



TURNING VIRAL MARKETING INTO A MAINSTREAM PROPOSITION

Viral marketing is a clever idea. A virus attacks the immune system; and many people believe that people nowadays are 'immune' to advertising (being bombarded by as many as 1500 commercial messages per day). Hence, we need viral marketing to break down the body's defences, and allow brands to form relationships with their customers (assuming, of course, that people want to have relationships with brands).

BUT WHAT LIES BEHIND IT?

It seems that 'The Tipping Point' by Malcolm Gladwell has become the latest epoch-defining business book, and the bible of the viral marketers. It sets out with great clarity and forcefulness the underlying patterns by which social intercourse influences events.

Welcome to the return of 'word of mouth' as the prime marketing weapon!

Not for decades has this most potent of tools been at the heart of the matter. We've had USP, persuasion, image, attitude, permission, and other forms of marketing. But here we go back to the Athenian agora to relearn marketplace fundamentals all over again.

CATCHING THE VIRUS

Gladwell's fundamental premise is that "it takes only the smallest of changes to shatter an epidemic's equilibrium", and that an epidemic 'tips' through one of "three agents of change... the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context." He identifies three types of people ('the Few') as progenitors of a 'virus': Connectors, Mavens and Salespeople. By their very nature, although in very different ways, each of these types is an innovator/early adopter of any new trend, product, circumstance or fashion that they came across.

This book seems bound to be the successor to 'Generation X', creating a massive bandwagon of marketers analyzing every facet for clues to raid and reapply.

In fact, it has already started. Seth Godin has written in 'Unleashing the IdeaVirus', but glossed over perhaps the most fundamental issue facing marketers who want to make big money out of big brands – how to cross the divide between innovators/early adopters and the early majority. This is where the real money is.

What is not clear is how to create a viral marketing campaign, or make it 'stick' when we need to go big. To begin the process, we need to understand some of the fundamental transformations that are happening in the world.

WHO AM I?

Stereotypes don't really work any more. Not just demographically. But also psychographically. I am unique, like everyone else. I am an expatriate professional. I like diving, hiking, love the National Geographic channel, am a new father, and like to buy art in strange places around Asia. And I could go on about my tastes in music, food and drink, friends, and where I live.





The Henley Centre explored this phenomenon in depth across Europe, and noted that as we get wealthier, so we work harder, get stressed out, and relax more. Sure, chores are made easier by technology; but now there are more things we do that count (in our minds at least) as 'chores' – so there is no overall time-saving. What this means is that 'productive time for ourselves' (the things we enjoy doing, and which provide a sense of fulfillment) is squeezed.

Getting a window in that 'productive time' is critical. Researchers talk about the bewildering array of choices open to people nowadays. There is some truth here. Many things infringe on my life, but don't involve me. But when I am in the right 'context', I am happy to spend as long as necessary making sure I make the right decision.

What this means is that authorization comes from within. It is not imposed from outside ... unless I am in receiver mode. I am in control.

Rule 2: Understand where people's 'productive time' exists

At Ogilvy, we work out how to influence this 'productive time' through getting into the 'Brand World' of the customer.

I-MODE, IN MODE

Let me give you an example. Mobile phones brought us 'mobility'. But only recently has that 'mobility' been transferred into control. In Japan, the i-mode wireless Internet service launched last year is transforming people's lives. It marries ultimate convenience (ie: portability) with a depth of service that is truly impressive. Their vision is simply that interactive, mobile communications will become an inseparable part of everyday life.



No wonder that a few weeks ago Business Week announced that "There are few things a Japanese teenage girl doesn't leave home without: her 6 inch platform shoes, touch-up toner for her hair, and her i-mode phone".

On 'i-mode' you keep tabs on 'your world' and control how much interaction you want at a given time. And when you want more information. And when you buy.

Rule 3: Don't try to get customers to respond to you; be prepared to respond to them

The implications are enormous. In broadcast or print we are all used to our intended audience skipping past commercial messages.



Tsutaya – a popular video store with 120,000 i-mode members in its first three months.



Dwango – Compete with other anglers nationwide in 1,000 simulated fishing spots.



Chaku Mero – 10,000 tunes from existing karaoke databases bring a new income stream.



Charappa – a daily download of an animation generates US\$ 7 million revenues annually.

But, the 'era of information' brings greater interaction between people, and between people and brands.

Attention is the issue. If I am in control, I may wander through a magazine, a mailing or mobile Internet experience in a myriad of different ways. It is not that my attention-span is limited. Quite the contrary. It is very focussed. It is focussed on exactly what I want to know more about. You can't guess what that might be. All you can do is make it as interesting and varied as you can, and create the right links for me to navigate by myself.

In terms of people's interface with the media and advertisers, the transformation from 'opt out' to 'opt in' will continue.

TUNE IN, TURN ON, OPT OUT

Managing this change is critical. All of a sudden, we no longer need to assume that we have to get their attention. Their attention has been sparked by something else. They actually want to hear or see what

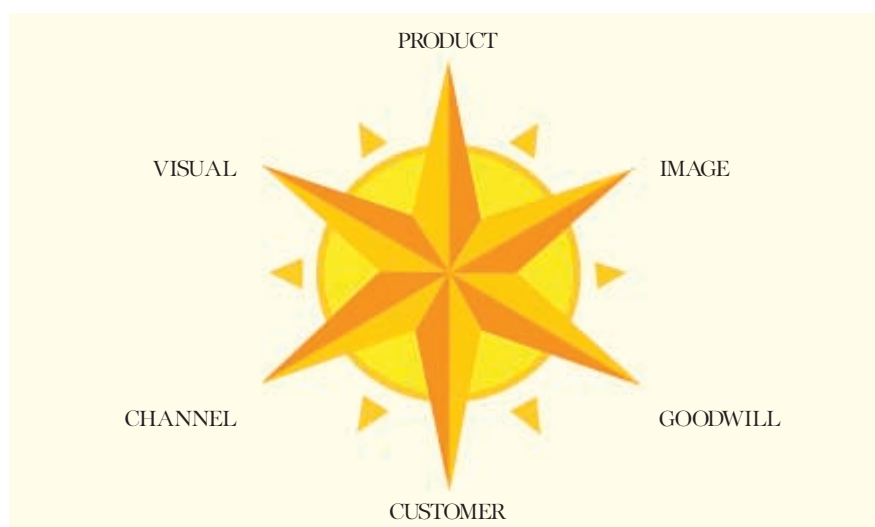
we can offer. We no longer have to sell or persuade them about the merits of our offer. They wouldn't have picked it up or clicked through it if they weren't already at least in part pre-sold.

The role of information under these circumstances is not to create the sell, but to improve the experience. The 'sell' is there for anyone who wants it; but we should treat the media opportunity as a total marketing tool, from creating the product experience, to reinforcing the brand image, to exposing its philosophy, to directing you to the right channels, to strengthening your loyalty. Whatever, whenever, wherever you as the customer want.

THE CLICK OF DESIRE

We need to consider not whether we should be in this medium or that medium, but how. If we cannot control the flow of people's attention through their interaction with brands in the media, then (to adapt the Coca-Cola mantra) we need to be 'within a click's reach of desire'.

A COMPOSITE OF SIX INTERRELATED EQUITIES



Ogilvy's proprietary method for assessing where a brand's real strengths are. (For more detail, see Viewpoint issue 3, p. 56)

It is here where the distinction between 'content' and 'context' becomes blurred. Ogilvy's 360° Brand Stewardship approach recognizes this instinctively.

By probing the issues behind each of six brand equities, we build up a picture of the whole experience that a customer has of that brand (see illustration). When we develop a 360° campaign, we aim to create interplay between the vehicles we choose to intensify the overall experience of the brand, as and when people come into contact with it. No one vehicle can exist in isolation. And no vehicle is necessarily excluded. All can and should work together, and off each other.

Who knows where this will take the communications industry. One thing is sure: we have to realize that because the world is changing so fast and transforming itself so frequently, our normal practice no longer works effectively. Or, at least, it soon won't. We cannot operate in silos. We cannot treat any channel as a world unto itself. We cannot divorce planning from implementation, image-building from hard sell. The two go together – in real time, all the time.

We all have to change in order to remain the same. And, if we understand this paradox, we'll all survive. 