

4.5.9: Viral Messages

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the elements of viral messages.
2. Understand strategies to develop effective viral messages.

What was once called “word of mouth” advertising has gone viral with the introduction of social marketing via the Internet. What was once called a “telephone chain,” where one person called another in order to pass along news or a request in a linear model, has now gone global. One tweet from Twitter gets passed along and the message is transmitted exponentially. The post to the Facebook page is seen before the nightly news on television. Text messages are often real time. Radio once beat print media to the news, and then television trumped both. Now person-to-person, computer-mediated communication trumps them all at the speed of light—if the message is attractive, relevant, dramatic, sudden, or novel. If no one bothers to pass along the message, or the tweet isn’t very interesting, it will get lost in the noise. What, then, makes a communication message viral?

Let’s look at the June 2009 death of Michael Jackson for an example of a viral message and see what we can learn. According to Jocelyn Noveck, news of his death spread via Twitter, text messages, and Facebook before the traditional media could get the message out. People knew about the 911 call from Jackson’s home before it hit the mainstream media. By the time the story broke, it was already old (Noveck, J., 2009).

People may not have had all the facts, but the news was out. Communities, represented by families, groups of friends, employees at organizations, had been mobilized to spread the news. They were motivated to share the news, but why?

Effective Viral Messages

Viral messages are words, sounds, or images that compel the audience to pass them along. They prompt people to act, and mobilize communities. Community mobilization has been studied in many ways and forms (Freire, P., 1970). We mobilize communities to leave areas of disaster, or to get out and walk more as part of an exercise program. If we want people to consider and act on a communication message, we first have to gain the audience’s attention. In our example, communities were mobilized to share word of Jackson’s passing. Attention statements require sparks and triggers. A spark topic “has an appeal to emotion, a broad base of impact and subsequent concern, and results in motivating a consensus about issues, planning, and action” (McLean, S., 1997).

In the example of Michael Jackson, the consensus may be that he died under suspicious circumstances, but in other examples, it could be that the product or service being discussed is the next cool thing. The message in social marketing and viral messages does not exist apart from individuals or communities. They give it life and attention, or ignore it.

If you want to design a message to go viral, you have to consider three factors:

1. Does it have an emotional appeal that people will feel compelled to share?
2. Does it have a trigger (does it challenge, provide novelty, or incorporate humor to motivate interest)?
3. Is it relevant to the audience?

An **appeal to emotion** is a word, sound, or image that arouses an emotional response in the audience. Radio stations fill the airwaves with the sounds of the 1980s to provoke an emotional response and gain a specific demographic within the listening audience. The day after the announcement of Michael Jackson’s death broke, you could hear his music everywhere. Many people felt compelled to share the news because of an emotional association to his music, the music’s association to a time in their lives, and the fact that it was a sudden, unanticipated, and perhaps suspicious death.

A **trigger** is a word, sound, or image that causes an activity, precipitates an event or interaction, or provokes a reaction between two or more people. In the case of Michael Jackson, the triggers included all three factors and provoked an observable response that other forms of media will not soon forget. His death at a young age challenged the status quo. In the same way, videos on YouTube have earned instant fame (wanted or unwanted) for a few with hilarious antics, displays of emotion, or surprising news.

The final ingredient to a viral message is relevance. It must be immediately accessible to the audience, salient, and important. If you want someone to stop smoking, graphs and charts may not motivate them to action. Show them someone like them with postsurgery scars across their throat and it will get attention. Attention is the first step toward precontemplation in a change model that (Prochaska, J. and DiClemente, C., 1982) may lead to action.

Key Takeaway

Viral messages are contagious.

Exercises

1. Design a viral message about a hypothetical product or service you would like to promote. Incorporate the elements listed above in no more than a hundred words. Post your viral message in class and compare with classmates.
2. Identify a company that is relevant to your major or interests and locate an example of their marketing material about a specific product or service. Write a viral message as if you were an employee presenting to a potential client. Share and compare with classmates.
3. Consider a message you passed along recently. Write a brief description and include discussion on why you passed it along.
4. What motivates you to pay attention? Make a list of five ideas, images, or words that attract your attention. Post and compare with classmates.

References

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