TIP Sheet

TACTICS AND STRATEGIES FOR VIRAL MARKETING

By Mitch Arnowitz

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Viral or "word-of-mouth" marketing is rapidly climbing the corporate-agenda ladder. More and more word-of-mouth is being used by companies and organizations for relationship-building and message dissemination in pitching causes, candidates and products. Metrics include fundraising appeals, legislative action, membership drives and product sales, sent to opinion leaders and consumers who then pass the word through their networks.

To be effective, a sound strategy and a long-term communications plan must be in place before choosing viral campaign tactics or tools. It also is imperative to dedicate resources to manage the response such a campaign is likely to generate.

Here are some strategies and tactics to maximize word-of-mouth marketing:

▶ **Grassroots marketing**

Leverage hidden audiences by locating and engaging supporters in grassroots groups - blogs, Web forums, e-mail lists and other online communities. Because this "bottom-up" approach facilitates a dialogue and a relationship, it may mean losing some control over your message, but it *will* galvanize passionate supporters who are empowered to share that message. Product- or cause-related messages with *real* value are the most likely to be passed along.

To identify groups likely to pass the word, try **Technorati** (www.technorati.com), **Alexa** (www.alexa.com) and **CataList** (www.lsoft.com/lists/listref.html). Craft personalized messages relevant to a particular audience. Distribute messages through list or group leaders rather than posting directly to members. Surveys, e-mail notifications and other interactive tools foster a sense of urgency. It can take between 12 and 18 months to gain critical mass, but the result should be strong customer relationships and a targeted prospecting database.

▶ **Content and product offerings**

Create products and services with "pass-along" potential - if the right people become engaged, they are certain to tell others. While there is no "perfect" viral-marketing product or content, *real* value and usability increases your likelihood of success.

Refresh Web-site content often to create an incentive for continually reading, linking to and syndicating what you say. Look into Really Simple Syndication (RSS or newsfeeds) through such aggregators as **NewsGator** (www.newsgator.com) or **Bloglines** (www.bloglines.com).

Free or discounted applications or downloads promote pass-along potential; a free book chapter as a PDF or Web page is another good way to build a mailing list and to sell more books. Funny or timely Flash files have become a solid viral-marketing tactic. An affiliate program is a surefire way to let people know about products, too.

Customized IM Buddy Icons and e-cards that urge people to support a cause also are effective. In addition, companies are taking advantage of customer evangelism with powerful results: customer-created advertisements that offer a genuine voice while spreading the word. Examples include **Plaxo**'s free e-mail service, which securely updates and maintains contact information; a free download and community-building tools (buttons, banners, electronic signatures) from Web browser **Firefox**; and free, short films from **JibJab**, creator of the election parody "This Land."

▶ **Integrated marketing**

Today's sophisticated marketing campaigns are integrated, combining mainstream advertising, Web-site efforts, e-mail products and feet-on-the-street campaigns to present a united voice and a seamless customer experience.

PDF petitions or fact sheets as Web-site downloads help spread the word about a product or cause. Event blogs create buzz and drive conference registrations. Placements in traditional publications help content find its way online. Examples include **Peta2.com**, a community Web site of teen animal-rights activists, with interactive discussion forums and an offline street-team program that promotes animal rights in person at the local level. To tap the college market, **Mozilla** uses the Internet to identify campus leaders who pass the word about its products.

A Web site and blog can bring program participants together. Character blogs tie online efforts into traditional campaigns. Undoubtedly, one of the easiest, most effective ways to spread the word is to ask people to forward information. Put a "forward to a friend" form on your Web site and mention it in e-mail subject lines, message footers and electronic signatures. Include a link to the form on product purchase and Web-site exit pages. **PRN**

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To The Editor:

Re: "Does Constant Awards Buzz Translate Into New Business?" (And Another Thing..., July 27), I enjoyed your comments and agree that too many PR awards programs are little more than beauty pageants, especially in the past. However, most **Public Relations Society of America** (PRSA) and **International Association of Business Communicators** (IABC) awards base about 50% of an entry's total score on a written work plan, which includes providing a business case on the need for the communication, measurable communication goals linked to business goals and measurable results. I think the awards programs have often educated PR professionals on what they should be focused on for their clients, usually at the point they realize they can't enter the pretty campaign because it didn't accomplish anything.

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