It is a method of product promotion, to achieve marketing objectives, where customers market the product or service or idea by telling other customers who may need it. Information will be spread using word-of-mouth, emails, blogs, videos, etc. Viral marketing campaign exploits common motivations and behaviors.

“Occupy wall street movement” is an example of viral marketing. A video in YouTube, by anonymous, triggered the movement. Many videos were uploaded in Facebook, YouTube and as many as 120 Facebook pages were created in support of this movement. “India against corruption” in India by Team Anna, Rajnikanth website by webchutney.com, Vodafone ZooZoos, launch of Hotmail, and Himalaya Herbal Facebook page are also good examples of viral marketing through social media.

Viral marketing message have these components.

**Messenger:**

Opinion leaders help a lot in promoting products or services. They act as market mavens. Market mavens send messages in social exchanges and for benefit of family and friends. They will surely know who needs the product or service and send accordingly, which causes ad to be read or seen and understood. Those friends and relatives send messages to many friends. A research was conducted in university of Illinois to find, the characteristics of opinion leaders. They came up with 24 traits. They performed factor analysis and came with nine factors i.e. maturity, authoritarian, self-centred, opinionated, accessible, general expert, practical, peer expert, visibility. Depending on the culture of people, definition of opinion leadership changes to that particular culture.
In case of Indians, they chose people, having general or peer expertise, as opinion leaders. Companies should target correct opinion leaders through their ads. In the case of HONDA ad “The Cog”, which was made in 2003, was targeted at people who were interested vehicles. Those people recommended this ad to their friends. HONDA put this ad in their website also. Soon after launching the ad, no of views of that ad in their website increased tremendously. As a result of this campaign visits to Honda dealerships rose from an average of 3500 to 3700 per month, with 22% of these resulting in the purchase of a Honda, compared to 19% before the campaign.

Message:

Malcom Gladwell explains in his book “The Tipping Point”, that message should have stickiness factor i.e. message should memorable so that it can be spread easily. In a research paper written by Angele Dobele et al, it is explained that message should capture the imagination by being fun or intriguing, it should be attached to a product that is easy to use or highly visible, it should be well targeted, it should be associated with credible source, and finally it should combine technologies like internet, SMS. “Why this kolaveri di” song by Dhanush from Tamilnadu is an example of intriguing message and this is easy to sing, it is well connected with culture of target audience i.e. youth and it is being played in many places, many programs across FM channels, TV programs, internet.. This song got more than one million hits, on youtube.com, just after one week of launch.

Environment

Correct environment will help unleash the potential of the message. For the same example, Kolaveri di, many people are using internet, in fact number of internet users is increasing, and TV, FM channels exclusively for music lovers, are also increasing. That media also helped in spreading of this song. And at that time of launching of song, there was no competent song or movie to Kolaveri di. This correct ecosystem helped Kolaveri di to grow as fast as a virus.

Advantages

Viral marketing reduces marketing expenditure, helps in targeting correct target audience, and boosts speed of product or service adoption. As per one study, in 2000, 67% of products in US
are affected by buzz. Improving technological infrastructure, disposable incomes will be helpful for viral marketing.

Disadvantages

There needs to be a greater understanding of the contexts in which this strategy works and the characteristics of products and services for which it is most effective. This is particularly important because the inappropriate use of viral marketing can be counterproductive by creating unfavourable attitudes towards products.

Some failed campaigns

1) Management should be prepared to keep promises if they will have made anything. In the case of KFC in May 2009, Oprah Winfrey offered her viewers a free coupon for KFC’s new grilled chicken. The promotion was successful, and by the next day, Oprah’s KFC coupons were the fifth most popular searched items on Google. The demand was too overwhelming to handle. KFC couldn’t meet the demand due to insufficient inventory. Then KFC CEO apologized to customers and gave discounts on future purchases.

2) Another example is of McDonald’s explained here. Mc Donald’s created “I’d hit it” campaign to target youth in US. They created a banner ad and put in ESPN.COM website in 2007. They incorporated youth slang in it to go viral. They didn’t understand correct meaning and context of usage. The meaning of phrase was “I would love to have sex with her”. They failed to attract customers miserably. A survey was conducted to know the effectiveness of this ad. 52.4% of the target audience said this ad was a blunder mistake of Mc Donald’s.
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