

Viral Marketing Stampede

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Imagine getting thousands of visitors to your site, or logging in to YouTube and seeing the number of views of your last video climbing into the millions. What might that kind of attention do for your business? Would you earn more sales? Gain more customers? Make more profits?

What if I told you all that is possible with just a little effort and a nifty little marketing tactic known as Viral Marketing?

Think for a minute how a real virus spreads, and you'll get a sense of what a viral marketing campaign looks like. It starts with one person, who passes it on to several more people, who each pass it along to several more people, and before you know it, you have thousands – or maybe millions – of people all continuing to spread the virus to their friends, family, colleagues, and customers.

Now that's not so nice when it happens with the seasonal flu, but when it's your brand that's spreading at an exponential rate, it can be pretty good for the bottom line!

Definition of Viral Marketing

Web Marketing Today defines viral marketing like this:

"Viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence."

What does that mean, exactly?

Basically, the goals of a viral marketing campaign are to

- Get readers/viewers/customers to share your content via social networks, email, or any other communication network
- Extend the reach of your message through this sharing, and provide exponential growth of your customer base.
- Increase your brand recognition

- And do it all without a huge advertising budget – that's the magic of viral marketing.

There's something else to remember, though: Just because it's viral, doesn't mean it's marketing. A funny video of your cat fighting with itself in the bathroom mirror might very well go viral on YouTube, but so what? What good does it do you? Did it get your brand out there? Do all the millions of people who love funny cat videos care about your brand? Remember the big marketing rule about finding a targeted audience, because lots of traffic doesn't mean anything if they're all just passing through on their way to somewhere else.

Sometimes in a viral campaign, the campaign is the product. Think of Nicole Dean's Blog World Tour product for example. She was guest blogging as a way of promoting her new product about guest blogging. She incorporated her campaign right into her product, with spectacular results.

In this ebook, we're going to look at some examples of great viral marketing campaigns, and examine what works and what doesn't when creating a viral marketing strategy for your business. We'll talk about the parts of a successful viral marketing campaign, and I'll provide examples you can use in your own business, whether you work online or off. Finally, we'll look at how different business models can use viral marketing to make more sales and improve their bottom line.

Ready? Let's start a stampede!

History of Viral Marketing

Even though you're probably most familiar with the term as it relates to Internet businesses, viral marketing has been around for as long as marketing has existed. Before computers - before the invention of the television, even - people relied on word-of-mouth advertising and viral campaigns to bring in sales.

Think of the barnstormers that roared across the United States just after World War I. They'd fly low over a small, rural village, catching the interest of the locals, then set up makeshift air field at a farm outside of town and wait for the

crowds to arrive. And the crowds almost always did. Why? Because the news - and excitement - of the flying machine spread like a virus, even without the help of modern communication.

Now you can see that even though the old barnstormers used a form of viral marketing to bring hoards of curious onlookers and wannabe stunt pilots to see them perform (and spend their money), this virus had a limit. Rural towns and villages are small, and travel at the time was slow, so the crowd size was naturally limited.

Here's another example you might be familiar with: The Grateful Dead.

At a time when record labels and bands were searching fans at the door to make sure they weren't carrying any recording devices into a live show, the Dead actually encouraged it. They wanted their fans to enjoy the show, and to share it with their friends and family. Whether on purpose or not, the Grateful Dead were utilizing a viral marketing strategy that built their fanbase quickly, and that continues to work today, 25 years after Jerry Garcia's death.

Today, advanced technology has made it possible for viral marketing campaigns to spread across the globe in a matter of hours. Unlike the barnstormers limitation of playing to just the local crowd, or the Grateful Dead's reliance on physical cassette tapes passed hand to hand, marketers today have the advantage of an enormous web of interconnected computers. Even the smallest marketer in the tiniest corner of the Internet has the potential to reach millions of potential customers, all without leaving her office.

Some of today's largest companies have their roots in viral marketing campaigns – although in this case it's called network marketing. Amway Corporation – ranked by Forbes as one of the largest private companies in the United States – relies heavily on network marketing to recruit new partners and keep their business growing. With sales of \$8.4 billion in 2009, it's clear their campaigns are successful.

Whether you call it network marketing, viral marketing, or something else, the practice is sound, and can work for virtually any business model. Let's look at some viral marketing examples that have performed well online.

Examples of Viral Marketing Online

Blair Witch Project

Back in the early days of the Internet, an independent movie studio called Hexan Films, with a budget of just \$25,000, produced a movie that would become a legend: The Blair Witch Project.

The film made more than \$240 million worldwide, largely because of Hexan's unusual marketing techniques. Without the big budget of a corporate studio, Hexan had to get creative, and the strategy worked well. So well, in fact, that you could say the film went viral.

Hexan developed an elaborate backstory to go with the movie, built a website dedicated to the "history," and recorded "interviews" with local police and residents, making it appear as if the events in the film really happened. Then they leaked the story, building interest and driving traffic to the film's website. By the time the movie was actually released, the public was clamoring to see it.

Of course, movie studios have been using viral marketing strategies for years. It doesn't take a master marketer to figure out that promoting your animated movie with free toys stuffed into a Happy Meal is a great way to build an audience. But the Blair Witch creators took it a step further by using virtually free advertising techniques available on the Internet, and that's something any business owner can do, whether you work online or off.

Will it Blend? is a highly successful viral marketing campaign for a line of expensive blenders. The campaign consists of a series of infomercials that demonstrate the power and durability of the Blendtec home and professional blenders. The commercials are distributed through YouTube, with more than 300 thousand subscribers signed up to see the latest installment.

So far, the slightly geeky, grandfatherly Tom Dickson – CEO of Blendtec – has blended over 100 items, and propelled his company into Internet marketing history. And it's not hard to see why this viral campaign has taken off. All you have to do is look at a sample of what Dickson has put in his blender.

Will it Blend? videos have featured blended glow sticks, chicken and Coke floats, powdered vuvuzela, and even pulverized iPhones. Whether you want to see the merely interesting, the slightly disgusting, or take out your virtual

frustrations against an irritating noisemaker, Blendtec has the answer. And if none of that appeals to you, surely you'd tune in to see the hottest gadget in town take a beating. You aren't alone, either. More than 16 million viewers have watched Dickson destroy everyone's favorite cell phone.

What makes Will it Blend? so popular? First, the videos are entertaining. You can't help but be amused when Dickson "accidentally" blends his new iPhone instead of the old one. Second, they're easy to share. YouTube videos can be embedded on web pages and Facebook, links can be sent via email and Twitter, and they're great for social bookmarking sites like StumbleUpon.

Will it Blend? videos are just the right length for bored Internet surfers looking for a fun distraction

Lastly, Will it Blend? is unusual. It's not a copy and paste job of someone else's campaign. It's not a me too site looking to ride on the coattails of a more popular product. Tom Dickson found a unique and entertaining way to get the word out about his company, and judging by the number of views his 101 videos have had, I'd say he's created a stampede.

Hotmail

At a time when email was relatively new, Microsoft launched one of the first web-based email services, and one of the only free services available at the time. Their advertising plan was simple – a link at the bottom of every email sent through their system promoted the service with a link to "get your own Hotmail account."

The plan was viral right from the start. Every single email contained the link, so no matter who you sent a message to, they saw the link. Users didn't have to do anything special. There was no need to ask them to embed the link, pass on the information, or even discuss their email choices with anyone. In fact, if you asked most users, they wouldn't even be aware the link existed.

But the result was spectacular. Hotmail was launched in July of 1996, and by December of 1997 had more than 8 million subscribers. That – and the fact that Hotmail was a fantastic and innovative product – was enough to make it worth \$400 million dollars when Microsoft purchased the service in late 1997.

Without the work of the marketing virus, Hotmail may have drifted off into Internet anonymity, but as it is, we still use Hotmail today (now called Windows Live Mail), more than 13 years later.

The Viral Marketing Common Denominator

What do these four examples of real-life viral marketing all have in common? They are all a quality product. Barnstormers provided great entertainment for the bored rural population at a time when they had money to spend. The Grateful Dead made every single show unique, and encouraged their fans to share their enthusiasm through recordings, ultimately bringing in new fans by the thousands. The Blair Witch project was a great movie, filmed in an unforgettable and unique way. Even those who don't like horror can appreciate the style. And finally, the "will it blend" guys make a fantastic blender.

If you want your marketing campaign to go viral, keep this in mind. It's much easier to do with a fantastic product your customers will love. Remember, it's possible for a viral campaign to be negative as well, and if you put out a bad product, that's much more likely to happen. So the first step to any viral campaign is quality.

Something else these campaigns all have in common is their unique product and style. None of these campaigns had been done before. Their creators all made an effort to come up with a quality product, presented in a unique and unforgettable way, and it's paid off for them. It will work for your business, too, once you know how to build your viral campaign.

Viral Marketing for Your Online Businesses

The Elements of a Successful Viral Campaign

When you're planning your viral marketing strategy, it's important to keep in mind the basic requirements of every viral campaign. Without these, your stampede might turn out to be more like a leisurely stroll.

To build a good viral campaign, make sure your plan includes

- A free product or service
- The product has to be easily transferable to another person

- It has to be able to scale easily
- It has to take advantage of other people's resources
- It has to be unique

Over the next few pages, we're going to take a look at each of these elements, and examine how you can use them to design and launch your own viral campaign. Don't worry. It's not as complicated as it looks!

There is a Free Lunch, and You're Serving It

Every single viral campaign begins with giving something away. Every one. It could be an ebook, a piece of software, an instructional video, or even a few laughs, but it has to be free. And when we say free, we mean free. Not free with an opt-in or a free trial. It has to be really free, because you're going to encourage your customers to share it with their friends, and no one wants to tell their sister she has to sign-up for your list to get the cool thing you're giving away.

Now that doesn't mean you're giving away the farm. But you do need to give away great stuff. There's lots of ways you can do that, while still leaving your customers wanting more.

For example, if you build and sell a software package that helps bloggers find free photos for use on their blog, you could offer a free version of the software that only searches one database instead of several. Or if you've written an ebook, you might release one chapter for free.

One thing to remember, though, is that the free product must be useful all by itself. You're not releasing a free trial, you're essentially building two products. One which you'll give away and one which you will sell, and they both need to be valuable to your users. Free software that is so limited as to be worthless is not a good candidate for a viral campaign. The same is true for a chapter of an ebook that ends with a question.

Some marketers pull just this sort of trick to "force" customers to upgrade, but very often it will backfire. Customers are savvy, and they dislike being

manipulated this way, so don't make the mistake of thinking you'll lose sales by giving away too much information, because the opposite is actually true. You'll gain sales by giving away great stuff. Especially if your great stuff is easy for your users to share among their friends, family, and colleagues.

Share and Share Alike

The second element of a fantastic viral marketing campaign is the ability of your customers to share your product with their peers. Think about the hundreds of email forwards you get in a year. That's because people love to share great stuff. Good marketers know this and take advantage of it by providing their customers with what they want, and then they sit back and watch it spread.

Social Networks

Viral campaigns thrive on the Internet largely because of the social networks that exist. Ten years ago marketers had to rely on telephones and email (maybe) to get the word out about a new product or a great service. You can imagine the results were unpredictable and slow to materialize.

Today, we have dozens – maybe even hundreds – of social networks to use to get our message to the masses. But for some, that means having the opposite problem: where do you start?

For an online marketer, the first place to start is with your very own email list. These are the people who already know you, like you, and buy from you. They're your biggest fans, and they're the ones who are most likely to pass your great products on to their family and friends and social network. So make sure you're keeping them informed about the latest products you're developing, any contests you're holding, or any other thing that's going on that they might want to share.

You probably have an account with several of the more popular social networking sites, like Facebook and Twitter. But for viral marketing to work in these venues, you have to be hanging out with the right crowd. If you use Facebook primarily for friend and family interaction, trying to launch a viral campaign there is probably not a good move.

The same goes for Twitter. Do you follow those in your niche, or those who are other marketers? If it's the latter, your niche campaign won't have very good results here either. Instead, make an effort to follow those who share your passion for your niche, instead of those who are simply marketing their own online business. Now if your niche is internet marketing, then you should be following other marketers, but that's the only exception. Concentrate on following – and being followed by – those who are in your niche, but who are not necessarily selling in your niche. In other words, you want to be hanging out with the buyers, not the sellers.

For strictly social interaction, Facebook and Twitter are your number one choices. If your target market is other business owners, though – say for example you sell a product aimed at accountants – you need to get on LinkedIn. If you're not familiar with it, LinkedIn is basically a database of business professionals in all areas of expertise. It's similar to Facebook, but without the games and other social activities.

LinkedIn allows you to network with other professionals in your area of expertise, form groups, organize meetings, and develop a vast network of colleagues you can reach out to through private messaging or by posting status updates. You can automate your LinkedIn updates just like you can with Facebook and Twitter, and even link your other social network accounts so everything is up to date. If your product is geared toward professionals, LinkedIn is the social network of choice.

For viral campaigns built around funny videos, great photography, comic strips, or other visual media, StumbleUpon is the social network of choice. A combination of a social application and a bookmarking service, StumbleUpon is where you go when you're looking for new stuff on the Internet. Just click the button on your toolbar, and you'll be transported to the next interesting thing as determined by the choices you made when you signed up. Like animals? StumbleUpon will serve up a random cat video or heartwarming dog story. Into sports? You might land on a video of Tiger Woods hitting a hole in one, or an ad for a new kind of practice ball.

Of course, getting your content to go viral on a social network involves more than just putting it out there and hoping for the best. Later on we'll discuss how you can give your campaign a virtual push to get it started, but for now, just be

aware of the options available in the social networking world. Each has its own purpose and followers, so pay attention to where your customers hang out to determine the best social networks for your needs.

Blogging

Blogging is often the first thing we think of when we think of sharing things online, and with good reason. With millions of blogs out there, and thousands more being started every day, it makes good sense for you to promote your viral campaign through your blog – and through the blogs of others. Here's how.

A blog is a community. You lead the discussion with a post about a topic, and your readers add their comments. If your blog has a large following, it's the perfect medium for starting a viral stampede. Start by building up the anticipation of a new release – say a free ebook – encourage your followers to comment, ask questions, and submit topics they'd like you to cover.

Once your ebook is released, blog about it (naturally) and encourage your readers to use their own social networks to promote it. Provide easy to use social networking buttons for the major networks, like Twitter and Facebook, and sit back and watch the stampede grow.

Email

Email is the primary medium by which campaigns turn viral. Think of that old shampoo commercial with Heather Locklear. She's talking about how great the shampoo is, and says "So I told two friends, and they told two friends, and so on, and so on."

That's precisely how email works to expand the reach of your viral campaign. You email your list, and your subscribers email their lists – or if they don't have lists (not everyone is a marketer) then they email their friends and family. It's similar to social networking, but email has a more personal feel, even when you're receiving a recommendation because you're part of an email marketing list.

Before Starting a Stampede, Make Sure There's Room to Run

I'm sure you've seen an email (or three) from a marketer who's embarrassed that their "server crashed" due to an influx of orders. Sometimes this is merely a ploy to get you to check out their fabulous offer, but the whole reason this ploy came into being is because it really did happen on some product launches. Don't let it happen to you, because your campaign might not recover.

Always make sure your campaign has plenty of room to grow. Remember, the whole point of planning a viral campaign is to get it to take off at breakneck speeds and drive thousands of new customers to your website. You better make sure you have enough beer and pizza on hand when they get there, or they'll leave disappointed, and with bad memories of you and your hostess skills. Here's a checklist you can use to make sure you've got plenty of room (and snacks) for a party:

- Host videos on YouTube or other video hosting site, never on your own servers. The bandwidth usage will quickly get your site taken down.
- Compress your content into the smallest package for fast and easy downloads. No one wants to spend an hour downloading a video, even if it is free, and even if it is the greatest tutorial about making money with Amazon that the Internet has ever seen.
- Upgrade your hosting plan to fit your needs. If you're planning a viral stampede, you can't do it with a Hostgator Baby account. They might say unlimited bandwidth, but when you do hit the limit, they will shut your sites down. Upgrade to something more robust, or host your files elsewhere.
- Plan ahead for any major upgrades you're going to need. When the developers of Hotmail launched their new application, you can bet they had lots of servers ready to switch on as soon as they were needed. Nothing will kill a viral marketing campaign quicker than a bogged down system.

Learn to Use Your Friends and Their Resources

Leveraging the power of your own network is an important aspect of any successful viral campaign. Chances are some of your friends are marketers just like yourself, and chances are they've got mailing lists, blogs, and Twitter followers in related, complementary niches. These are powerful assets you can use when it comes to launching a viral campaign.

Here's a short list of ways you can leverage the resources of other marketers to get the word out about your new campaign:

- Buy ad space on related blogs
- Guest post on related, but non-competing blogs
- Buy ad space in newsletters in your niche
- Offer affiliate commissions for lead generation
- Make yourself available for interviews about your product or business

Make it Special

The final element of any viral marketing campaign is its uniqueness. The same old eBook offering the same old, seen-it-everywhere plan for planning a destination wedding isn't likely to go viral. But add a new twist or your unique take on it, and suddenly it has potential.

That doesn't mean you have to invent a new way to train dogs, though. It just means you have to offer a unique view. In other words, be yourself. You'll get a lot further by giving your eBook or video or podcast your own voice than you will with simply rehashing what others have already said many times over.

Another way to add a unique flair to your content is by giving away checklists, printable workbooks, and other user-friendly features that can't be found elsewhere. We'll talk about that some more in the section on creating viral eBooks, but for now just remember that unique and unusual products and marketing campaigns will spread faster and farther than anything else.

You can see that all these elements go together like a jigsaw puzzle. Without all of them, the picture is incomplete, and they all rely on each other to work. Without the resources of your friends, your social networking strategy won't work as well or be as far reaching. Without a good product, your friends and

readers won't be likely to share it with others. Without a great distribution network, it won't matter how good your product is, because no one will see it.

Creating Viral Content

Ebooks

When it comes to eBooks, great content is the key to going viral. If what you're distributing is just the same old rehashed stuff that's already out there, you'll still get readers, but your chances of starting a stampede are much better when you've added your unique take on the subject, given your readers something new to think about, or presented the information in a new and exciting way.

For example, say you want to put together a dog-training guide. There are hundreds – maybe thousands – of dog-training blogs, videos, eBooks, and other information products out there. Some of them are free, some are paid, but most of them all say the same things. What makes yours stand out? Do you offer step-by-step photos of complicated training plans? Never-before-seen recipes for irresistible training treats? Your grandfather's secret for housebreaking a puppy in just 45 minutes?

Just like your business needs a unique selling proposition (USP), so does your eBook, if you want it to go viral. Coming up with your USP can be a challenge, but consider these questions to get you started:

- What benefit will the readers of your eBook see? Remember, a feature is a description of your product, a benefit is the answer to the "so what?" question. If your eBook shows you a new method to get your dog to sit, the benefit (So what?) is having a well-behaved dog that doesn't jump all over your company.
- What problem are you solving for your target market? For ideas, read forums about your niche and see what questions come up again and again and again. Solve the problem in your eBook, and you're practically guaranteed a viral explosion of traffic.
- How does your eBook improve on the eBooks already out there? Do you go into greater detail? Offer handy printable checklists to accompany the instructions? Have professional illustrations to enhance the instructions?

Presentation Counts

Even though you're giving it away for free, you want to present your eBook (and yourself) in the best possible light. After all, the point of a viral marketing campaign is to get your brand and your products in front of as many people as possible. If you're putting out substandard stuff, no one will take you seriously, and no one will buy your upsell product because of the shoddy quality of the free stuff.

If you're not a writer, it's an easy thing to hire one. Ask for recommendations from other marketers in your niche, be sure to get samples, and start off with a small project rather than a large one, to be sure you're a good fit with each other. Also, it's a good idea to hire a writer who has some knowledge about your topic, as the learning curve will be shorter.

Once your ebook is complete, you'll want it professionally formatted and to have a nice cover designed for it. You should be able to get a cover done for under \$40, and the formatting is easily done with Microsoft Word or Open Office. When you've got everything where you want it, just save as a .pdf file, and you're done!

Distribution Channels

Getting your eBook written and wrapped up in a pretty package is only the beginning. Now it's time to flood the distribution channels with your content so your readers can find you easily. Of course, you can – and should – host it on your own site, but there are sites where readers will browse for eBooks to download, so you want to make sure your book is easy to find. Here's a list to get you started:

- <http://www.ebookdirectory.com>
- <http://www.wisdomebooks.com>
- <http://www.free-ebooks.net>
- <http://dlb.netfirms.com/ebooks.htm>
- <http://books.google.com>
- <http://www.getfreeebooks.com>

- <http://e-library.net>

You can also distribute your eBook via your partners, which we'll talk about in greater detail later.

It's Free! Why do I have to Work so Hard?

You're probably wondering why you need to put so much time and effort (and even money) into something you're just going to be giving away for free. Getting your name and brand in front of a bigger audience is the primary objective, but there are ways you can monetize your free eBook as well.

Affiliate links lend themselves well to a free eBook. If your eBook is all about fly fishing, you might include a list of places to buy supplies for making your own flies. Or if you wrote a book of recipes designed for a once-a-month cooking plan, you might link to some places to buy storage containers at a good price.

Another option is to offer an upsell product. We're all familiar with upselling our list, and adding an upsell to a free eBook is no different.

Just like with affiliate links, you can offer a resources page at the end of your eBook that lists other, more in-depth or differently formatted materials your reader might be interested in. Readers of free eBooks might be willing to purchase an audio version of the same content, for example. Or to purchase videos that provide more information on the subject.

One other way to monetize free products is to get the reader to opt-in to your mailing list. We already talked about why you should not use a forced opt-in (get this eBook when you sign up for my list) in a viral campaign, but that doesn't mean you can't ask for an opt-in. A great way to do that is to keep your eBook up-to-date with the latest information about your topic. And of course, in order to get the latest revisions to your readers, they need to sign up to receive updates from you. Simply put a link in the footer of each page with a note that says they can receive all future updates for free just for signing up. Now you're building a list that already knows and likes your products, and will be more likely to buy from you in the future.

You can see that the time, money, and effort you put into creating a viral eBook is never wasted. You just need to use it wisely, and leave room to leverage it later.

Videos

We've already seen how videos can become wildly popular. From funny cats to dancing wedding parties to blended iPhones, the Internet is full of viral videos that get passed from email to Facebook to blog and back again, gaining new followers along the way. You can use video in your viral campaign, too.

Whatever You Do, Don't Bore Them

Great viral videos start out the same way great viral eBooks start – with good, compelling content. The difference is, instead of instruction or pure information, people want videos to be entertaining. They want to laugh or cry or be touched in some way. Information is secondary in a viral video, but it can be done.

Look again at the Will it Blend? videos. They're entertaining first and foremost. Tom Dickson is so silly and sincere, you can't help but like him. And the blending itself is like watching a suspenseful movie. Will it or won't it?

But make no mistake, these videos are selling that blender. How? By showcasing the quality construction. They're not about how the iPhone blends, they're about the fact that the blender itself survives the blending. The message is subtle, but it's there, and when it's spread over one hundred videos and millions of views, the branding is set. The world knows that BlendTec makes a great blender.

So how can you use viral videos in your business? How-to videos are the obvious choice. Whether you're into soap making, dog training, or weight loss, a how-to video can be a great way to introduce yourself to potential customers. But beyond the how-to, virtually every form of content can be turned into a video. The key is in making your video compelling, entertaining, and the kind of thing your users will want to pass on to their families, friends, and colleagues.

Think about the kind of videos you've passed on to your friends. What made you share them? Were they funny? Heartwarming? Shocking? All these are

great qualities for a viral video to have. When you're planning your video, try to incorporate some of the traits you admire in other videos into your own.

Distribution Channels

Just like eBooks, videos can be distributed in a number of ways. YouTube is the most common distribution channel for free videos, but check out some of these other options as well:

- <http://www.youtube.com> – allows for easy embedding of hosted videos on other web pages and social network
- <http://www.viddler.com> – allows direct recording to the site via webcam
- <http://www.flickr.com> – free accounts are limited to two video uploads per month, pro accounts have no limits
- <http://www.dailymotion.com/us> – 2 gigabyte and 20 minute limit
- <http://www.metacafe.com> – features a rating system that automatically judges user reactions and ranks videos accordingly, making it possibly the best service for hosting a video you hope will go viral

You can, of course, host your video on your own site, but as we said before, you need to use caution. Video files are huge, so you run the risk of exceeding your bandwidth limitations. Further, you want users to be able to easily share your video with their followers, so be sure to choose a service that allows for that.

What's in it for Me?

Producing a video isn't easy, nor is it inexpensive. A professionally edited video can cost you hundreds of dollars for a couple of minutes of finished video. Putting together your own video will involve hours and hours of your time. So why do it at all?

Next to written content, video is the second most popular format online. So popular, in fact, that YouTube is the third largest search engine. Think about that. Your potential customers are going to YouTube right now and searching for your keywords. Are they finding your videos? Are your happy customers

spreading the word about your business by sending their friends and family to watch your latest video? They could be.

Since there's no place to put an affiliate link or offer an add on product to a video, it's clear that video is all about branding. But that's okay. Building your brand and getting your name in front of potential customers is one of the most important marketing tasks you can undertake, and producing videos that get passed from viewer to viewer is a fantastic way to get your message heard thousands of times over.

Software

Free software lends itself quite naturally to a viral campaign. It fits all the requirements we discussed earlier for successful viral marketing – it's free; it's easily transferable; it's easily scalable; it uses other's resources; and it's unique. Some examples of software that's gone viral include

- Article submission programs
- WordPress plugins – and WordPress itself!
- Games
- iPhone apps
- Browser add-ons
- Note-taking and organizing applications like Evernote

But before you decide you want to write a software package, you need to consider the special requirements of software. First, it has to work across multiple platforms. Unlike video hosted on YouTube or a pdf file, software has the added problem of so many possible configurations of computers to deal with. Is your end user running Windows XP? Vista? Or even Windows 97? What about the video adapter? You can see that a lot of thought has to go into the development of a large-scale software package, so it's not something to be taken lightly.

The second obstacle to software creation is ongoing support. You can't just throw out a piece of code and let it drift off without a support plan – not even a free piece of code. If you don't have plans to upgrade, fix bugs, and improve

your software down the road, you might be better off sticking with eBooks and videos.

What's in it for Me?

With that said, though, software can quickly go viral and build a fantastic revenue stream for you, even if the software itself is free. Here's a few ideas you can use to monetize free software:

- Offer a limited functionality free version, with an upsell to the fully functional paid version. Remember though, the free version must be useful as it stands if you hope to get a viral stampede started.
- Sell ad space in the software itself. Evernote does this well, with one small, unobtrusive ad in the corner.
- Use a link-back strategy to build brand awareness. This is perfect for WordPress plugins.

Distribution Channels

Distributing free software isn't much different than distributing other forms of content. You can host the files on your own server (remember to use caution here if you plan on going viral!), host them on free file sharing sites, upload them to CNET or ZNET or SourceForge servers, or – in the case of WordPress plugins – distribute them through the WordPress Codex.

Going Viral

Can you force a viral stampede? Probably not. But there are things you can do to give your marketing tactics a nudge that might just send them over the edge.

Great content. This cannot be stressed enough. Without this, no matter how much effort you put into your marketing strategy, people are just not going to pass on links or eBooks or newsletters that aren't any good. Make an effort to

go the extra mile for your readers, and they'll reward you by bringing in new customers for you.

It's important that you give your readers (and listeners) exactly what they're looking for, in a format they love. Anything else just won't have the same impact. How can you know what they want? Ask them.

- Conduct a poll using Survey Monkey (free)
- Ask for comments on your blog
- Email your list and tell them you're planning a new launch and ask them what they need most from you
- Study niche forums and pay attention to the questions that get asked repeatedly
- Do a keyword search on Twitter and see what questions pop up surrounding your niche
- Follow the top blogs in your market and see what their readers are commenting about
- Pay attention to other viral campaigns to see what's worked for them, then replicate it

Once you've built your content, it's time to promote it. We touched on this earlier, but now we're going to cover viral promotion methods in-depth, so you can give your viral marketing campaign the kick in the virtual pants it needs to start a stampede!

Press Releases

Press releases are a powerful way to get your message to the masses. They're easily distributed to hundreds of websites all at once, are frequently picked up by other websites and print publications, and have a way of "going viral" all on their own.

Try to put a newsworthy spin on your launch for best results, then submit your release to a number of press release sites. You can go an extra step and

(social) bookmark your press releases, Tweet about them, add links to your Facebook fan page, and include links to them in your blog.

Joint Ventures

Joint ventures refer to mutually beneficial partnerships with other marketers. They can take many forms, but some of the most common are simply the cross promotion of each other's products. If your JV partner has a free eBook she's hoping to work up some interest for, she might ask you to send it out to your list. In exchange, she'll promote something of yours.

Another form of JV partnership is simply the exchange of ads – either in newsletters, on blogs or websites, or in audio and video files.

You can also have a partnership of sorts with other bloggers, offering to guest post on their blogs, author articles for their newsletter, or even appear as guests on their podcasts. All of these ideas can be the tipping point of a viral campaign, if your JV partner has a large and responsive list.

Contests

Holding a contest on your blog or website – or even Twitter or Facebook – is a natural lead-in for a viral campaign. When you give away great prizes, people will be more likely to participate. But your prize doesn't have to cost you a lot, it just has to be valuable.

For example, if you run a hosting company, a year of free hosting is a valuable prize to your customers, but costs you very little. If you're a service provider like a writer or a graphic designer, giving away free services costs you nothing but time, and has to potential to build your business exponentially.

The key is to make your contest interesting and fun, but not complicated. One hosting provider held a contest recently that required participants to film a short video singing the praises of the company. The winner got a year's worth of free hosting, and the company got lots of short commercials posted all over

the Internet talking about how wonderful they are. The result was a lot of free advertising that will continue to make sales for years to come.

You can do the same thing no matter what your business model is. Some ideas for contests include requiring participants to

- Post a photo in a Flickr group of them using your product
- Write a blog post listing the five best features of your product
- Tweet about your giveaway – one tweet per entry
- Comment on your blog for a chance to win the prize
- "Like" your Facebook page
- Digg or Stumble your blog post or article

Just remember – don't make it complicated. Don't require your reader to comment on your blog, Tweet about it, then email you and tell you they did it. The second element of a viral campaign is easy sharing, so make it easy on your customers, and they'll help get the word out for you.

Just Ask

Your mailing list subscribers and blog readers are a valuable asset. They already know you and like you and do business with you, and will be quick to talk you up to their friends and colleagues – all you have to do is ask.

Write a great newsletter article all about your upcoming viral product launch, send it out to your list, and at the bottom, ask them to forward it to friends they know will be interested. Or use the "call to action" in a blog post or article to ask readers to Stumble, Tweet, or otherwise share your post.

Get Listed

One article format that is commonly shared is the list, and specifically "best of" lists. If you can get your video, eBook, or podcast on a Top 10 list, just think what that will do for your viral marketing campaign!

But how do you get on such a list.

The first step – you may have heard this before – is to produce fantastic content. Then spread the word. If that fails to gain the attention you need to make it onto the next list of "50 Greatest YouTube Videos You've Never Seen" then consider making your own list.

Of course, making your own list and putting yourself at the top is a bit self-serving, but if you combine this idea with a joint venture, and together put out a big list promoting all your (and all your partners') videos, you might be surprised at the results.

Pit Your Users Against Each Other

You've probably participated in this kind of viral campaign, where users are encouraged to do battle with each other in public. The makers of Farmville, Mafia Wars, and other games are great at getting this kind of campaign rolling, by getting players to share their scores and recruit other players.

Test, Regroup, Test Again

The last – and most important – part of every marketing campaign is to evaluate the results and refine your plan accordingly.

If you're seeing a ton of traffic from YouTube, think about releasing another video. Not many sales coming in from Twitter? Maybe you should spend your marketing energy elsewhere.

Use Google or another analytics package to track keyword searches, traffic stats, and other relevant information to help you get a good sense of where your most valuable traffic comes from, and where you're wasting your time.

Many of the distribution channels we've discussed in this guide include detailed analytics which will allow you to see exactly where your traffic comes from, how much of your video they watch, and whether or not they download your eBook or software. Be sure to take advantage of all the information available to you,

and use it to refine your current campaign, and to plan a better, even more effective campaign the next time.

Final Thoughts About Viral Marketing Campaigns

If you've ever dreamed of logging into your website stats and seeing those number spike, of having thousands of Twitter followers, or of feeling the thrill of your video hitting a million views on YouTube, then you need to get started planning your own viral marketing campaign.

But remember, viral doesn't have to mean millions - to a blog with a small readership, a viral event might be 1,000 visitors - then you build from there! With careful planning, each subsequent campaign can build on the last, until you finally reach the numbers you're dreaming of.