



2528-9705

Örgütsel Davranış Araştırmaları Dergisi
Journal Of Organizational Behavior Research
Cilt / Vol.: 3, Sayı / Is.: S2, Yıl/Year: 2018, Kod/ID: 81S2197



EXPLAINING THE FACTORS AND INDICATORS AFFECTING THE SUCCESS OF VIRAL MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

The complexity and dynamism of the environment due to rapid technological changes on the one hand, and increased Internet influence and on the other hand have affected various aspects of business and human life and the geographical and economic boundaries have been disappeared. They have also caused commercial and economic activities, ranging from financial transfers, marketing and sales, as well as the provision of services and follow-up for consumers to be taken into consideration. Thus, modern marketing practices have been developed in light of Internet and social networks, which one of them is the viral marketing. It is based on word of mouth advertising principle and dissemination on the Internet and the use of social networks and cyberspace. Therefore, to succeed in viral marketing, it is important to consider some of the factors. The objective of this article is to examine the related studies in this field and to provide a definition of viral marketing and to examine the factors affecting its success. Finally, some points to be successful in this field along with applied examples would be provided.

Keywords: *Viral Marketing, Word of Mouth Advertising, Social Network,*

INTRODUCTION

The expansion and influence of the Internet in recent years has led to great developments and changes and high capacity of global involvement at various levels of businesses and life of communities and consumers' behavior and so on. These issues have changed the type and strategy of marketing, so companies and organizations use different methods of advertising and marketing to introduce products and encourage the customers to use their services, but the development of the Internet and the creation of a different space have caused that another type of marketing, known as viral marketing, to be developed (Ho and Dempsey, 2010). Many major companies in the world, such as Hotmail, Yahoo, Amazon, have found great number of customers with viral marketing over the short term. In fact, this method has high importance in encouraging customers to do this type of marketing and to identify the factors involved in this regard due to its low cost and high effectiveness (Phelps et al., 2004). Viral marketing is a marketing policy, encourages people to retell the marketing message to others. Viral marketing and advertising refer to marketing techniques, using current social networks to enhance the brand knowledge and other goals of the company, such as increased sales through viral processes.

This type of marketing has found popularity due to three reasons: 1. Movement of social networks to the Web. 2. Low cost of personal contact on the web. 3. Increasing impact of Internet (Park and Kim, 2008). The main goal of viral marketing is to distribute the messages among people as many as possible without spending money on advertising. In fact, this type of marketing, like your virus, multiplies itself. The most common method for doing this type of marketing is the World Wide Web, which its importance is increasing with increasing the number of Internet users. Given developments in technology, paying attention to this type of marketing has been increased and has drawn the attention of researchers. However, there are limited number of studies on the factors affecting the success of viral marketing and its limitations. The main objective of this study is identifying key factors involved in the success of viral marketing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Word of mouth marketing

It was proposed for the first time by William White about 40 years ago in a classical marketing study in Fortune magazine (Haji Heydari, 2017). The influencing power of other people's recommendations consists of three key factors: The first is communication, which is an important factor in word of mouth marketing. Many discussions made with family or friends support them in showing certain behaviours. Second, unlike unilateral communication, such as commercials, word of mouth marketing involves bilateral communications. The power of bilateral or two-way communication results from the fact that one can ask and receive explanations and obtain beneficial results. Third, word of mouth marketing has the characteristic of vicarious experience, that is, people who are speaking on products and services with each other have experienced those products or services (Wilkley, 1990).

Viral marketing

Many of viral marketing researchers have defined viral marketing as a kind of word of mouth internet marketing and the latest online advertising phenomenon. Viral marketing is briefly described as an advanced word of mouth communication network by Juriston. In addition, he described the nature of viral marketing in this way: "When used outside the network, internet marketing will be word of mouth marketing, and when used inside the network, marketing would be viral". Viral marketing is a kind of word of mouth transmission of message, through which some marketing messages related to the company, brand, or products are distributed widely among the people in community via mass media (such as the internet). Viral marketing strategy, known as electronic word of mouth advertising, is a concept, disseminated basically through Internet channels, such as email (Kaplan & Hinlin, 2011). Word of mouth advertising involves all interpersonal communication, and currently, it includes new media marketing channels such as the Internet. Understanding this point that viral marketing is the result of the digital technology advancements is very important and it is a generalized electronic example of word of mouth communication. It is not just advancement in word of mouth communication (Kaplan & Hinlin, 2011). Some researchers and marketers also use the terms of viral marketing and viral advertising interchangeably, but there is a difference between them. They consider viral advertising as a subset of viral marketing .



In fact, viral marketing, as traditional marketing, includes marketing mix components (product, price, promotion and distribution), but viral advertising is one of the components of the promotion and is one of the success factors in the sales system of most companies. This type of advertising is called viral marketing since such a message is disseminated like a virus in a short period of time. Messages are usually transmitted via email or social networking sites.

Types of viral marketing

Value viral marketing: In this case, people share their high quality experiences with others. In this case, products should be good enough to persuade people. In fact, the use of the phrase "Send it to your friends for free" does not make a product viral, but they only allow users to talk about other good products.

Clever viral marketing: People try to sell their product for various reasons, by encouraging others. In this case, the user must feel that the reward is valuable, and that the products are good enough to take risk for possible dissatisfaction of others. In simple words, when the products do not have adequate quality, giving reward may lead to a severe reaction by consumer against the sale.

Vital virus marketing: People like to share their experiences with people who need specific products. In this case, the user must feel that the experience and product are valuable so that in addition to making changes in the person himself, there is reason to send it to others.

Spiral viral marketing: People like to share their interesting experiences with others. It should be noted that the compulsory products and goods are not suitable for this class.

Unpleasant viral marketing: People warn others on their negative experiences. Someone who creates low-quality products, which are not based on the user taste, creates in fact this type of virus (Jan Nesar et al., 2007).

Factors affecting viral marketing:

Coach & Benlin (2015) stated that viral marketing means the dissemination of information about specific services and products in virtual and Internet networks, in order to guide friends and people who have common interests (Leswack, Adamick & Hiverman, 2007). Viral marketing is performed in the online environment. In this type of marketing, the referral to messages sent by marketers depends on recipients, and if no motivation is created in them, viral marketing might be eliminated (Nouri et al., 2017). To describe success in viral marketing, this type of marketing can be classified into two parts or steps (Posjer, Richard, and Spanan, 2014). The first step refers to focus on company in making and creating word of mouth messages. In this step, the message made by marketers in social networks is sent for the target community (Burger & Lyngar, 2012; Stephen & Berger, 2009).

In the second step, companies are seeking to launch advertising campaigns in interpersonal communication on social networks when customers and the target community transmit a message to other friends in the sense that that the company in the viral marketing could take these two steps successfully (Nouri et al., 2017). According to Wilson (2000), there are important factors in determining the strategy, governing in any successful viral marketing. The first factor is that any successful viral marketing should involve the free assigning of valuable products or services. However, considering that fact that companies are looking for profit, the concept of assigning seems to somewhat unreasonable. However, one of the best ways to attract customers is through the free word. It can be stated that free products act only as a prey.



Hence, marketers should have high-quality products which stimulate customers for purchasing despite the free products. The second principle is the Wilson claim, which any strategy should provide the conditions for transmission of the message to others without problem. Third, it should be easily transformed from very small to very large dimensions. It means that the media used for communication should provide a context, which is easily repeated and can be in line with rapid and large fluctuations and interference and action of the customers. The fourth component of each strategy emphasizes on the need to use common motivations and behaviours of customers. For example, the best viral marketing strategy is to emphasize the need of customers for belonging and being understood. This causes consumers to feel popular among their peers through the sharing of messages. The other two factors of success is combination of the use of existing communication networks and other resources. For example, a viral message for effective dissemination requires to be injected into user's personal network. In addition, viral marketing is also trying to be cost-effective, so marketers who use this strategy should rely on other resources such as internet magazines, you tubes, and online blogs for low-cost dissemination of their message (Wampell, 2012). In a classification, viral marketing strategies can be grouped into five groups:

- Discussing on a topic. Discussion around a topic is one of the oldest known ideas about viral marketing, which is widely used. The advantage of this discussion is that it can encourage people work harder (Bremen, 2012).
- Providing viral "free" online services: When we talk about free viral services, we can refer immediately to Google. Google, in addition to a search engine, provides large volume of useful applications such as Google Map, Google Doc, and Google Mail and so on for free .
- Whenever we use these applications, we have indirectly helped Google to improve its brand and enhance the knowledge of its consumers (Bajapay et al., 2012).
- Goal-based referral programs: Another viral strategy is that we adopt a goal-based referral program in which we consider a minimal goal for our referrals. In specific cases, when our members reach 20 referrals, they will receive free promotional credits monthly. This kind of strategy will also be astonishingly practical.
- Visual marketing: visual marketing power is well known. If you can create useful educational videos for your specific site and publish them in the virtual space, these videos can be cause of your referral for several years.
- Influence via social networks: One of the other strategies is viral marketing through social networks. One of the good examples for this case is the use of the Like option in Facebook. By stimulating people to like with you in Facebook, you will be faced with all his or her friends, each of them has potentially similar interests. Even if, it is for a short-term, if some of these friends like you, this cycle will continue to be completely viral (Bremen, 2012).

Based on Long and Wong (2014), an advertising message with viral characteristics is very effective when it has several characteristics. The first characteristic is the message's content. In other words, the sent message consists of simple and accurate phrase stimulating the sense of curiosity. Second, the speed of the message transmission should be high, meaning that companies introduce their products and services in this way and the message should have required novelty. Third, the sender of the message should have credibility in the competitive markets. In other



words, he should have required reputation in social and ethical activities. Thus, the advantages of viral marketing other than having these conditions cannot be used properly.

In order that viral marketing method to be successful, three essential conditions should be met (Figure 1). The right message should be sent to the right people in the right conditions. Each of these three elements is based on the results of studies conducted in the area of marketing and sociology and the works of Gladwell (2002) (Kaplan, 2011).

The first factor is the messengers (market experts, social centers, and sellers). The first crucial element in generating a viral marketing message is to find the right people to broadcast the messages. Based on old law of focus, 20% of messengers are responsible for broadcasting 80% of the messages, so it is very important to select the initial recipients of the virus wisely.

Three types of messengers are needed to ensure the transformation of the normal message to the viral phenomenon: market experts, social centers and sellers. Market experts have access to much information in market, actively involved in discussions with other customers to disseminate this information (Freak, 1987). Market experts as aware people are usually among the first people receiving a message and disseminating it social network immediately. And broadcast it on their immediate social network. When a market expert disseminates a message in a social center, that message will become a viral phenomenon. Social centers are defined as a group of people with a very large number of social communications (Goldenberg, 2009). They often know hundreds of different people and can be a link or bridge between among various subgroups.

Wide social network of social centers can facilitate the transmission of messages to hundreds and even thousands of other customers. However, in some cases, direct link between market experts and social centers is not adequate. Although market experts might be aware of the message earlier than others, they may not have a convincing role in transmitting that information. In this case, sellers are required to send a message from the market experts and transform it to persuading message and transmit to social centers. The second factor is a memorable and interesting message, and even the most complete mix of market experts, community centers and sellers will be worthless until the news itself has no ability to be viral. The only message that is adequately memorable and interesting and is transferred to others would be viral phenomenon. The difference between a normal message and a memorable and interesting message is medically like a difference between a flu virus that is contagious only for few days and a herpes virus that can cause a life-threatening infection. While the normal flu virus quickly dies and only affects a few people, the herpes virus can become a real epidemic and afflict thousands of people .

Making a message interesting and memorable does not need for great changes at most cases. One option is to trust on real stories of real people. Another option is the use of rumours and especially positive rumours expressed by trusted people. Such a message will have a greater chance of transferring to others (Comin et al., 1997). There are also other reliable ways, such as short practical phrases (ten ways to lose weight) and funny messages, and so on. In general, messages having viral capability should trigger emotional response in the recipient (Debele et al., 2007). Effective messages often include the element of surprise along with other emotions, which can be positive (such as happiness) or negative (such as hate and fear). The third factor is the environment. In addition to sending the right message to the right people, the two environmental conditions will be also involved in making distinction between success and failure



in the field of viral marketing. First, messengers will only send a message to others who perceive no one knows about it.

The important point is that everyone has 150 acquaintances on average, which is the maximum number of people who can have sustainable social relationships with them in their daily lives. This threshold is often called Dunbar's Number, which is related to the size of each individual's social network (Hill and Dunbar, 2003). Companies may not success in creating the phenomenon of viral marketing, since they have sent the initial message to a too large circle of people.

Instead of concentrating on seeding too much seeds, companies should think on contagious message, which they produce (leading to higher reproductive rate) and seeding the seeds for the maximum number of unrelated possible subcultures. Thus, platforms which are capable to include different simultaneously incorporating, such as the virtual social worlds (Kaplan and Hinlin, 2009) are particularly considered suitable for the viral marketing phenomenon. Second, a little good luck is needed to put everything together, because sometimes the only issue is that there is not a right time and right place to launch a viral marketing campaign. This vague issue makes it difficult to understand viral marketing for companies: the works that have been effective in the past or for a competitor may not be effective at all at special conditions. One example of it was Starbucks Viral Marketing Campaign in May 2009.

This large chain coffee company encouraged its customers to take photos of the new billboards and share it on Twitter. Meanwhile, Robert Greenwald, film producer and the political activist, found an appropriate opportunity to make their latest documentary about the unfair working conditions work in these chain coffee shops. He also asked people to take photos, while they had boards on their hand as a sign of protest against unfair conditions. Many people responded to Greenwald's call and soon many photos were shared on Twitter, which half of them was very different from what Starbucks wanted (Kaplan, 2009).

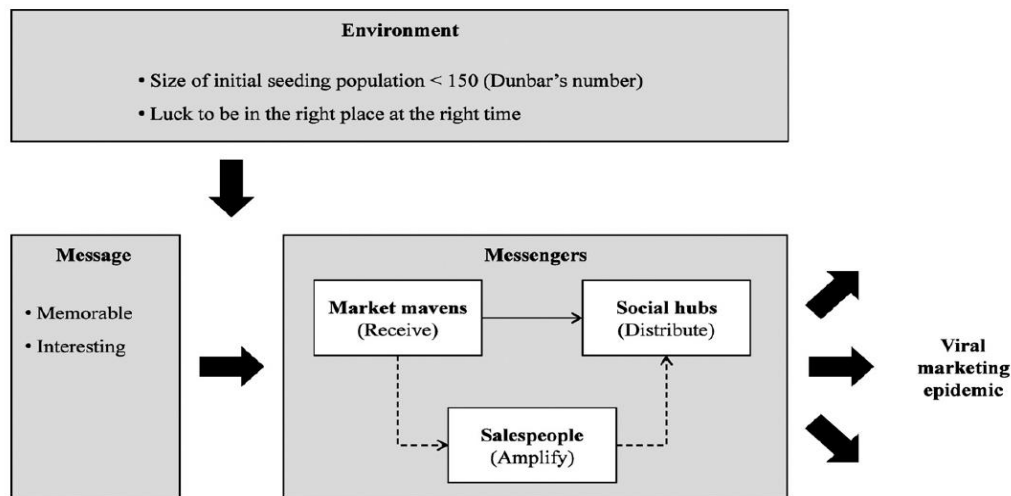


Figure1: The three basic conditions for creating a viral marketing epidemic (Kaplan, 2011)

In another study conducted by Maria Wurndel et al (2009), five important factors affecting viral marketing that have been widely influenced by the success of viral marketing were introduced. These factors include: general structure of the company, product and service characteristics,

message content, and characteristics of the dissemination and communicative channels of message (friend to friend information channel).

The first factor is the general structure, an implementation plan which should consider viral activity and legal and ethical issues. In cases where, for example, ethical issues are not considered, a viral program may lead to a negative outcome for the organization. The second important factor is related to the characteristics of the service or product which should be marketed.

Some products and services for viral marketing executive plans are more appropriate than some other products and services. The third and most important element is the message, which is transmitted. Messages that foster the imagination and are interesting and entertaining for the or even deceive the recipient are more likely to be sent voluntarily. In general, a message should effectively attract the recipient to turn him into a transmitter .

The fourth most important factor is related to the speed of message transmission and audience of message, and nature of exponential growth. Another important factor is for viral marketing is the friend to friend information channel: the transmission of a message depends on channel of communication and the technology available to the sender and the combination of the power of the technologies. Another important element is the credibility of the source of the message (Verndel et al., 2008). In a model, Davis and Khazanchi (2008) introduced the dimensions of viral marketing as volume, attraction, message characteristics and characteristics of the respondent. Based on marketing studies, they showed that viral marketing affects cognitive conditions such as knowledge, attitude, expectation, perception, intention, and behavior of customers.

Xavier and Samer (2009) in their study entitled "Communication in Viral Marketing, focusing on Word of Mouth Marketing" concluded that while viral marketing enhances the knowledge on brand, it has great impact on the purchasing decision of the customers. The results of their study also showed that the negative effect of word of mouth advertising is much stronger than its positive effect on customer behavior.

Sirmanen (2009) argues the growth of distrust in marketing communications dictates consumers to other sources of information, because trust is an important factor in assessing the credibility of the message. Hasik and Sabsenko (2009) consider trust as an important factor in explaining the power of the word of mouth message and concluded that with expansion of Internet in the community, trust in information has become a major issue. Palka et al. (2009) realized that risk and trust are factors affecting the viral marketing, especially at initial stages of the message. Their results also suggest the creation of entertainment and pleasure in marketing (Abdollahi et al., 2015).

Howein et al. (2016) examined the factors affecting the success of viral advertising, which led to development of a theoretical framework. While this research had limited exploratory nature, it was among the first studies in one of the most interesting research areas focused on processes of customers' decision making and explored the mechanisms by which the cognitive-behavioural aspects of the customers works .

The effect of power factors of intellectual affinity and links and emotions on the customer's need for their decision-making processes was examined. Thus, marketers should use strong



intellectual affinity and links to pursue a strong seeding strategy in order to create a sense of surprise and joy and happiness in their audiences.

Another important factor affecting the viral marketing at present time is the use of social networks. Social network can be defined as group of internet-based applications developed based on web technological and ideological foundations and allows the creation and exchange of content generated by user (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This general title is used for describing various applications such as participatory projects (Wikipedia), blogs (Twitter), content generation associations (Youtube) social network sites (Facebook), world of virtual games (world of Warcraft) and virtual social worlds (Second Life). Social network applications are a very appropriate tool for viral marketing, since their collective element facilitates the transmission of marketing messages to a large group of people.

(Kozinets et al., 2010)

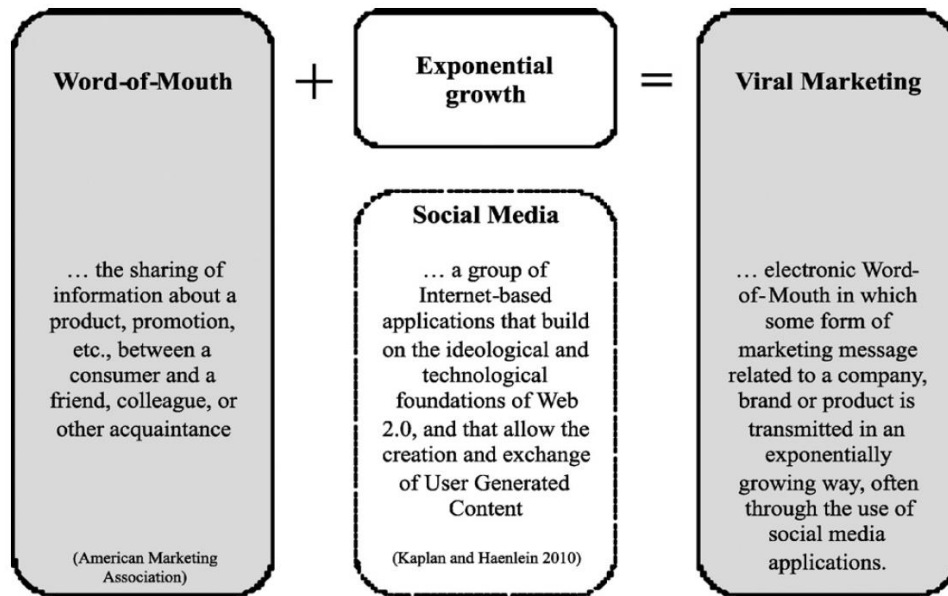


Figure2: Relationship between word-of-mouth and viral marketing (Kaplan, 2011)

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

With expansion of social communication, organizations have found higher tendency to use new marketing methods, including viral marketing, but it should be noted that besides the benefits of viral marketing, including financial resources, it is one of the most important advantages of viral marketing, which costs less than other advertising and marketing programs. Another important and advantage is speed, leading the message to be transmitted to recipient in a short time (Khoshtinat, 2016). It also has some problems such as lack of control over brand, threat of personal relationships, unwanted growth, lack of measuring and unpredictability. However, there are few organizations able to gain a good market share by recognizing the market rightly and applying the scientific and methodological principles of this method. The reason for lack of success is not having adequate knowledge of experts on key and important factors (Haji Heydari, 2017).

This article tries to identify the most important factors influencing viral marketing (Table 1)

Table 1: key factors affecting the success of marketing

| factors | Indicators |
|---|---|
| Communication channels (various technologies, social network) | The use of various technologies, etc., which facilitates the transmission of messages and the possibility of sharing messages in older media. using social network and considering the degree of influence, accessibility, and the ability to transforming from small to large dimension |
| Messenger including (experts, social centers, sellers) | Reputation, trustworthiness (trusted source of message sender), level of communication |
| Service/product | Appropriate, high quality, unique characteristics of a product that has viral marketing capabilities |
| message | Stimulating, creating sense of curiosity, personalization capability, attractiveness, memorable, product relevance, accurate and credible, expressing product characteristics and uses, using simple and practical phrases, non-repetitive, ethical, entertaining, involving the feelings, visual content usage |
| Dissemination characteristics | Exponential growth, speed of dissemination, novelty, reaching to the desired audience, width of dissemination |
| environment | Diverse selection of different and unrelated subcultures, taking into account luck, competition, and economic status |
| customers | Taking into account the cognitive-behavioral aspects of customers, the inner needs of individuals, the need for excellence, motivation, affections, intellectual affinity |
| Promotional programs | Free goods, special discounts, low cost to access the goods, festival, creation of excitement and entertainment, rewarding |
| Organization | Social responsibility of the organization, active communication with customers, general structure of the company (legal and moral issues), brand reputation |



It should be noted that viral marketing is both science and art. However, in order to increase the chances of creating successful campaign, there are some basic rules which companies should follow them in the spread of the virus (Kaplan, 2011).

- Viral marketing is effective beside other marketing mix elements. Despite all the benefits of viral marketing, it should be realistic. Even the most successful rumination campaign cannot compensate for a bad product, inappropriate price, or inadequate distribution. In order that viral marketing to reveal its real capacity, it should be associated with changes in other marketing mix elements. The example of Chaplus King Burger Chicken is an inspirational case .
- Viral marketing should be supported by traditional forms of communication. Rumination element, which plays an important role in the viral marketing epidemic, usually has short life and does not last for a few weeks at best condition. It should be noted that viral marketing is exciting, and nothing is boring as much as old news. Thus, in order to keep the pace with viral marketing flow, companies should combine it with traditional forms of communication.
- Excessive interference and planning kills any viral marketing campaign. The viral marketing campaign, as any other communication project, should be planned precisely. However, when the virus was released, it would be preferable to have the least amount

of control and interference in it. Companies should not ask their unwilling customers to cooperate with them in virus dissemination. A campaign convincing the viral marketing should be to stand alone and keep pace with its dynamics.

- Excessively stimulating messages are high-risk jobs. Good viral marketing messages should be both memorable and interesting. However, companies need to be careful and watch out for messages, which are highly stimulating. There is often a very small boundary between being stimulating and inappropriate.

Successful viral marketing requires little luck and courage. Business managers should accept that the transition between precise planning and success in viral marketing depends on accidents, and failure is always possible even with best planning and best intentions. What has been effective yesterday or competitors have used it is not necessarily effective today!

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