

FOLLOW that virus!

Viral (word-of-mouth) marketing campaigns can be extremely efficient and profitable.

Due to good execution? to pretty uncontrollable factors?

Or, completely out of randomness?

Viruses can be obnoxious little creatures. They constitute the tiniest unit of life, a few nanometers of not even autonomous creatures, unable to replicate on their own. A mere thread of genes sometimes covered with a protective coat of protein, but extremely well designed by Mother Nature to perform its function: inject its set of genes in a given cell, and use that cell's energy and mechanisms to produce identical copies of those genes. Viruses are, by definition, infectious, contagious. They spread among different organisms, cross borders, follow migrations... tirelessly, efficiently. Sometimes, they are able to become epidemic, to reach a significant amount of the overall population in a given area with incredible speed.

Now, try to imagine the viral mechanisms and abilities applied to the marketing field: picture your brand, or a specific product, passing from one customer to another, contagiously, like a disease. No need for costly marketing campaigns in TV and magazines, just plain,

pure infection driving your brand awareness, boosting your sales. A marketer's dream came true.

FROM WORD-OF-MOUTH TO WORD-OF-MOUSE

With the spread of the Internet as a social medium and the rise of the blogosphere as the electronic equivalent of the Greek agora, viruses seem to have found the ideal playground for its diffusion strategies. Everything on the Internet is one click away, the perfect scenario for virus diffusion processes. The so-called *ideaviruses*, or *memes*, are in high

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fashion these days. The term is attributed to **Steve Jurvetson**, a venture capitalist referring to the way Hotmail spread its name by using its tagline, "Get you free, private e-mail at <http://www.hotmail.com>", at the end of each message. That strategy allowed Hotmail to

reach a notable success: from zero to twelve million users in just eighteen months.

Experts in *memetics* compete trying to put together the next viral campaign, the perfect epidemic, in a sort of "artisan science" still very much driven by plain luck. However, lucky or not, when they are truly able to hit the bull's eye, the success is phenomenal. Check the numbers in the launch of "Blair Witch Project", for example: with an estimated production cost of just about \$25,000, a huge array of gossiping about the movie populated the Internet in a matter of weeks. The film grossed over \$248 million worldwide, making it the most profitable motion picture of all time.

The mechanism of a viral outbreak is extremely interesting: a self-fulfilling value proposition in which an individual is socially rewarded for being able to identify an idea as a viral one before it breaks out to the masses. A good *meme* is able to generate cohesion, a sense of belonging to a certain class of privileged



people who can learn from the idea well in advance. Each person transmitting the idea becomes “infected”, active, and switches from a receptor to an emitter role, a true marketing

The mechanism of a viral outbreak: a self-fulfilling value proposition

agent of the idea. Of course, individuals are not created equal: good viral marketers can easily spot sneezers, influential people with a huge infectious capacity through the so called hives.

Others call them *network hubs*, or *mavens*, using **Malcolm Gladwell's** *Tipping Point* terminology. However, the status of maven is not necessarily perpetual: in a society where every member can have his or her own “Speaker’s Corner”, things can change pretty fast, and it is up to the marketer to realize who is who and who can be influential for what. Putting together the idea, the meme, is also part of the marketer’s ability:

ideaviruses are necessarily simple, and get transmitted better or worse, to create *buzz*, according to its *smoothness*. Viral campaigns can be extremely efficient and profitable, in some cases due to good execution, in some others due to pretty uncontrollable factors, or completely out of randomness.

According to **Seth Godin**, one of the prophets of the discipline in his well-known book *Unleashing the ideavirus*: “The future belongs to marketers who establish a foundation and process where interested people can market to each other. Ignite consumer networks, and then get out of the way and let them talk”. The strength of the concept, the possibility of getting your customers to work for you, to help you diffuse your product, is an extremely powerful concept in itself, a stimulus to anyone with a marketing responsibility in firms of any kind. Frivolous? Not appropriate for your serious organization? It may well be the case, but loose it up, relax and enjoy. Test the concept before others do so. An *ideavirus* might be coming your way.