



Maximizing the Value of Viral Video: Creativity Rules and Reach Still Counts

Technology is changing faster than human nature. This is a fact that marketers would do well to remember when they want an online video to go viral. Compared to traditional paid TV advertising, encouraging people to pass on a video to friends and family is highly attractive in these budget-constrained times.



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But while the media player may have changed (from TV to PC), the same rules still apply: Creativity rules and reach still counts. Creativity is mission-critical to getting people to watch your video online, probably more so than on TV, and a “post and hope” strategy not only risks your video never being discovered, but is likely to reduce the overall number of views your video will receive.

Human Nature Underlies Viral Campaign Success

If a viral campaign is to be effective, people must be willing to work on behalf of a brand. Therefore, marketers must ensure that people are inspired to send the ad to other people. The basic motivation for people to share ads or links is the age-old desire to connect with others. People pass along ads for the same reasons they pass along jokes, anecdotes, and photos. It is a means of staying in touch, of making a connection, of sending the message “I’m thinking of you, and I hope you’ll enjoy this.”

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Ads, however, can have value that goes beyond the personal connection represented by a comment or photo. Ads can become a unit of “social currency,” transmitting the message “I’m cool and special because I’m hooked into this new, fun, interesting stuff.” But if either of those messages is to register, the content must be appreciated by the recipient.

Two Components of Viral Success

In 2007, Duncan J. Watts co-authored a paper titled “Viral Marketing for the Real World” with Jonah Peretti and Michael Frumin. In the paper, Watts, who is a professor of sociology at Columbia University and the author of *Six Degrees: The Science of a Connected Age* (W. W. Norton, 2003), finds that the size of a viral audience is determined by the scale of the initial seeding of the video combined with the “reproduction rate” (that is, the degree to which people are willing to pass the ad on to others).

In marketing terms, “seeding” represents the initial reach of the video, and the reproduction rate represents the creative power of the ad — that is, the degree to which people engage with it and feel compelled to pass it on. The authors demonstrate that the greater the initial reach of a viral video, the greater the number of “bonus” views it will achieve (irrespective of creative power). Simply posting a video and hoping people will find it is a long-term strategy at best. If a video is to stand a chance of going viral, it must be seeded in enough places to transcend the disparate set of sites and personal networks that exists online.

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In their paper, Watts et al. focus primarily on the “media” component of viral marketing. They say that success is rare and that predicting the likely success of a viral campaign “is extremely hard, if not impossible — even for experienced practitioners.” But practitioners can only predict success if they understand how well an ad resonates with the target audience.

Investigating Creativity’s Role in Viral Viewing

Last year my colleagues Duncan Southgate, Nikki Westoby, and Graham Page set out to discover the creative factors that allow ads to go viral. (The details of their findings will be published in the May edition of *The International Journal of Advertising*.) Their analysis was based on behavioral viewing data from YouTube for 102 ads (71 from the U.S. and 31 from the U.K.), which had been tested as finished films using our Web-based Link methodology.

Analysis of the viewing data confirms Watts’ statement that viral success is rare. The distribution of weekly viewing rates is massively skewed, with only about one of six ads breaking out of the pack to achieve a good weekly audience.

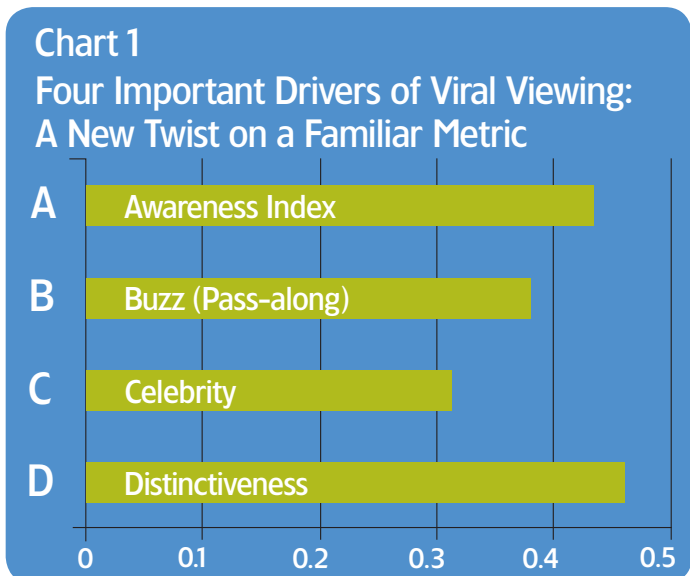
Creativity Rules

In spite of the potential “noise” in the data that might be caused by media-related issues, our team found four factors that had strong correlations with the number of views an ad achieved on YouTube (see Chart 1).

First, our established Awareness Index measure (in the case of traditional TV advertising, this is the composite of enjoyment, active engagement, and branding) had a correlation with viewings of 0.43. We were not surprised to find that the correlation, though strong, was not overwhelming. This is because the Awareness Index was designed to represent how well people *remember* an ad in relation to a brand, while our analysis of viral ads was intended to understand what drives someone to *watch* an ad.

Second, when people actively state that they are willing to send an ad on to someone else, that is a strong indication that they believe the ad has merit ($r=0.38$). Watts et al. demonstrate that an online campaign will only truly go viral (where viewings increase exponentially) if people pass the ad on to more than one person. But few ads have the power to engage people this strongly. Only 2 percent of TV ads pretested using Link have 35 percent or more people stating that they would pass the ad on. Even in the case of these exceptional ads, viewers would need to pass them on to an average of at least three other people if they were to stand a chance of truly going viral.

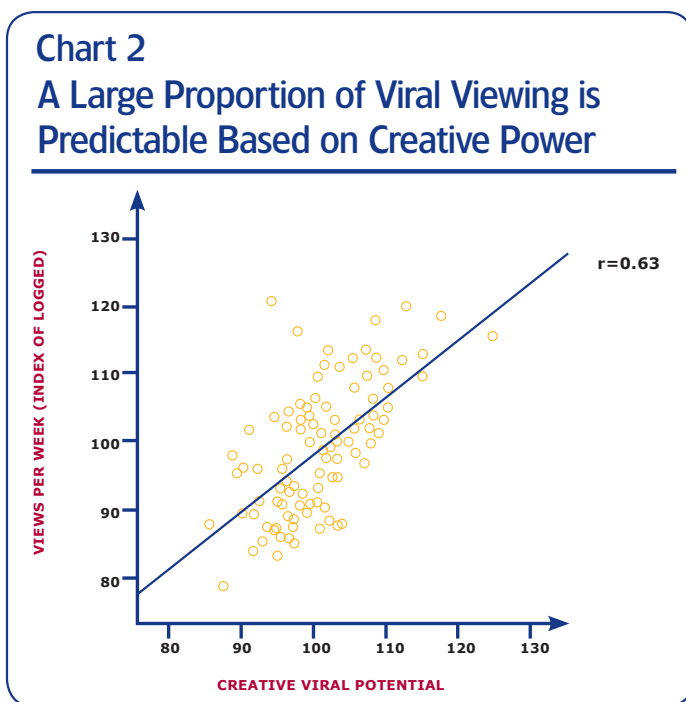
The third factor was readily apparent from examining the viewing data alone: The presence of a celebrity has a big impact on how many views an ad gets ($r=0.31$). To account for the star power of different celebrities, an index was created from Google Insights that compared the number of searches for each individual to the number of searches conducted for Angelina Jolie. The more interest demonstrated in the celebrity, the higher the weekly viewing tended to be.





Last, but certainly not least, we found that the Link “Distinctiveness” measure (“How different is this advert from other advertising that you have seen?”) had the strongest correlation with the number of weekly views ($r=0.46$). This makes good intuitive sense. After all, why watch an ad on YouTube unless it promises to show you something new and different? Notable viral successes have all broken the mold in some way (a fact which itself points to the difficulty of creating a viral campaign that will stand the test of time).

When combined, as shown in Chart 2, these four measures show a strong relationship with views per week on YouTube ($r=0.63$). The relationship is not perfect, but that is to be



expected, given the role that mass media support, seeding, and other factors play in determining viral success. However, it is very useful to be able to isolate and understand some of the major creative factors underlying that success. The findings confirm that creativity is critical to getting people to watch ads online and be willing to pass them on to others. This analysis also confirms previous qualitative research conducted by Millward Brown in 2007, which suggested that successful viral videos are often laugh-out-loud funny, edgy, gripping, or sexy.

Reach Still Counts

Using real-world examples, Watts et al. demonstrate that the more broadly seeded a campaign, the more people it will reach, irrespective of the pass-along rate. In order to seed a viral campaign effectively, different media placement strategies may well be required based on the nature of the target audience. Some campaigns benefit from paid media support. The video ad itself may need to appear on TV, in cinemas, or in paid online video slots. Of the UK's *Campaign Magazine's* “Top 10 Virals of the Decade,” several are TV ads: John West Salmon “Bear,” Honda “Cog,” and Budweiser “Whassup.”

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For other ads, PR can also have a major impact — first in seeding the ad appropriately among opinion formers and later in “fanning the flames” to ensure wider awareness. One other ad in the *Campaign* Top 10, Dove's “Evolution,” relied on a major PR blitz from Edelman, New York for its success. This helps explain why “Evolution” received over 10 million views and the follow-up ad titled “Daughters,” only 500,000. The difference was not due to the response to the creative. When tested, people were equally likely to say that they would pass the ad on to others (34 percent for “Evolution” and 39 percent for “Daughters”). What was different was how many people were exposed to the two campaigns by PR and news coverage.

With these findings in mind, marketers should consider how best to seed their viral campaigns. The research by Watts suggests that the more sites, the better. Simply posting an ad on a corporate Web site or on just one social media site is unlikely to be enough. Dynamic Logic's AdReaction 2009 study finds that while many people have visited multiple social networking sites, only a minority belong to more than one. Therefore, the chances of an ad being seen and forwarded are much greater when it is seeded on a number of different sites.

Names Matter, Especially Online

Of course, it is not just the number of sites you use that matters. Other factors can play an important role in determining



whether an ad gets discovered and passed along. One of these factors is the way ads are placed and named. Campaigns can be placed in a way that makes them easier to forward — either by placement (such as a branded page on YouTube or a dedicated campaign microsite) or by naming the ads carefully to ensure that they are searchable.



Our own experience of attempting to track down the 102 ads on YouTube demonstrated that this can be a very difficult task when the ads are given obscure names. The ad name itself clearly has two functions. Among random surfers, an intriguing name may help drive viewing. However, among searchers, a more obvious name may help increase viewings. Advertisers can only control how their own “official” version(s) of the video are named — but they should consider those names carefully.

The Power of a Campaign

Lastly, viral ads may benefit from the collective strength that linked executions can provide. The ongoing BlendTech campaign, which currently includes over 80 individual executions, is a great example that embodies many of the properties of successful viral video campaigns. Every time a new ad is released as part of the *Will It Blend?* campaign, that new viral has the potential to generate additional viewings for previous ads. The most viewed individual video is the “iPhone — Will It Blend?” execution, which achieved over 7 million views. This campaign has reached a level of scale that allows

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it to attract a substantial audience in its own right. But once again, few campaigns are likely to achieve the same degree of success unless they combine creativity with wide reach.

Conclusion

Generating “bonus” viewing by having your campaign go viral is a desirable objective but is not as easy to achieve as many might hope. In fact, there are marked similarities between success online and off: Creativity and reach matter. The essential difference is that only online can a viewer share his reaction to an ad and allow others to immediately see what he’s talking about. But in order for that to happen, the ad must offer a truly distinctive and compelling viewing experience. Ads that might be passively viewed on TV will simply be ignored online. So by seeking to engage people online, advertisers may have set themselves an even higher standard for success. It is difficult enough to create an ad that people are willing to watch online. It is far more difficult to create an ad that will truly go viral (that is, one that has a pass-along rate greater than 1-to-1).

But that does not mean that advertisers should ignore the opportunity. They simply need to be realistic about the odds of success. Provided it fits with the brand’s positioning and character, a video that the target audience finds engaging and distinctive and that can be readily found online is likely to garner significant bonus viewing. It is a reward that could be well worth the investment.

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