

Healthcare Marketing

The new generation of 'guerrilla' marketing: Can viral marketing work for healthcare?

You get an e-mail, and at the bottom is a message about the e-mail company's free service. You check out a website, and as you're reading discover an offer to tell your friends about the site and its products in return for a fee or special offers on the merchandise. Or after checking out several websites on the same subject, you receive an e-mail with more information on that subject, from a company or source you may or may not recognize.

These are all examples of "viral" marketing - which, along with its close cousin "buzz" marketing (the subject of a future column) is the Cyber-age generation of "grassroots" and "guerilla" marketing campaigns. What exactly is viral marketing, and what are its implications for healthcare?

The goal of viral marketing is to utilize the Internet to pass on subtle messages or information about your product or service, and/or to enlist customers to pass on something about your product or service to their network of friends through the Internet. Viral marketing is closely associated with the web, and tied to the ability to communicate messages, subtly and often indirectly, to a large number of individuals who match a certain profile, via e-mail. Criteria that a product or service must meet to be a successful candidate for a viral marketing campaign include the ability to add value to the transmitter and the receiver, to be easily delivered (no capacity or fulfillment limitations), to be easily transferable with a minimum of effort, and to use existing networks to transmit the message. "Value" transmitted does not necessarily have to be monetary - this value could be the satisfaction of helping a friend, or of assisting a cause.

The most well known example of viral marketing was probably the campaign executed by Hotmail e-mail service. Their marketing campaign was simply and elegantly communicated by adding an e-mail message to each e-mail sent by one of the users who subscribed to the free service, announcing the availability of this free service to the e-mail recipient. The campaign was launched in 1996 and three years later, Hotmail had 40 million users with 150,000 people signing up daily.

Other examples of viral marketing include:

- The prevalence of offers on websites to visitors to earn fees or premiums by forwarding offers to friends
- Companies paying customers for the privilege of adding their "Viewbar" display ads to the customers' desktops, and paying the customers an additional fee when they refer this service to their friends
- Messages and comments posted on message boards and in Internet

chatrooms

What are the implications of viral marketing for healthcare? Before examining potential applications, let's look at the specific barriers to successful viral marketing in healthcare.

- *Violation of privacy.* The person who has visited several sites on diabetes, hypertension, or sexual dysfunction may be either pleased or outraged to receive e-mail messages from companies offering products or services for these ailments. Even the receipt of information about the disease, without a marketing messages, still raises the question, "How did they know?" Individuals are extremely concerned about the privacy of their health information for a variety of very good reasons and already are suspicious of the Internet as a means by which their privacy can be violated. Any attempts by healthcare companies to use viral marketing must not only technically protect patients' privacy but also ensure that it does not offend them by implying that "Big Brother" has been watching.
- *Healthcare delivery is local.* Generally speaking, the provision of healthcare services is a local phenomenon. A hospital or physician is interested in targeting patients within a finite community; therefore, the global reach of the Internet is not as valuable to them as it is to companies who target a broader geographic area. This is not the case, of course, for companies selling healthcare products to consumers, many of whom do target national and international audiences.
- *Not everyone uses the Internet.* Every citizen residing in the United States is a healthcare consumer. Despite its rapid adoption, there are still millions of people who do not use the Internet. Also, physicians' offices have been one of the slowest adaptors of the Internet for business processes and communication; this is a limiting factor in viral marketing programs that target physicians or which might be launched by the physician's office.
- *People hate spam.* Anyone with an e-mail address - unless they are located on, say, their employer's intranet - receives hundreds of advertisements and "junk mail" in their inbox. To be successful, viral marketing must be personalized, valuable, and perceived as coming from a reliable source that the recipient knows and respects. It is not successful when passed on to 1,000 of the connection's "closest friends."

Still a viable opportunity

With these reservations noted, viral marketing still represents a viable opportunity for healthcare companies when used judiciously and to support its overall marketing strategy. Healthcare companies should consider the following applications and their relevance to their institutions and services:

- Including messages about the organizations products, services, and events in all e-mails sent by employees at the organization. These messages may range from "In honor of National (disease) Awareness Week, XYZ Hospital is sponsoring free screenings daily from 10 a.m. - noon" to messages about new services and amenities now offered, to announcements about honors and awards received. The messages can also include a website address for people to check for more information. For virtually no cost, the facility or company can increase awareness both internally and externally through this means.

- Analyze the company's website, and the marketing programs for the company's products and services, for opportunities to enlist visitors and customers as viral marketers. One example is offering new parents the opportunity to post their newborn's photo online at no charge. Friends and family can visit, and they will also see the hospital's name associated with the new arrival. Another example may be the chance for site visitors to forward health or disease-specific information to their friends and family members who may be interested.
- Look for opportunities to allow patients and site visitors to "opt in" to personalized informational programs. For example, a visitor can be asked, "Would you like to receive a complimentary weekly newsletter on this subject?" Or, "Would you like to receive news articles about new research in this area?"
- Offer people the opportunity to communicate and share public service oriented healthcare messages that include your company's name as the source. One of the most popular types of e-mail that circulates among women is one that has instructions on how they can protect themselves against male predators and attackers. Another widely circulated e-mail contains instructions about what to do if you suffer a heart attack while alone, at the wheel of a car or in a situation where you cannot get to a hospital immediately. The popularity of these types of e-mails illustrate the willingness of people to share valuable information that will help protect the health or safety of their friends and family.
- Offer other websites the opportunity to post health information that you have created on their sites, with a link back to your site. Similarly, allow viewers to your site the capability of forwarding information from your site directly to others.

These are a few of the ways in which the emerging field of viral marketing may apply to healthcare. For future columns, we would like to hear your ideas and/or your examples of how you have used viral marketing for your companies and institutions. Please forward your thoughts to joy@joyscott.com.

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