

W-O-M with a Twist

If you were sitting around in one of the cafes on Sunset Boulevard in Los Angeles on a Summer evening in 2001, the chances were that an attractive 20-something would pull up outside on his eye-catching Vespa and drop in. He might even have bought you a latte, and if you admired his Vespa, a scooter you had never seen before, he would promptly have scribbled for you the address of the nearby dealer. And as a bonus, he would have whispered a secret in your ear—that is where rap artist Sisco and Hollywood star Sandra Bullock bought their Vespas! This was classic buzz marketing at work. These seemingly enchanted Vespa riders were actually marketing messengers hired by the European motorbike company's US affiliate Piaggio USA to spread the word.

This is buzz marketing in action. **Buzz marketing** refers to the rapid-spreading of product news through word-of-mouth. Perhaps the most colorful description of buzz marketing is penned by a business writer Nancy K. Austin:

Buzz is busy talk. The CNN of the street. It's hugely influential. Buzz is not merely onomatopoeic; it is big-time, no nonsense force. Once it is on the move, buzz is potent and widespread and lawless, which of course makes it irresistible. Brisk and a little unstable, buzz is a weather system that whirls into, and eventually out of, your life. Buzz is the Tornado Alley of communication.

—Nancy K. Austin, "Buzz: In Search of the Most Elusive Force in All of Marketing," *Inc. Magazine*, May 1998, 44-50.

The buzz-bees (the carriers of buzz) differ from celebrity influencers in one aspect: they are not celebrities at all. "We weren't looking for celebrities," says Julie Roehm, the then communications manager at Ford Motor Company who managed a buzz campaign for the company's Gen Y model *Focus*. "We were looking for assistants to celebrities, party planners, disk jockeys—people who seemed to influence what was cool." She gave them a *Focus* to drive around for six months and simply be seen driving it.

Peer-to-peer marketing Peer-to-peer marketing is a special case of buzz marketing, where the goal is not just to spread the word but to get the target audiences to act on the word which comes from their peers. If you are a college student, you might have seen in the hallway some fellow students sitting at a table loaded with T-shirts, pens, cookies; you fill out an application for, say, a credit card, and you get one of these prizes. They are just collecting some money for their campus organization, they will tell you—and they are—but they are not unbiased communicators by any standard. Yet, you happily comply, for the sake of friendship, if not the freebies. This is peer-to-peer marketing.

During one recent school year, a small group of student "volunteers" at Brandeis University collected 200 names, complete with personal information—information fellow students would not easily give a business company. The Magma Group, the youth marketing company that sponsored the project, has some 6000 student volunteers in colleges across the nation who at its bidding will get their fellow classmates to fill out surveys for a freebee.¹⁶

Viral marketing We all know how a virus spreads—from one person, to two, four, eight, sixteen, thirty two, and so on. Only ten more iterations later, it would reach 65,000 people. With still 10 more, it would have reached 66 million people. Similar to the spreading of a virus, **Viral marketing** refers to spreading product acceptance from one consumer to another in an exponential fashion. It has been practiced for quite sometime, under such alternative names as 'pyramid marketing' and 'multi-level marketing.' An accomplished practitioner of this method is Amway. A company associate recruits three (or a number like that) of his or her friends to become associates who buy some of the company's product. Each in turn recruits three friends, who in turn do the same. And pretty soon, the number of associates (who are also the consumers of the product Amway sells) reaches thousands, or even millions. A similar program was used a few years ago by MCI under its *Friends and Family Campaign*, where an MCI long distance phone service customer would qualify for some discount if he or she recruited friends and family members.

Viral marketing got a new life with the advent of the Internet. Here the idea of viral marketing is simply to spread the message using the Internet channel. An example of viral diffusion in cyberspace is the dancing baby video clip that showed up as email attachments on the desktops of millions of email users a few years ago. Viral marketing can occur in two ways: (1) voluntary, or (2) incentivized. Voluntary viral marketing occurs when an email recipient finds the content interesting and voluntarily forwards it to friends. In the incentivized viral marketing, the marketer offers an incentive for forwarding a message to a certain number of people. For example, in September 1999, Asimba.com, a health and lifestyle Website ran a “Friends and Fleece” campaign. If an Asimba.com user recommended the site to ten friends, when the tenth friend registered with the site, the recommender got a fleece as a gift. By June 2000, the company had acquired 200,000 new users through the campaign.¹⁷

Cyber-buzz **Cyber-buzz** is buzz through the Internet channel. Although all Internet-based viral marketing is technically cyber buzz, it is best to reserve the term to refer to the voluntary forwarding of email. The forwarding of the email voluntarily implies that the content is inherently interesting, a requirement for email to be forwarded to an exponentially increasing number of recipients and to spread at a super-fast speed, which is what a buzz is, by definition. An example is the campaign by VF Corporation, the maker of Lee Dungarees. The company carefully identified 200,000 young web surfers and emailed them a video, with a built-in click-through icon labeled “Send to a friend.” The goal was to get the recipient to visit the company’s Website to watch a video game and, along the way, hopefully to browse the new merchandise. Within four months of the initial e-mail, 436,000 consumers had visited the company’s Web site.

Also see *Recipe for Successful Buzz* (Exhibit 10.3, NOT reproduced here).

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