



# Marketing 101

## The Pathogens of Viral Market

by  
Michelle Merlo, Managing Partner  
Michelle Merlo Communications, LLC

Heard a good rumor lately? Or a really juicy piece of gossip? Has you recounted a news story you heard or read to someone? And of course, who among us hasn't been duly warned that if we don't immediately forward a certain email, complete devastation will surely find us?

Welcome to viral marketing. It's a term that may not be too recognizable in the traditional business marketing arena, but chances are, you have already experienced it via any or all of the above scenarios.

Viral marketing – which is also called buzz marketing – is the simple act of spreading information via word of mouth, email, Internet sites, and other communication avenues, with the goal of creating a buzz about a topic, product, or concept. Viral marketing is, like its name, spreading fast, thanks to the Internet and the skyrocketing presence of social media.

The process of viral marketing is actually very simple. The author of the message identifies a core audience that would be interested in hearing that message, and then releases it to them. Unfortunately, that simplicity is both the good and bad news. The good news is viral marketing is inexpensive, fast and easy. The bad news is that, once the message is launched, the author loses any semblance of control over how, when, and where the message goes.

To start the word-of-mouth, you must be ready to fuel the communication vehicle with enough material until you see that it's catching on. Then, your core recipients and following interested recipients of the message should take it from there and give it the power to spread. The usual pathway starts with customers who share your news with their family and friends, who then pass it along to more contacts, and so on.

By far, viral marketing is seeing the most success on social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn. News-sharing sites such as Digg and Reddit are also great conduits of viral marketing. In reality, any site that replicates the message and allows people to relay information on a volunteer basis is a viable viral marketing transmitter. Traditional avenues such as radio talk shows and even fax machines can also be leveraged to start and spread the message. And of course, technology also allows for more than just text to be spread. If your product lends itself to video, leverage that asset!

Benefits of viral marketing include increasing brand awareness and product knowledge, widening your prospective customer base, and hiking sales.

To determine if viral marketing has a place in your business plan, think about what you have to offer the rumor mill. Do you have a product that can be easily described? How about good third-party testimonials or excellent customer experiences? The more excitement you can generate in your message, the more enthusiasm your transmitters will have, and the more they will want to talk about it. The most important thing to remember is this: Make sure your content is so compelling, that those who first receive it will literally feel the need or desire to share it.

Key attributes to a good viral message has “infection” capabilities, meaning the message is memorable enough attract attention, enter a person's memory and then stay there. It will be easy to communicate. It will be succinct in thought, so that it doesn't lose its meaning as it travels. And it will have credibility to be trusted information.

Viral marketing is a viable opportunity to get your business noticed in a cost-effective manner. It keeps your company relevant by leveraging a new marketing technique with modern technology. And it is a tactic that won't take you away

from other tasks for very long. With thought and an understanding of how it can work for your company, you can become the next overnight web sensation!

**About the Author**

A two decade, award-winning veteran of marketing and communications, Michelle works with organizations and companies of all shapes and sizes to help them implement marketing strategies to further their businesses. She can be reached at [michelle@michellemerlo.com](mailto:michelle@michellemerlo.com) or 412-475-0425.