

# Is Viral Marketing For You?

By Tony LLoyd

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What comes to mind when you hear or see the term Viral Marketing? A virus? Something spreading like wildfire? Something that is multiplying out of control?

When Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper coined the term Viral Marketing in 1997, they were thinking of the ability of a biological virus to spread out of control. However Viral Marketing has nothing to do with medicine. The term appropriately describes a method of business promotion that can increase your business exponentially. In other words, it can expose your business to a lot of people in a very short time. To illustrate this we will think of one word - Hotmail. The next time you hear the term Viral Marketing, think Hotmail. Why Hotmail?

Hotmail is the best example of Viral Marketing on the Internet. Sabeer Bhatia and Jack Smith started Hotmail -a free e-mail service - in 1996. The company was introduced to the public in July of that year. By the end of the month Hotmail had more than 20,000 subscribers. Within 4 months it had exceeded 100,000 users. In January 1997 the one-millionth subscriber signed up with Hotmail. After a mere 18 months, Hotmail had signed up over 12 million subscribers. Today the number of Hotmail subscribers worldwide has exceeded 65 million. How was this phenomenal growth achieved?

Initially, each Hotmail message arrived in someone's mailbox with the words "Get your free email at Hotmail" at the bottom. By clicking on the word Hotmail, the recipient was taken to Hotmail's Home page where the free e-mail service was explained. Back in 1996/1997 most computer users paid for Internet service that included one e-mail address. Hotmail gave users a chance to sign up for free multiple addresses. Another benefit of having a Hotmail e-mail address is the fact that subscribers can access their account from anywhere in the world. To many persons, there were advantages in having a Hotmail account. Therefore it was not necessary to twist someone's arm to get him or her to sign up for Hotmail's free account. People signed up by the thousands each day.

For Hotmail, this "word of e-mail" advertising or Viral Marketing was extremely cost-effective and successful. While one of Hotmail's competitors spent \$20 million to attract less than half of Hotmail subscribers, it spent only \$500,000 over a 2-year period to gain 12 million subscribers. The success of this company is one reason why Microsoft bought the company. (Today the message at the bottom of each Hotmail message reads: Get Your Private, Free E-mail from MSN Hotmail at <http://www.hotmail.com> )

How can you use Viral Marketing to reach thousands of prospects? Here are a few suggestions to motivate your customers and visitors to refer your message to others.

1. First and foremost, the information that you want others to forward to their friends and families MUST be valuable. The more valuable the material the more likely someone will forward it. EVERY e-mail you send should have your URL (or e-mail link) on it. At the bottom of your e-mail letter, you should provide a link to your web site or an e-mail link that can be used to get more information. It's a good idea to use an e-mail link to provide certain standard information via autoresponder.

2. Look for web sites that sell products or services that compliment what you are selling. For example, if DG Computers sells computer hardware and you sell computer software, you could send customers to DG when they need upgrades or a new computer. In return, DG sends you customers when they need software for their computer.

3. Use humor to spread the word about your business. People are always sending jokes to friends and families. Create a funny newsletter or an e-mail alert that the reader would readily pass on. If the material is not directly related to your business, don't forget to place the URL of your business in each newsletter.

4. Create an award for the best sites in your category or field of business. Send them an e-mail letting them know they won the award and where to get the award icon to place on their site. (The "Best of..." icon should have a link back to your site.)

5. One very clever online entrepreneur allows you to take his FREE eBooks and place your URL link in them. He allows you to give these FREE eBooks away on condition that you do not remove the link to his web site. These eBooks contain tons of information about different types of online businesses and different ways to promote them. Each time you pass on these eBooks you are doing a form of Viral Marketing for him. This is a great and effective idea that you can copy.

It takes time to see the results of Viral Marketing. If one person send your URL to 2 persons and those 2 persons pass it on to 4 persons and those 4 pass it on to 8 more persons, eventually the number of persons who receive your URL will mushroom. A modest start will later increase exponentially to include a very large number of persons exposed to your message or web site. This is a very powerful and cost-effective means of promoting your product or service. You should definitely use this marketing method in your marketing campaign.

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