



# Why pass on viral messages? Because they connect emotionally<sup>☆</sup>

Angela Dobele<sup>a</sup>, Adam Lindgreen<sup>b,\*</sup>, Michael Beverland<sup>c</sup>,  
Joëlle Vanhamme<sup>d</sup>, Robert van Wijk<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Central Queensland University, Australia

<sup>b</sup> Department of Marketing and Marketing Communications, Hull University Business School, University of Hull, Hull, UK

<sup>c</sup> University of Melbourne, Australia

<sup>d</sup> Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands

## KEYWORDS

Viral marketing;  
E-Commerce;  
Marketing  
communications;  
Consumer emotions

**Abstract** In this article, we identify that successful viral marketing campaigns trigger an emotional response in recipients. Working under this premise, we examine the effects of viral messages containing the six primary emotions (surprise, joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust) on recipients' emotional responses to viral marketing campaigns and subsequent forwarding behavior. According to our findings, in order to be effective, viral messages need to contain the element of surprise. By itself, however, surprise is not enough to guarantee message success; therefore, it must be combined with other emotions. The effectiveness of the viral message is also moderated by gender, with disgust-based and fear-based campaigns being more likely to be forwarded by male recipients than female recipients. To ensure forwarding behavior, the message must capture the imagination of the recipient, as well as be clearly targeted. Moreover, achieving fit between a campaign and the featured emotions is important, as this ensures an increased chance of forwarding. In addition to relaying these and other findings, we share and discuss the managerial implications of using different emotions in viral marketing campaigns. Finally, culture is recognized as an influencer.

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## 1. Viral messages: Do we really know how they work?

Viral marketing has been described as “the process of getting customers to pass along a company's marketing message to friends, family, and colleagues” (Laudon & Traver, 2001, p. 381). Like a virus, information about the company and its brand message, goods, or services is spread to potential buyers, who then pass the information along to

<sup>☆</sup> The authors contributed equally.

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: [a.dobele@cqu.edu.au](mailto:a.dobele@cqu.edu.au) (A. Dobele),  
[Adam.Lindgreen@hotmail.com](mailto:Adam.Lindgreen@hotmail.com) (A. Lindgreen),  
[mbb@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:mbb@unimelb.edu.au) (M. Beverland), [jvanhamme@fbk.eur.nl](mailto:jvanhamme@fbk.eur.nl)  
(J. Vanhamme).

<sup>1</sup> (c/o Adam Lindgreen).

other potential buyers such that a huge network is created rapidly (Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005; Lindgreen & Vanhamme, 2005). Viral marketing has gained tremendous popularity with the introduction of electronic media, as these outlets dramatically facilitate interconnections between companies and potential buyers (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Recognizing this opportunity, several world-class companies and brands have jumped on the viral marketing bandwagon, including Budweiser, De Beers, eBay, Jose Cuervo Tequila, Kellogg's, Levi's, Nestlé, Procter and Gamble, Scope Mouthwash, and Virgin Cinemas.

When executed effectively, viral marketing campaigns can create an instantaneous buzz in the promotion and distribution of companies' brands and products. This was the case with *The Blair Witch Project*. Artisan Entertainment, the maker of the film, created much interest in the movie by giving it the air of a documentary and by supporting it with a well-developed and elaborate Internet site. Even before the film debuted in theaters, people were talking about *The Blair Witch Project*, and friends were referring friends to the website (Bernard & Jallat, 2001). Although the budget for the movie's release was just \$2.5 million (US), *The Blair Witch Project* grossed \$245 million in worldwide box office sales.

Despite the fact that viral marketing can be a successful means of marketing communication, there is still only a limited understanding of how it works (Boroff, 2000; Brodin, 2000; Diorio, 2001; Helm, 2000). This notion is supported by De Bruyn and Lilien (2004), who posit that "it is difficult to... explain why and how [viral marketing] works" (p. 4). What we *do* know is that viral marketing campaigns can result in peer-to-peer recommendations, thereby increasing the credibility of the message. Viral marketing can drive sales, reduce marketing costs, and reach media-jaded consumer segments such as Generation X and Generation Y. It may involve people who know each other (e.g., the 'Refer-a-Friend' program of [Half.com](#)) and those who do not (e.g., [Epinions.com](#) and [ConsumerReports.org](#), which provide forums for consumers to post objective product reviews for the benefit of others). It is vital that companies choose carefully which consumers should first pass on the viral marketing message, as the creation of viral networks depends upon these people (Helm, 2000; Bannan, 2000).

For viral marketing to work, there must be something uniquely powerful about the message, something that encourages would-be advocates to pass it on. For example, in the case of Viagra, the

message captures the imagination and highlights a completely new product that lends itself to referrals. However, if the goal of viral marketing is to use peer-to-peer communications in order to spread information about a brand or idea, what really drives consumers to pass the message on? Viral marketing messages face several challenges because spamming is frowned upon in the online world and nobody likes to feel used (Dobele et al., 2005). Essentially, peer-to-peer electronic messages face the same 'clutter and noise' problems that afflict traditional advertisers. What, then, can companies do?

We argue that emotions, and in particular the phenomenon of social sharing of emotions, offer a solution to this problem. To illustrate, we consider the impact of the six primary emotions on message forwarding in nine chosen viral marketing campaigns. Also, we examine gender as a moderator on the relationship between emotions and forwarding behavior. We identify that the success of a viral message is dependent upon it capturing the imagination of the recipient, as well as it being cleverly targeted. Our study's findings are summarized in six points that must be considered in designing successful viral marketing campaigns.

## 2. It's all about emotions: Why are they important?

In this article, we argue that viral marketing messages must build an emotional connection between the campaign and the recipient in order to ensure that the virus gets spread. Why emotions? By interviewing three leading spokespersons of electronic marketing businesses (Yankee Group, Giga Information Group, and Aberdeen), Hirsh (2001) discovered that viral marketing campaigns should be either intriguing, passionate, fun, unique, or create interest (e.g., incorporating interactive games). As articulated by Masland (2001), "If the content of the e-mail is funny, interesting or emotional enough to have an impact, the recipients often forward it – viral message and all – to friends and family" (p. 3). According to research conducted by Clark McKay and Walpole Interactive (an interactive sales promotion agency), the highest response rates can be found in messages that contain violence, pornography, or irreverent humor (Witthaus, 2002). The 'Are you Type 1' campaign developed for the Levi's brand used creation of curiosity among consumers as the main driver of the movement. To pique people's interest, recipients were asked "Are you Type 1?" and were then encouraged to ask themselves if they could be the person Levi's was looking for. Table 1 provides an

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