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Unedited version of October 2004 article in
**Admap 40th anniversary special issue 'The future of communications':
40 marketing gurus share their vision**

Using 'Word of Mouse' in Brand Marketing

Justin Kirby, DMC, describes how specific kinds of online viral marketing can widen brand exposure and increase profits

WHAT IS WORD OF MOUSE AND WHY IS IT IN THE MARKETING SPOTLIGHT?

'Word of mouse' describes the online version of 'word of mouth' – the wide, user-driven spread of a message or communications 'agent'. This kind of communication is also called 'viral', and its use online by businesses is often referred to as online viral marketing.

Word-of-mouse marketing activities are becoming increasingly important to brands as they realise that much traditional, interruptive advertising no longer works. Put simply, there's too much advertising (so people have learned to tune it out), and there are too many media channels (which makes it harder for advertisers to reach their now-fragmented audiences). So advertisers are looking for new ways to get consumers to buy into their brand and buy their products.

Forward-thinking brands are already using online viral marketing to generate widespread brand awareness, and ultimately to sell more products and services.

Word of mouse marketing activity is everything traditional ATL-based ('top-down') marketing is not: it's non-interruptive, proactive not passive, user- not advertiser-controlled. Its messages (and therefore the brand behind it) are endorsed by influencers and by consumers' peers. Its agents are seeded via editorial not advertising routes, and - with no campaign cut-off point - it provides an ever-increasing return on investment. Yet it integrates very well with traditional marketing activities to give brands the best of both approaches - 'bottom-up' and 'top-down'.

In fact, the most successful use of online viral marketing is not as a standalone tactic, but as an integrated part of a brand's overall marketing strategy. One of the big mistakes brands make is thinking that an online viral campaign is an end in itself, rather than recognising that it's a means to end. Viral marketing, like PR, is a process not an event. Its point is to create a buzz in order to help build brand and shift product, not just to create a buzz fullstop. There is no point in 'going viral' without fulfilling a wider or longer-term strategic purpose.

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Using 'Word of Mouse' in Brand Marketing - continued

The practical backdrop to this is that no brand can afford to maintain constant mainstream media brand awareness. That's where online viral marketing fits in. Its three main purposes and benefits from a strategic viewpoint are:

1. To maintain or boost a cost-effective level of brand awareness during ATL media spend 'downtime', usually by releasing web-only viral material that retains the brand and campaign themes.
2. To kickstart new marcoms activity, which often means releasing a web-first viral edit of a mainstream ad before it hits TV, in order to create a buzz and exploit the exclusivity factor.
3. As an effective standalone marketing tool for brands that either can't afford ATL marketing, or that require only online distribution to a widespread target group.

It's also worth bearing in mind that integrating online viral marketing within the overall marketing mix doesn't mean making sure the campaign's graphics and straplines are the same across all media. It means telling a similar campaign story in slightly different ways across the media used, depending on the specific channel and audience. Online viral marketing is simply another way of telling a story, but in a manner that is appropriate to the peer-to-peer and file-sharing activities that web users engage in.

So, understanding the place of word-of-mouse or online viral marketing in the overall marketing mix, and using the technique strategically rather than tactically, within the context of web users' behaviour, are key to its success.

A CLOSER LOOK: THE APPROACH USED BY VIRGIN MOBILE AND MAZDA

Both Virgin Mobile and Mazda, who are currently undertaking their eighth and fifth online viral marketing campaigns respectively, use a word-of-mouse approach developed by DMC.

In outline, the approach involves developing a buzz angle, generating buzz by gaining influencer advocacy, and seeding (distributing) campaign news and the viral agent (usually an 'advertainment' video clip) on the most influential, specialist viral/entertainment seed routes – as core editorial not advertising content.

Unlike finite-period online advertising campaigns, which target a brand's core market, the point of online viral marketing is to enable the buzz and the viral agent to reach the widest possible number of online users (among which any brand's core target market resides). The approach DMC uses kickstarts buzz and viral spread – then it's up to users, who effectively become brand advocates and free media channels as they pass the viral agent around via email, providing valuable peer-to-peer brand endorsement.

Mazda and Virgin Mobile also use DMC's specialist online tracking system to measure viral spread and user interaction with their brands beyond the initial seed routes, in order to quantify the impact online viral marketing activity has on brand awareness.

The main difference in their use of the DMC approach is strategic: Mazda's word-of-mouse activity is driven by and closely integrated with their CRM activity; Virgin Mobile's falls within the remit of their brand marketers.

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Overall, both brands emphasise the importance of using specialist viral seeding and of developing creative strategies that ensure the campaign material is appropriate for online viral audiences.

The results speak for themselves. For example, Mazda's 'Parking' campaign was rated the number 1 online viral campaign of 2003 by Campaign magazine in the UK and Germany, and delivered a measurable response from over 1 million web users within only eight weeks of going live. Steve Jelliss, CRM Manager for Mazda Motors UK, states: "Since getting in at the forefront of online viral marketing with DMC in 2002, we've undertaken a series of campaigns that have proven their value in providing high brand exposure to a wide-as-possible audience, and ultimately contributing to car sales."

Virgin Mobile is the most successful virtual network operator in the world, and one of the fastest growing mobile phone companies in history. James Kydd, brand director for Virgin Mobile (UK), says: "Continuing our successful series of online viral campaigns with DMC, over the past year we have developed the way we use viral marketing strategically as a key part of our overall brand marketing mix. It has had a huge impact on our brand exposure for a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing methods."

In conclusion, if you get the approach right, word-of-mouse activity can be an extremely valuable addition to brand marketing. And if, as Malcolm Gladwell said in his book 'The Tipping Point', "The most powerful selling of products and ideas takes place not marketer to consumer but consumer to consumer", then bottom-up, peer-to-peer-driven techniques such as online viral marketing will become more prevalent, to the benefit of all stakeholders (not only brands).

CONTRIBUTOR BACKGROUND

Justin Kirby is the founder and managing director of Digital Media Communications Ltd (DMC). Founded in 1994, DMC have offices in the UK and Australia, and are recognised as the experts in online viral marketing and buzz marketing for major brands. They have specialised in this rising area since 2000, developing their own approach that has been used by many brands, including Diesel, EA Sports, Eidos, Levi's, Mates, Mazda, MTV, Opel, Sony Ericsson, Ubisoft, Virgin and Xbox. DMC are also co-founders of the international Viral + Buzz Marketing Association (www.vbma.net).

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