

# Catching the bug

Viral marketing – where your audience spreads your message for you – has obvious benefits. But not everything gets passed on, so how can you make sure your ad is infectious? Report Nic Howell Illustration Paul Smith

Over the past two years it seems everyone's been trying to 'go viral', launching campaigns that would be picked up and distributed by consumers, creating spontaneous online word of mouth around a brand.

While generating third-party endorsement is the holy grail for advertisers, achieving this isn't cheap, easy or predictable. Few campaigns have achieved the exponential growth intended, and disappointment with the technique is now coupled with a sense of overkill.

Viral has become synonymous with vaguely interactive, lazily rebranded games clogging up the viral charts. "The volume of virals through our site increases week on week," says Viralbank marketing manager Adam Dean, "but the percentage of those that are truly viral is definitely decreasing."

If viral is to restore its credibility, it's time to understand what "truly viral" is, and what it can and can't do.

Back in December 2000, London ad agency Leo Burnett posted a preview of an ad for its client John West on the US Web site [adcritic.com](http://adcritic.com). Featuring a fisherman taking on a kickboxing Kodiak bear for its prized salmon, the ad became a cult phenomenon. People started to forward it on from the site, exposing it to a worldwide audience way beyond the reach of the original media budget.

The 'Bear' ad was intended for traditional paid media with traditional production values. It reportedly cost £1m to make, with Muppets

creator Jim Henson's Creature Shop creating the stunt bear outfits. Yet despite never being sent to a seed list or a customer database, it achieved viral marketing nirvana.

Although today's successful viral campaigns have much in common with this ad, what happened for John West is hard to repeat. As practitioners have discovered, there's a big difference between tinned fish and spam.

## First symptoms

Viral begins with exceptional content. It may be funny, topical or edgy, but it has to engage an audience. "You have to have something which is so valuable for the recipient that they're compelled to forward the message to other people," says Lazar Dzamic, digital strategist at EHS Brann.

This is a rare feat at the best of times. If agencies and clients are honest with themselves, little of what currently passes for viral is so compelling that users want to endorse it by passing it on. Yet it is possible, as both DMC's recent *Hitman 2* campaign (NMA 9 January) and Tesco Personal Finance's 'Pet Stars' (see box) demonstrate.

When the buzz surrounding viral was at its height, clients and agencies didn't face up to the fact that decent content costs money. For many advertisers, the fact that a campaign can go viral for next to no outlay somehow made it harder to justify a large production budget.

With so little room for manoeuvre, agencies tried to create engaging content for just a few thousand pounds. However, given such budgets, the creative people can do little more than re-skin some existing game they've already built in Flash.

Justin Kirby at agency DMC believes that

much of what now finds its way into the viral charts is too similar to ever go viral. "You immediately get a sense that the points of difference are very small," he says. "Therefore, the effect you're actually getting is very much less than people imagine."

Viral content can be any format, but reliance on games is in danger of turning consumers off. When DMC conducted some research on the Lycos Viral Chart last year, the agency found games were actually the least popular format.

You also need the right seeding mechanism. The John West ad achieved peer-to-peer distribution by being hosted on the right industry site.

Many advertisers try to short-circuit this process by sending viral clips directly to their customer database. For some this is little more than email marketing, and unsolicited 1Mb clips aren't always popular with recipients.

"It can backfire," warns Matthew Smith at The Viral Factory. "We tend to advise against it unless the client has really thought hard about the opt-in."

He instead recommends seeding using a pull-seeding mechanism on a site dedicated to virals, such as the Lycos Viral Chart, Viralbank or his own [Punchbaby.com](http://Punchbaby.com).

The popularity of viral sites demonstrates consumers' hunger for new content. Many people come to them in search of diversion from work – Chris Toombes at viral directory



Kirby: "People have understood viral's value and begun incorporating it as part of a more strategic activity."

## QUICK TAKE

- Viral marketing describes any activity that encourages individuals to pass on messages.
- A viral is any form of content that engages the recipient so they feel compelled to send it on. It doesn't have to be a game.
- With so much content on viral charts, your campaign has to be exceptional to get noticed.
- Although viral marketing has minimal media cost, it requires the right seeding techniques and shouldn't be confused with email marketing.
- Good virals often have latency – people will come back to them often for new reasons.



John West was the first to discover the power of viral marketing when its 'Bear' ad was widely forwarded.

## TESCO PERSONAL FINANCE 'PET STARS'

In common with other brands in the personal finance sector, Tesco Personal Finance faces a challenge to keep visitors returning to its site. It has therefore experimented with viral games, such as a battle of the sexes driving game in 2002, to promote its motor insurance products.

Given a brief to promote Tesco's new pet insurance range, Victoria Real devised a three-tiered 'Pet Stars' campaign based on ITV's *Pop Stars* show, to find the nation's favourite pets.

"Typically, Tesco's pet insurance marketing has revolved around conservative, finance-based campaigns," says Graham Stevens, business development director at Victoria Real. "We

decided early on to challenge these boundaries and come up with an idea that was both compelling and engaging to the target audience."

The campaign launched in February 2003 with a microsite where pet owners were encouraged to submit photos of their favourite cats or dogs. Entrants and friends were then asked to return to the site to place their votes.

This had inherent viral potential and has delivered customer data and leads by engaging its audience. "It's been something that people



can interact with and see a result, rather than just a game," says Gemma Jones, Internet marketing manager at Tesco Personal Finance. By the time the campaign finished on 26 March, 2,000 people had put their pets forward and around 8,000 votes had been cast.

Although the competition incorporated a tell-a-friend mechanism, Tesco also used email marketing to seed the campaign, targeting users from existing databases of pet owners, as well as Tesco.com customers who had recently bought pet supplies.

for viral. "We're getting tremendous traffic around content that's generated by users," he says. "It's a good business model for us."

### Feverish audience

If you have strong brand loyalty you can also pull customers directly to your site. Italian fashion brand Diesel has a customer base of over 200,000 consumers who have registered on its site for more information.

Such 'brand loyalists' can play a key role in passing your message on, and they're

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hungry for more output, says Diesel's virtual department manager Bob Shevlin. As part of a rich-media campaign across 21 fashion and lifestyle sites in Europe and the US, Diesel previewed its 'Oil Klash Klash' TV and cinema campaign on its site (NMA 20 March).

Diesel isn't alone in using viral to support wider brand awareness - Hutchison has also attempted this to support its new 3 brand. But Shevlin believes much of Diesel's advertising back catalogue is consumed more online than it ever was on TV or in the cinema. "In the last year we've had a huge amount of consumption and distribution of our old content online," he says.



DMC's seeding of Maverick Media's viral for Eidos's *Hitman 2* game reached over 9m people.

For example, a 1995 Diesel ad to commemorate the anniversary of the end of the Second World War was picked up again a few years later during the controversy surrounding gay soldiers in the US military.

Such latency is one of the elements of effective viral. Smith says that successful viral clips "burn bright and quickly", but can be revived again in unexpected ways if they have a special appeal. The Viral Factory's 'The Gift' ad for MTV, featuring a boy who receives a real light-sabre for Christmas with catastrophic results, was revived months later by *Star Wars* fans excited by the release of *The Phantom Menace*.

The latency effect has also worked for The Viral Factory's 'Hamlet' ads, commissioned by CDP Travis Sully earlier this year to coincide with the end of tobacco advertising in the UK. The Viral Factory produced two 30-second ads for Hamlet aimed specifically at 30-40-year olds, a younger audience than the cigar brand's traditional demographic. The ads were seen by a million people within a week, says CDP MD Simon North. As an unexpected bonus, one of the ads, which exacts punishment on a horn-toting Ferrari driver, continued to chart on Viralbank long after the tobacco advertising ban came into effect.

### Developing resistance

Far from having had its day, viral has moved on, says DMC's Kirby. The term may have become devalued by campaigns containing the most cursory viral element. But both he and The Viral Factory's Smith say clients have now learned that viral is no longer an end in itself and are being more realistic about the role it can play.



In particular, advertisers recognise that a viral element can build and maintain interest in a brand outside the peaks and troughs delivered by traditional media. Like PR, well-executed viral marketing can create buzz around a brand before or after other push communications. Says Kirby, "People have understood its value and begun incorporating it as part of a more strategic activity."

After the success of its 'Pet Stars' campaign, Tesco Personal Finance sees viral as one element in its communications mix, says Internet marketing manager Gemma Jones. "We'll have more viral activity going on this year, but with very clear objectives and it'll tie in with other campaigns we have running."

"Almost every good campaign online will go viral to some extent," says Victoria Real business development director Graham Stevens. "Companies might be better off simply facilitating this behaviour, rather than getting into a lather about 'viral' campaigns."

Some viral purists say that it's unrealistic to have any goals for such an inherently organic activity, or that the best indicator you can hope for of a viral working is when your own is forwarded to you.

In fact, it's just as important to treat viral like you would any other activity and "ask the basic questions you would ask about any campaign", according to Smith. And as viral is now increasingly being given its own budget, it's legitimate to measure it. "The overall buzz is as easy or as difficult to measure as PR," says Kirby.

DMC's metrics allow clients to see how many people look at a video clip and gain an idea of the third-party endorsement it's receiving. Nevertheless, it's important to be realistic. While DMC can claim its *Hitman 2* viral shifted 2m units for Eidos Interactive last year, this says as much about the strength of the viral as it does about the highly engaged gaming community.

At best viral campaigns can reinforce awareness of your brand and provide you with some customer data, but it would be unwise to bank on direct sales. Much of what passes for viral marketing has probably had its day. But for those advertisers that have thought carefully about what they want to achieve from online buzz and are prepared to invest in genuinely engaging content, it can still be a worthwhile, if high-risk, activity. ■