

Getting the bug

Justin Kirby explains how online viral marketing can help those brands without a 'wow' factor by creating entertainment and provoking debate



Justin Kirby is the managing director at Digital Media Communications

Word-of-mouth marketing is not a complete panacea for the 'much advertising no longer works' problem. As Steve Knox from Procter & Gamble's admitted at the recent Ad:Tech in San Francisco, the problem is that it only truly works if the product has some inherent 'wow' factor that people want to talk about.

This is why marketers are now turning to online viral marketing, the flipside of the word-of-mouth coin. Online viral marketing kills two birds with one stone:

- It avoids the need to have a product with a 'wow' factor in order to generate buzz. Instead, the viral campaign's communication agent – often video-based advertainment content – is the element that needs a 'wow' factor.

- It is closer to traditional advertising than word-of mouth, because it builds awareness and premium brand building – rather than directly delivering product recommendations. The focus is on campaigns that consumers want to interact with.

Advertainment approach

Online viral marketing provides the missing link between the word-of-mouth approach and the top-down, advertainment approach to brand marketing.

For example, the Trojan Games online viral marketing campaign (trojangames.co.uk), with its award-winning sex-and-games spoof video content, has been seen by over 25 million people globally since the site launched in October 2003. In its first month alone, over six million people visited the site. Only sites such as Google, MSN, Yahoo and the BBC reach more people over such a time period. Consumer

marketing firm QuickWise revealed that 77% recalled the Trojan brand and 50% would be more likely to consider the Trojan brand after seeing the campaign.

Mazda generates debate

Another successful example of using online viral marketing to deliver not only buzz but also tangible brand benefits, is Mazda's 'parking' campaign (mazdamovies.com). The campaign film clip sparked global debate on blogs and forums about male and female parking capabilities.

Globally, the campaign generated over a million quantified clip views in less than a month and helped sell a product that is very similar to many others in its class. As Steve Jelliss, CRM manager for Mazda Motors (UK), stated: "Our online viral marketing campaigns have proven their value in providing high brand exposure to a wide-as-possible audience, and ultimately contributing to car sales."

However, one example of an online viral campaign that misses a trick on the brand benefit front is Burger King's subservient chicken.com. The campaign uses an interactive video of a man dressed as a chicken in a humorous take on webcam activity. It's aiming to promote a new chicken sandwich, which in itself does not inspire user-driven, word-of-mouth activity.

The viral ad has reportedly been seen by 46 million people. But how many visitors realised that the campaign was for a chicken sandwich, or indeed for Burger King rather than Kentucky Fried Chicken? This campaign is in

danger of generating a character that outshines the brand like Levi's Flat Eric. 'Sticky' advertainment content and high exposure is not enough; viral campaigns must also deliver strategic brand benefits, otherwise their value is hit-and-miss, or at best only short-term.

