Weapons of Mass Destruction,” “Raging Cow,” “Honda,” and “Motorola” campaigns. These four campaigns used different ways to elicit the emotion. For example, the “Raging Cow” campaign used humour, “Honda” used idealism and “Motorola” used financial incentives to elicit joy. Success of these campaigns was also evidenced, for example, surprise and joy worked well for the new Accord, Honda campaign which started with 500 emails containing a short movie attached. In the first week following the launch the website was visited by 2,779 users, 35,000 at three weeks and three years after the launch, over 4.5 million people have seen the short film (Jaffe 2003).

## **Sadness**

Sadness results in feelings of distress or being downhearted (Power & Dalgleish 1997; Oatley & Jenkins 1996; Ekman & Friesen 1975) and as a tool can be used to encourage support or sympathy for a company, its causes and the overall campaign. For example, the Red Cross campaign incorporated the charity efforts of several Non Governmental Organisations (NGO's) including World Relief, the Salvation Army, and UNICEF and primarily sought donations of money, food, clothing and other related items for the victims of natural disasters. The website asked for donations of money or other aid (e.g. old clothes, blankets, or physical assistance) and encouraged viewers to pass on the information to others. Sadness can be a useful emotion for eliciting support for victims of natural disasters and 'Acts of God' where no person or organisation can be blamed for the victim's plight (Zisowitz Srearns 1993) and is thus, an effective emotion for encouraging support for the viral marketing campaigns of charitable organizations. Further, a sad individual may make emotional and practical demands on others around them, thereby strengthening social bonds and achieving an important social function. This social function could lead to altruism in which others feel sympathy or pity (Izard 1993).

## **Anger**

Where a person or organisation can be blamed for a victim's plight the emotion of sadness will most likely change into anger, however the emotion is still useful for NGO's or pressure groups to encourage support for a cause (Power & Dalgleish 1997; Oatley & Jenkins 1996; Ekman & Friesen 1975). One example of this is the petition started by the Organisation of Women's Freedom (OWFI). The petition was posted on 30th December 2003 and alerted viewers to the plight of women's rights activists in Kurdish controlled Northern Iraq, during a time when Kurdish authorities had threatened to shut down the offices of women's rights activists. The petition was in two parts, the first called for a recipient to join in support of women's rights activities by emailing the OWFI, and secondly, to forward the petition to other people and government representatives. Further details were available to website visitors included examples of the injustices suffered by some Iraq women. The OWFI received new names of potential supporters for each name added to the petition. Another example is Dutch public broadcasting agency (BNN) who set out to save their company from parliamentary closure. The campaign was successful with BNN achieving a 224,000 membership base, enough to remain in business.

## **Fear**

Fear is a useful emotion for encouraging action of some kind, especially when the fear is strong enough to produce outrage in a recipient (Power & Dalgleish 1997; Oatley & Jenkins 1996; Ekman & Friesen 1975). The 'Rock the Vote' campaign made good use of fear as a motivation for forwarding behaviour. A non-profit organisation, Rock the Vote, was founded in 1990 and sought to encourage young Americans to become involved in political issues and register to vote. The campaign used images designed to shock on issues ranging from abortion, gun control and capital punishment encapsulated in an interactive quiz. The combination of shocking images and a text message quiz was hoped to cut through existing clutter and reach an already media jaded audience (Dobele, Toleman & Beverland 2005) and appeared to be successful in terms of viewings (approximately 22 million views) and a 35 percent click-through rate. Part of the success of this campaign may have been clever targeting, the message directly related to the recipient group and the support sought was short-term for a specific cause.

## Disgust

While the emotion of disgust, or bad taste, can have a short duration and low experiential intensity (Rozin, Haidt & McCauley 1999; Power & Dalgleish 1997; Oatley & Jenkins 1996; Ekman & Friesen 1975) it can be a useful emotion for viral marketing campaigns. For example, finding a message to be disgusting, especially in terms of humour, can be a powerful reason to forward it to others, in our sample, this was especially true for young males and the 'Smelling Monkey' message which featured the bodily workings of a monkey. Another campaign which rated highly for disgust was the e-tractions (an IT company) campaign. Instead of sending traditional Christmas cards, e-tractions sent an e-card featuring short video of a snowman eating various other characters before exploding, thus causing more snow to fall. The campaign got off to a slow start, with clients unable to see the link between an IT company and an exploding snowman (possibly a failure in targeting) but became more popular the year after as the technology behind the card was more fully understood and the message extended outwards from clients to recipients who appreciated the disgusting elements of the card. In a single six-week period the website version of the card had been viewed by over 200,000 people and reached a peak of 26,000 viewings a day.

### Summary of Emotions in Viral Marketing Campaign

Of the six primary emotions, surprise was the only one to be mentioned in all viral campaigns and as the key emotion for willingness to forward. Further, the pairing of surprise with another emotion, such as joy, sadness or fear, also encouraged positively forwarding behaviour. A summary of the recipients' emotional responses to each campaign is provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Emotions in the Different Viral Marketing Campaigns

	Surprise	Joy	Sadness	Anger	Disgust	Fear
Weapons of Mass Destruction	✓	✓				
Rock the Vote	✓		✓			✓
Red Cross	✓		✓			
Raging Cow	✓	✓				
Honda	✓	✓				
Motorola	✓	✓				
Snow Globe	✓				✓	
Smelling Monkey	✓				✓	
Women's Rights	✓		✓	✓		
BNN	✓		✓	✓		
TOTAL	10	4	4	2	2	1
✓ = Emotions elicited by the content of a campaign as suggested by interviewees						

Source: developed from the research

### Moderating influences

Three potentially moderating variables were identified for comparison in this study, 1. capturing the imagination, 2. well targeted and 3. gender. Effective campaigns, judged by

willingness to forward, were the ones that seemed to capture the imaginations of original recipients (73 per cent of recipients said they forward such campaigns). Thus, such a campaign had to do more than just provide a surprise ending, it had to encourage (and receive) action. Surprise was deemed more effective when paired with another emotion, such as joy (resulting in delight), or disgust (resulting in humour). Examples of comments which typify this feeling include, “I thought something else was going to happen” for the “Weapons of Mass Destruction” campaign, “I was surprised they would use such a crazy looking cow to promote their product” for the Raging Cow campaign the Honda viral marketing campaign was thought to be ‘inventive’, ‘original and unique’, ‘well thought out’ and ‘nicely made’, with a very unique idea behind the advertising message. The level of ‘malicious delight’ and ‘gross humour’ brought particular attention to the Snow Globe campaign. Secondly, recipients appeared more than willing to forward a viral marketing message when it resonated with them, and they felt that people they forwarded the message to would also find it useful or amusing. Overall, almost half the judges (44 per cent) indicated they would forward a well targeted campaign. We define a well-targeted campaign as one that provides the ‘right’ message to the ‘right’ audience in a timely manner without offence, or technological problems, such as download time. Campaigns which were thought to achieve this goal included the “Rock the Vote” (“good reason to vote”, “everybody should know about the information provided” and “it is relevant to everyone”) and the “Save BNN” campaign (“BNN makes nice programmes, so I was surprised by the fact that they could be removed from the television” and “It is a pity that BNN should be removed”). The resulting sympathy for the company and the service it provides resulted in forwarding behaviour. Finally, male recipients were more likely to pass on viral messages (63 per cent male to 37 per cent female) and messages involving humour, particularly disgusting humour, were more likely to be passed on by both genders.

## **Conclusions**

The ten viral messages studied in this paper highlight four common themes for success. Firstly, campaigns that a recipient can respond to on an emotional level appear to be forwarded more readily than campaigns that contain little or no emotional content. All ten campaigns researched in this study contained at least one of the six primary emotions and forwarding behaviour appears to contain a response by recipients to that emotion. Secondly, willingness to forward a viral message was in evidence when recipients’ imaginations were excited or captured through a new application of technology, a surprising ending or a brand message that was unique. Thirdly, the recipients must be well chosen in order to improve the chances of forwarding behaviour. That is, there should be some familiarity with the product, company, brand or idea to elicit a pre-positive response to the original message sent cold and often blind by a company to existing or past clients. Even Carlton Draft’s The Big Ad started with staff of the firm. Finally, males appear more willing to pass on viral messages than females (especially when the message involves disgusting humour) but the reasons for forwarding are the same for both genders, for example, contains humour, would be deemed useful to others or the surprising use of technology.

Thus, the challenges marketing practitioners face when developing and launching a successful traditional campaign remain the same as those experienced when launching a viral marketing campaign. First and foremost, the need for adequate target market research, followed by the development of an engaging and well crafted message and delivery system, and finally, an effectively targeted and efficiently run campaign that provides an action for recipients, i.e., pass this on! Now!

## References

- Bercowitz, L., 1999. "Anger". In Dalglish, T. and Power, M.J. (Eds.) Handbook of Cognition and Emotion, pp. 411-428, Wiley and Sons Ltd., Chichester.
- Dobele, A., Toleman, D., & Beverland, M., 2005,.Controlled infection! Spreading the brand message through viral marketing, Business Horizons, 48(2), March-April, 143-149.
- Ekman, P. and Friesen, W.V., 1975. Unmasking the Face, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.
- Hirsh, L. (2001), Tell A Friend: Viral Marketing Packs Clout Online. E-Commerce Times, <http://www.ecommercetimes.com/perl/story/14295.html>, accessed January 14, 2003.
- Gatarski, R., 2002. "Breed Better Banners: Design Automation through On-line Interaction." Journal of Interactive Marketing, 16(12), 2-13.
- Izard, C.E., 1977. Human Emotions, Plenum Press, New York.
- Jaffe, J., 2003. Viral Marketing – Part 2. iMedia, <http://www.imediaconnection.com>, , accessed February 21, 2004.
- Masland, E., 2001. Viral marketing Word of mouth comes of age, Websolvers, Inc.
- Oatley, K. and Jenkins, J.M., 1996. Understanding emotions, Blackwell Publishers Inc., Massachusetts.
- Power, M. and Dalglish, T., 1997. Cognition and Emotion: From Order to Disorder, Psychology Press, Sussex.
- Rozin, P., Haidt, J., and McCauley, C.R., 1999. Disgust: the Body and Soul Emotion. In Dalglish, T. and Power, M.J. (Eds.), Handbook of Cognition and Emotion, pp. 429-445, Wiley and Sons Ltd., Chichester.
- Witthaus, M., 2002. Spreading the Word: Special Report, Precision Marketing, 12.
- Zisowitz Srearns, C., 1993. Sadness. In Lewis, M. & Haviland, J.M. (Eds.), Handbook of Emotions, pp. 547-561, The Guildford Press, New York.