



Why pass on viral messages? Because they connect emotionally[☆]

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KEYWORDS

Viral marketing;
E-Commerce;
Marketing
communications;
Consumer emotions

Abstract In this article, we identify that successful viral marketing campaigns trigger an emotional response in recipients. Working under this premise, we examine the effects of viral messages containing the six primary emotions (surprise, joy, sadness, anger, fear, and disgust) on recipients' emotional responses to viral marketing campaigns and subsequent forwarding behavior. According to our findings, in order to be effective, viral messages need to contain the element of surprise. By itself, however, surprise is not enough to guarantee message success; therefore, it must be combined with other emotions. The effectiveness of the viral message is also moderated by gender, with disgust-based and fear-based campaigns being more likely to be forwarded by male recipients than female recipients. To ensure forwarding behavior, the message must capture the imagination of the recipient, as well as be clearly targeted. Moreover, achieving fit between a campaign and the featured emotions is important, as this ensures an increased chance of forwarding. In addition to relaying these and other findings, we share and discuss the managerial implications of using different emotions in viral marketing campaigns. Finally, culture is recognized as an influencer.

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1. Viral messages: Do we really know how they work?

Viral marketing has been described as “the process of getting customers to pass along a company's marketing message to friends, family, and colleagues” (Laudon & Traver, 2001, p. 381). Like a virus, information about the company and its brand message, goods, or services is spread to potential buyers, who then pass the information along to

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other potential buyers such that a huge network is created rapidly (Dobele, Toleman, & Beverland, 2005; Lindgreen & Vanhamme, 2005). Viral marketing has gained tremendous popularity with the introduction of electronic media, as these outlets dramatically facilitate interconnections between companies and potential buyers (De Bruyn & Lilien, 2004; Gruen, Osmonbekov, & Czaplewski, 2006). Recognizing this opportunity, several world-class companies and brands have jumped on the viral marketing bandwagon, including Budweiser, De Beers, eBay, Jose Cuervo Tequila, Kellogg's, Levi's, Nestlé, Procter and Gamble, Scope Mouthwash, and Virgin Cinemas.

When executed effectively, viral marketing campaigns can create an instantaneous buzz in the promotion and distribution of companies' brands and products. This was the case with *The Blair Witch Project*. Artisan Entertainment, the maker of the film, created much interest in the movie by giving it the air of a documentary and by supporting it with a well-developed and elaborate Internet site. Even before the film debuted in theaters, people were talking about *The Blair Witch Project*, and friends were referring friends to the website (Bernard & Jallat, 2001). Although the budget for the movie's release was just \$2.5 million (US), *The Blair Witch Project* grossed \$245 million in worldwide box office sales.

Despite the fact that viral marketing can be a successful means of marketing communication, there is still only a limited understanding of how it works (Boroff, 2000; Brodin, 2000; Diorio, 2001; Helm, 2000). This notion is supported by De Bruyn and Lilien (2004), who posit that "it is difficult to... explain why and how [viral marketing] works" (p. 4). What we *do* know is that viral marketing campaigns can result in peer-to-peer recommendations, thereby increasing the credibility of the message. Viral marketing can drive sales, reduce marketing costs, and reach media-jaded consumer segments such as Generation X and Generation Y. It may involve people who know each other (e.g., the 'Refer-a-Friend' program of Half.com) and those who do not (e.g., Epinions.com and ConsumerReports.org, which provide forums for consumers to post objective product reviews for the benefit of others). It is vital that companies choose carefully which consumers should first pass on the viral marketing message, as the creation of viral networks depends upon these people (Helm, 2000; Bannan, 2000).

For viral marketing to work, there must be something uniquely powerful about the message, something that encourages would-be advocates to pass it on. For example, in the case of Viagra, the

message captures the imagination and highlights a completely new product that lends itself to referrals. However, if the goal of viral marketing is to use peer-to-peer communications in order to spread information about a brand or idea, what really drives consumers to pass the message on? Viral marketing messages face several challenges because spamming is frowned upon in the online world and nobody likes to feel used (Dobele et al., 2005). Essentially, peer-to-peer electronic messages face the same 'clutter and noise' problems that afflict traditional advertisers. What, then, can companies do?

We argue that emotions, and in particular the phenomenon of social sharing of emotions, offer a solution to this problem. To illustrate, we consider the impact of the six primary emotions on message forwarding in nine chosen viral marketing campaigns. Also, we examine gender as a moderator on the relationship between emotions and forwarding behavior. We identify that the success of a viral message is dependent upon it capturing the imagination of the recipient, as well as it being cleverly targeted. Our study's findings are summarized in six points that must be considered in designing successful viral marketing campaigns.

2. It's all about emotions: Why are they important?

In this article, we argue that viral marketing messages must build an emotional connection between the campaign and the recipient in order to ensure that the virus gets spread. Why emotions? By interviewing three leading spokespersons of electronic marketing businesses (Yankee Group, Giga Information Group, and Aberdeen), Hirsh (2001) discovered that viral marketing campaigns should be either intriguing, passionate, fun, unique, or create interest (e.g., incorporating interactive games). As articulated by Masland (2001), "If the content of the e-mail is funny, interesting or emotional enough to have an impact, the recipients often forward it – viral message and all – to friends and family" (p. 3). According to research conducted by Clark McKay and Walpole Interactive (an interactive sales promotion agency), the highest response rates can be found in messages that contain violence, pornography, or irreverent humor (Witthaus, 2002). The 'Are you Type 1' campaign developed for the Levi's brand used creation of curiosity among consumers as the main driver of the movement. To pique people's interest, recipients were asked "Are you Type 1?" and were then encouraged to ask themselves if they could be the person Levi's was looking for. Table 1 provides an

overview of different emotions that have previously been suggested in the literature as driving viral marketing campaigns.

We argue that emotions work in viral marketing because they are related to the phenomenon of social sharing of emotions, which is defined by [Rimé, Philippot, Boca, and Mesquita \(1992\)](#) as “a phenomenon involving (1) the evocation of the emotion in a socially shared language and (2) at least at the symbolic level at some addressee” (p. 228). People, who experience everyday life emotions, initiate communication processes during which they share parts of their private experiences with social partners. Only about 10% of emotional experiences are kept secret and never socially shared with anyone ([Rimé et al., 1992](#)). There is also evidence that the more disruptive the event, the sooner and more frequently it is shared. Social

sharing of emotions is also positively related to the intensity of the emotions ([Rimé, Finkenauer, Luminet, Zech, & Philippot, 1998](#)).

In particular, we examine the use and impact of emotions on consumers' decisions to pass on viral marketing messages. To our knowledge, previous research has not investigated this issue. We contend that emotions are key in driving viral marketing campaigns. For example, it has been shown that emotional responses account for a large part (about 30%) of the explained variance of referral behavior ([Maute & Dubé, 1999](#)). Consider the emotion of surprise. It has been noted that companies “need to move beyond mere satisfaction to customer delight” ([Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1996](#), p. 229), and that the features that have “the capacity to delight are those that are...surprisingly pleasant” ([Rust & Oliver, 2000](#), p. 87). The emotion of surprise

Table 1 Different emotions behind viral marketing

Mechanism(s)	Source and explanation	Mechanism(s)	Source and explanation
Entertainment, amusement, irritation	<i>Splash of Paint</i> : People are directed to the company's Internet site by entertaining, amusing, and/or irritating them.	Coolness, fun; unique offer	<i>Virgin Atlantic</i> : Customers pass on the message when they think it is cool or fun, or if the offer is second to none.
Fun, quirk, amusement; specific and relevant to the person	<i>Claritas</i> : Viral marketing campaigns should be funny, quirky, or amusing, or something that is very specific and relevant to the individual customer.	Violence, pornography, irreverent humor	<i>Clark McKay and Walpole Interactive</i> : The messages drawing highest response rates are those that have elements of violence, pornography, or irreverent humor.
Fun, humor, excitement (jokes, games)	<i>Fabulous Bakin' Boys</i> : Its website supports the muffin products with flash animation sites, fun, jokes, as well as games that people can download and forward to their friends.	Comic strips, video clips	Comic strips and video clips grab the attention of people, who then forward the content to their friends.
Emotional elements	Internet strategies must have high levels of emotional content including interactivity, the ability to involve other people, chat rooms, and the creation of online community.	Contests and humor; important advice	Contests and humor are important elements in successful campaigns, which can also be successful if they have important advice for customers.
Nature of the industry; online tenure of the audience; topic	<i>Sage Marketing and Consulting Inc.</i> : The success of viral marketing is dependent upon (1) the nature of the industry that the company is in; (2) the online tenure of the audience; and (3) the topic. People are more likely to pass on information about products like entertainment, music, Internet, and software.	Controversy	A company gains publicity when the media writes about controversy on its website, and competitors will have to deal with the company. But such word-of-mouth marketing can be dangerous because dissatisfied customers are more likely to share their negative experiences than satisfied customers.
False, deliberately deceptive information; popularly believed narrative, typically false; anecdotal claims; junk	So-called 'urban legends and folklore' can be organized as (1) false, deliberately deceptive information; (2) popularly believed narrative, typically false; (3) anecdotal claims, which may be true, false, or in between; and (4) junk. Such stories are frequently forwarded to friends, family, and colleagues.	Fun, intrigue, value; offer of financial incentives; need to create network externalities	People pass on messages if they find the product benefits to be fun, intriguing, or valuable for others; if they are given financial incentives for doing so; or if they feel a need to create network externalities.

Source: [Lindgreen and Vanhamme \(2005, p. 126\)](#).

has a strong influence on referral behavior (Derbaix & Vanhamme, 2003). Surprise is, however, only one of the six primary emotions, the other five being fear, sadness, joy, disgust, and anger (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996; Plutchik, 1980).

We contribute to the literature by examining the use of these six primary emotions in viral marketing

campaigns. By looking from the recipient's viewpoint at the decision to pass on messages, our findings build on a previous study that examined tactical strategies associated with successful viral marketing campaign execution (see Dobele et al., 2005). We also build on a previous study that explored what made consumers judge a viral marketing campaign

Table 2 Summary of the nine viral marketing campaigns studied

Name of campaign	Sponsor	Aim	Message
Amazon: Weapons of Mass Destruction	Blueyonder (an Internet service provider) developed a viral marketing campaign for Amazon.co.uk	Promote the company	Type in the campaign name and an error page results in jokes about the US government and a fake blueprint for invading the country of choice. The fake error page provided three links to different pages, two of which lead to an opportunity to buy a book called Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld at Amazon.co.uk with a discount of 20% and Amazon shirts. Online version of Christmas card played as a short movie.
e-Tractions – Christmas Cards	IT company	Promote the company; impress clients with the IT capabilities of the company and encourage referral activities from these clients	
Dr Pepper/Seven Up: Raging Cow	The soft-drink producer Dr Pepper/Seven Up created a new milk based beverage called Raging Cow	Promote a new product	By using six children (bloggers), the site tried to get the product noticed by the correct target group that would then encourage parents and guardians to purchase this product.
Honda Accord	Honda	Promote a new product	Two minute movie showing all the components found in the Honda Accord, dismantled and put together into a specific sequence creating a slow moving wave of actions that fall into place like a domino game.
Motorola V70	Motorola	Promote a new product; enlargement of current database	E-mail newsletter sent to current customers listed on the company's database. Tracking of all forwarded e-mails generated the larger list. Rewards offered to clients who forwarded the information.
World Relief, the Salvation Army, UNICEF, and the International Federation of Red Cross	Several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)	Increase awareness of plights of others; seeking donations both financial and resource	A viral marketing campaign provided an informative newsletter and encouraged viewers to pass it on to friends and family through 'tell-a-friend' buttons. The website also asked for donations of money or other aid (e.g., old clothes, blankets, or physical assistance).
Organization of Women's Freedom BNN: Save BNN	Organization of Women's Freedom Dutch public broadcasting agency seeking to keep license	Increase awareness of plights of others; freedom for Iraqi women Save Company; required: membership > 150,000; public support for company to put pressure on government	Online petition posted on December 30, 2003. Encouragement of people to e-mail parliament and register support.
Rock the Vote	Founded in 1990; non-profit	Encourage young Americans to become involved in political issues and register to vote	Shocking images about issues such as abortion, gun control, and capital punishment encapsulated in an interactive quiz. The images and text used in the quiz made the youth aware of the problems and enabled them to empathize with those affected.

as especially successful (see Lindgreen & Vanhamme, 2005).

3. The method

We selected nine viral marketing campaigns to study, details of which are provided in Table 2. From a list of numerous potential candidates, these nine campaigns were chosen on the basis of two main criteria: being global and being successful. A convenience sample was used for individual selection. Success was judged from the initiator's perspective through increased turnover, sales, or brand development, or in terms of how far the message spread. However, the final selection of campaigns could not be a completely random process due to the size of the topic. For example, a Google search of the term *viral marketing* generated 680,000 hits, far too many for an exploratory search of the relationship between emotion and forwarding behavior. As such, it was necessary to develop an alternative approach to campaign selection. Individual campaigns were identified on the basis of a convenience sample of campaigns that had been seen recently by friends, family, and work colleagues. This approach resulted in a long list, which was then shortened to nine campaigns that were judged to be both global and successful. In summary, two of the nine campaigns selected sought to promote the company (Amazon and e-Tractions), four sought to promote new products (Dr Pepper/Seven Up, Honda, Motorola, and Rock the Vote), two sought to increase awareness (Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs] and Organization of Women's Freedom), and one sought to save the company (Save BNN).

Twenty consumers accepted our invitation to participate in a survey and a subsequent in-depth interview, the purpose of which was to investigate how consumers responded emotionally to each of the nine selected viral marketing campaigns. A summary of emotional responses to each campaign is given in Table 3.

More specifically, the extent to which respondents experienced one or more of the six primary emotions was investigated in the following way. Respondents were asked to evaluate the level to which each of the six emotions was experienced (1=no such feeling; 5=very much this feeling). Surprise would be determined through three items that related to the experience of surprise, amazement, and astonishment. The higher respondents evaluated their experiences of these three items, the more the respondents had felt the emotion of surprise. In a similar fashion, each of the other five primary emotions would be determined using respondents' felt experiences of three different items (see Izard, 1977). These items included feeling:

- joyful, delighted, and happy (emotion of joy);
- distressed, sad, and downhearted (emotion of sadness);
- discouraged, mad, and enraged (emotion of anger);
- afraid, scared, and fearful (emotion of fear); and
- disgusted, distaste, and revolted (emotion of disgust).

To decrease the likelihood of bias, the 18 items appeared in a randomized sequence in the survey. In all, 180 evaluations were generated from surveying 20 consumers (nine campaigns evaluated by 20 consumers, indicating the extent to which they felt six emotions that were determined by using three different items). To illustrate, a summary of consumers' felt emotions for the Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign is listed in Table 4. For additional information on the number of respondents, we refer to Appendix A.

4. Impact of the six primary emotions on message forwarding

4.1. Surprise-based campaigns

In our study, surprise was the dominant emotion identified by the consumers across each campaign.

Table 3 Emotions elicited in the different viral marketing campaigns

Viral marketing campaign	Surprise	Joy	Sadness	Anger	Disgust	Fear
Weapons of Mass Destruction	✓		✓	✓		
Christmas Cards	✓	✓				
Raging Cow	✓		✓			
Honda Accord	✓	✓				
Motorola V70	✓	✓				
Red Cross	✓		✓			
Organization of Women's Freedom	✓				✓	✓
Save BNN	✓		✓	✓		
Rock the Vote	✓	✓				

Table 4 Proportional reduction in loss (PRL) reliability measure for the Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign

Scale value	Emotion ^a																				Gender						
	Surprise				Joy				Sadness				Anger				Fear					Disgust					
	Surprise	Amazement	Astonishment	Joyful	Delighted	Happy	Distress	Sad	Downhearted	Discouraged	Mad	Enraged	Afraid	Scared	Fearful	Disgusted	Distaste	Revulsion									
1	3	3	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male	
2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
3	3	3	2	3	2	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
4	4	3	4	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	Male
5	4	4	3	2	2	2	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	Female
6	4	4	4	2	1	3	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	4	2	Female
7	3	2	2	4	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
8	4	4	3	3	1	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
9	4	4	2	3	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
10	4	3	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
11	4	3	3	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	Female
12	4	2	2	4	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
13	3	2	3	4	2	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Female
14	4	3	3	3	4	3	4	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Female
15	4	4	1	4	1	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	Male
16	4	1	1	4	2	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
17	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Male
18	5	4	5	2	2	4	3	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	Female
19	5	5	4	3	2	4	2	2	3	3	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	3	3	4	3	4	1	2	2	Male
20	5	4	3	2	2	2	1	2	3	3	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	2	3	2	5	4	3	Female
Frequencies	2	3	2	3	9	4	16	16	16	16	17	16	17	16	17	16	17	16	17	16	13	15	15	15	15	15	
1	3	3	5	5	8	6	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	4	4	4	4	4		
2	4	7	9	6	2	5	1	4	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	1		
3	11	6	3	6	1	5																					
4	3	1	1																								
5	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	20	
# agreements	65	42	50	43	65	41	123	126	122	123	137	121	137	121	137	121	137	121	137	154	85	111	111	111	111	Σ 1803	
# maximum agreements	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	190	Σ 3420

^aThe felt experience of emotions are measured using 5-point Likert scales (1 = 'no such feeling'; 5 = 'very much this feeling').

The emotion of surprise is generated when something is unexpected or misexpected, with surprise resulting in responses of amazement and astonishment (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). For example, Amazon's Weapons of Mass Destruction viral marketing campaign masterfully employed the emotion of surprise. As one study respondent commented, "When the page opened, I thought I had made a mistake and got something of a virus on my PC." Developed for Amazon by Blueyonder, an Internet service provider, the Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign sought to increase customer awareness of Amazon's many services. An e-mail was sent out instructing message recipients to type the term *Weapons of Mass Destruction* into the Google search bar, and to then click on the 'I'm Feeling Lucky' button. (This button directs searchers to the highest-ranked link page, the top paid-search position which can be bought by owners of websites.) The resulting search led to a Weapons of Mass Destruction error page developed for Amazon, which indicated that the weapons of mass destruction could not be found, and provided satirical jokes about how the U.S. government was incorrect about the existence of such weapons in Iraq. The page offered a fake blueprint for invading a country supposedly having the capability of mass destruction. The fake error page also provided three links to different pages, two of which led to an Amazon.co.uk offer for a 20% discount on a book called *Pieces of Intelligence: The Existential Poetry of Donald H. Rumsfeld*. The other link on the page led to an Amazon.co.uk offering of t-shirts bearing anti-Iraq War slogans. The Weapons of Mass Destruction viral marketing campaign proved successful for Amazon. Of people who visited the fake error page, 30% clicked on the links to Amazon's home page, well above the average banner click-through rate of 4.7% (Gatarski, 2002).

In the nine viral marketing campaigns that were studied, the emotion of surprise was always expressed in combination with at least one of the other five primary emotions. This corroborates a previous finding that surprise is often accompanied by other primary emotions (Charlesworth, 1969).

4.2. Joy-based campaigns

Campaigns that gave rise to the emotion of joy resulted in happiness and delight. Joy has been linked to helpfulness and cooperation, desire, and liking (Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). As indicated by our research, consumers felt joy after viewing the Weapons of Mass Destruction, Raging Cow, Honda Accord, and Motorola V70 campaigns. Each of these used different tactics to elicit the emotion; for

example, Raging cow exploited humor, Honda Accord employed idealism, and Motorola V70 utilized financial incentives to elicit joy. Next, we consider in more detail the Raging Cow campaign.

In March 2003, PepsiCo introduced a new milk drink offering called Raging Cow. In order to promote the five flavors available, the company developed and launched a viral marketing campaign aimed at children, whom they hoped would ask their parents to purchase the product. Upon opening the Raging Cow website, an introductory scene was presented in which a funny-looking cartoon cow ran amok, pitchfork in hoof. It crashed into five different-flavored bottles of the milk product, mooing loudly. This sequence over, the main menu opened and featured the animated cow highlighting the items (fruits, chocolate, coffee) used for flavoring the milk products. Further into the website, consumers had the option of viewing the Raging Cow's diary, in which bloggers posted entries. Interaction with the site was possible through a quiz that determined which flavor best suited the consumer's individual needs. Finally, a linked page indicated locations the Raging Cow promotion team was scheduled to visit. At the height of the Raging Cow phenomenon, a Google search of the term produced approximately 42,000 hits in numerous languages.

Campaigns based around surprise and joy can have a big impact. For example, to promote its new Accord model, Honda created a two-minute promotional film entitled *Cog*. Designed to bring viewers in touch with the feeling of fun associated with the website and the new vehicle, the mini-movie utilized the element of surprise. As part of the film, consumers saw a dismantled Accord, after which a process was set in motion that eventually led to a fully operational Accord. Consumers felt even more surprised when a flag popped up and a voice said, "Isn't it nice when things just work?" This particular viral marketing campaign started with 500 e-mails (including the movie attachment) sent to employees of Honda and its agencies. Within one week, the website was visited by 2779 users. After three weeks, that number had increased to 35,000. Half-way through 2003, three years after the campaign's launch, as many as 4.5 million people had seen the short film.

4.3. Sadness-based campaigns

The emotion of sadness results in feelings of distress or being downhearted (Ekman & Friesen, 1975), and can be used to encourage support or sympathy for a campaign. Through use of viral marketing techniques, the International Federation of Red Cross

campaign (which also involved other NGOs such as World Relief, the Salvation Army, and UNICEF) sought to encourage donations for victims of natural disasters. For example, the campaign designed to aid Iranian earthquake victims in 2003 provided news stories about the death toll and the victims' plights, highlighting living conditions and hardships faced. Further, it supplied an informative newsletter, and encouraged viewers to spread the word via a 'Tell-a-Friend' button. The website also asked for donations of money or other aid (e.g., old clothes, blankets, physical assistance).

Sadness is useful in garnering support for victims of natural disasters and 'Acts of God,' for which no person or organization can be blamed. If a person or organization could be held responsible for a catastrophe, anger would be more of a motivating emotion than sadness (Stearns, 1993). One important social function of sadness is that it may lead the sad individual to make emotional and practical demands on others, thereby strengthening social bonds that lead to altruism on the behalf of others (Izard, 1977). As such, sadness can be used effectively to encourage support for the viral marketing campaigns of charitable organizations.

4.4. Anger-based campaigns

As mentioned, people feel angry when someone can be identified as being the cause of an injustice; moreover, the emotion can be employed when people believe they can accomplish a particular goal by expressing anger (Power & Dalglish, 1997). Anger can be used by NGOs or pressure groups to encourage support for a cause, particularly when the victim's plight is due to the actions of others. For example, on December 30, 2003, the Organization of Women's Freedom posted a petition on their website alerting people to the plight of women's rights activists in Kurdish-controlled Northern Iraq (Kurdish authorities had threatened to shut down their offices). To show solidarity, the petition called for letters of protest to be sent to the Organization of Women's Freedom, and encouraged supporters to forward the message to friends and family. Additionally, it requested that people e-mail standard texts to their political party, indicating anger toward the situation in Northern Iraq. By listing examples of injustices suffered by some Iraqi women, the Organization of Women's Freedom hoped to gain backing for their cause. Our respondents remarked that the situation of Kurdish women appeared so different to the situation of women in Western Europe that they almost could not comprehend it, and that they got angry that this was happening in the 21st century.

Another example of the use of anger in viral marketing campaigns involves the Dutch public broadcasting agency BNN. The Dutch minority government promised that BNN could keep its license if it had more than 150,000 members. Unfortunately for BNN, another parliamentary group had the right of veto over the decision, so BNN sought support from the general public, asking them to take action. The BNN website offered the facility of e-mailing parliament and forwarding the e-mail to four friends through a viral campaign (Save BNN). Consumers explained that they felt angry "against the government," and expressed the belief that "the government needs to keep its promises." Through these efforts, BNN reached 224,000 members. Speaking to the overall success rate of this campaign, in one month, 123,795 people used the mailing service to tell the government to keep BNN. As a result, BNN was granted its license.

4.5. Fear-based campaigns

Fear is an emotion that can encourage action, especially when it results in outrage. When a scary situation occurs, or when pain, danger, or a threat is anticipated, people feel fear (Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Oatley & Jenkins, 1996). Founded in 1990 and designed to encourage young Americans to register to vote and become more involved in political issues, the Rock the Vote organization employed the emotion of fear to help spread its message. This non-profit developed and launched a viral marketing campaign that utilized startling and graphic images to portray such issues as rape, abortion, gun control, and capital punishment, subjects which dominated an interactive quiz. The images and text used in the quiz attempted to shock disinterested youth. When active, the campaign was viewed approximately 22 million times and generated a click-through rate of 35%. As testament to its societal impact, the campaign also had some role in ensuring the highest voter turnout in years for the 2004 U.S. election. The consumers found that fear may be particularly useful for encouraging forwarding when it is used in campaigns that highlight issues that are known to be of relevance among peers. Furthermore, it is of benefit when attempting to gain short-term support for a cause (such as during a political campaign), although it may be less useful for encouraging long-term support. Regarding the Rock the Vote campaign (Fig. 1), respondents remarked that the message made them afraid because of "the high numbers of rape and abuse," and that they would definitely forward the message "because everybody should know this...[so] that they can do something against it."



Figure 1 Rock the Vote campaign. Source: Rock the Vote (www.rockthevote.com).

4.6. Disgust-based campaigns

Disgust, or bad taste, has a very short duration and is relatively low in felt intensity (Scherer & Wallbott, 1994). People feel disgusted when something is harming their soul, or when something threatens to do so (Ekman & Friesen, 1975). An example of the use of disgust in viral marketing is the 2001 Christmas Card campaign carried out by e-Tractions, an IT company. Via this campaign, e-Tractions encouraged and facilitated the sending of electronic Christmas cards, as opposed to traditional ones. The goal behind this effort was to impress clients with the company's IT capabilities, and encourage them to forward the cards and associated company information to potential clients. The e-Christmas card depicted a snow globe that featured a house and an outdoor Christmas tree. As the animated scene played, snow fell inside the snow globe, and characters skied, snowboarded, shoveled snow, and made a snowman. As the action ensued, the snowman 'ate' one of the characters and then exploded, prompting more snowfall within the globe. Although the campaign failed in its first year, as clients could not see the link between exploding cartoon characters and an IT company, it did become all the rage in years to follow. At the peak of its popularity, the e-card was viewed by over 200,000 people during a six-week period; on the six busiest days, the number of visitors averaged 26,000 daily. Most astonishing of all, the link to the page had been removed from the e-Tractions website after the failure of the campaign in 2001. Amazingly, people were sending the

site address through e-mail, and cutting and pasting it into their web browser's address bar. Logically, the huge number of requests motivated e-Tractions to repost the link on their website.

However, this campaign illustrates that disgust can be used for good or for bad, as it does not appeal to everyone equally, if at all. Some consumers (particularly young males in our sample) find humor in disgusting situations, or when disgust is placed in surreal situations. Others do not react so positively. For example, respondents said of the campaign that "it is not my type of humor, exploding children," and that "parents will not be glad when their children see this campaign." Yet, several respondents could "still see fun in the campaign," not having expected exploding characters in a "surreal setting."

A summary of the six primary emotions (explanation, behavior, physiological response, and other characteristics) is provided in Table 5.

5. Two keys to secure the success of viral messages

Our analysis of the comments made by campaign and viral message recipients suggests that emotions may not be enough to secure action, and thereby achieve success. Through scrutiny of the open-ended responses of interviewees, two main themes emerged. First, the campaigns triggered 'something' in the respondents who forwarded these messages. The messages captured the imagination

Table 5 Emotions behind viral marketing

Emotion	Explanation	Behavior	Physiological response	Other
Surprise	Generated when something (product, service, or attribute) is unexpected or misexpected.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expressions like opened eyes and mouth, and raised eyebrows. • Cessation of on-going activities. • Sudden and involuntary focusing on the surprising product, service, or attribute. • Heightened consciousness of the surprising product, service, or attribute. • Subsequent curiosity/exploratory behavior. • Increase in the ability to retain in memory the surprising product, service, or attribute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changes in heart and respiration rates. • Increase in skin conductivity and neural activation. • Different cortical response wave patterns. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Subjective feeling of surprise. • Spontaneous vocalizations ("Why," "Oh," etc.).
Joy	Expressed when a goal has been achieved, or when movement toward such an achievement has occurred. Also, joy is caused by a rational prospect of owning what we love or desire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expression of joy is the smile. • Happy people are more helpful and cooperative. • Often energetic, active, and bouncy. • Prompts the person to aim for higher goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wanting, hoping, or desiring to have an object when it is not present. • Loving or liking the object when it is already present. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smile is used when people are not happy to mask another emotion.
Sadness	Experienced when not in a state of well-being, which is most often derived from the experience of a fearful event.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No longer wishes for action, but remains motionless and passive, or may occasionally rock to and fro. • Often, focus is turned more toward the self. • Trying to solve the problem at hand. • Refuging from the situation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crying or whimpering. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attention can decrease, but when completely focused on the situation at hand, it can increase.
Anger	Response to personal offense (an injustice); this injustice is in that person's power to settle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attacking the cause of the anger through physical contact and verbal abuse. • Anger is extremely out of control (e.g., rage) and freezing of the body can occur. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raised blood pressure ('blood boils') • Face reddening. • Muscle tensioning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culturally dependent. Northern European people show more muscular reactions, southerners show a bigger increase in blood pressure.
Fear	Experienced when people expect (anticipate) a specific pain, threat, or danger.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A system is activated, bringing the body into a 'state of readiness'. • Escape and avoidance. • Facial expression as 'oblique eyebrows' and resulting 'vertical frown'. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal discomfort (butterflies in the stomach). • Muscle tensioning. • Increased perspiration and heart rate. • Mouth drying out. • Decreased heart rate. • Nausea. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In extreme form, making laughing or giggling sounds.
Disgust	Feeling of aversion that can be felt either when something happens or when something is perceived to be disgusting.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facial expressions like frowning. • Hand gestures, opening of the mouth, spitting, and, in extreme cases, vomiting. • Distancing from the situation, this by an expulsion or removal of an offending stimulus, removal of the self from the situation, or lessening the attention on the subject. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sounds like 'ach' and 'ugh'.

Source: Ekman and Friesen (1975), Izard (1977), Power and Dalglish (1997), Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley (1999), Scherer (1984), Scherer and Wallbott (1994), Scherer, Wallbott, and Summerfield (1986).

of the recipient in such a way as to produce an action: forwarding behavior. Second, the most downloaded campaigns were cleverly targeted. They were sent to cohorts that would be most likely to respond favorably, and subsequently forward the message. Each of these two themes is considered next.

5.1. Viral messages must capture the imagination of the recipient

Our findings identify that the overall success of a campaign, in terms of forwarding behavior, depends on more than just an emotional connection. A campaign must also capture the recipient's

imagination in a unique or unforgettable way. We note that 73% of our respondents said they forward campaigns that entail something more than just a great joke (e.g., important messages, something particularly disgusting). Our respondents also indicated that surprise was effective only when coupled with (at least) a second emotion, such as joy (resulting in delight) or disgust (resulting in humor). For example, the Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign was forwarded because of the funny jokes it contained and the surprise ("I thought something else was going to happen"). Raging Cow was forwarded because of the surprising ending, coupled with the use of humor ("I was surprised they would use such a crazy looking cow to promote their product"; "I thought of it as finally, something different, with the sound and everything"). The Honda Accord viral marketing campaign was thought to be "inventive," "original," "unique," "well thought out," and "nicely made," with a very novel idea behind the advertising message. The e-Tractions Christmas card received particular attention and was forwarded because of its "malicious delight" and "gross humor." While the campaign was deemed less funny the more times it was viewed, it was still forwarded to others.

5.2. Viral messages must be cleverly targeted

A well-targeted viral marketing campaign can generate positive response toward the message it conveys and promote subsequent forwarding behavior from recipients; in fact, 44% of our respondents indicated they would send on a campaign that was well targeted. Of the nine campaigns we studied, those deemed to fit this description included Rock the Vote ("good reason to vote," "everybody should know about the information provided," "it is relevant to everyone") and Save BNN ("BNN makes nice programs, so I was surprised by the fact that they could be removed from the television," "It is a pity that BNN should be removed"). Not all consumers, however, felt the Rock the Vote campaign was successful, believing that the image of a child pointing a gun was "too confronting." For its part, the sympathy and empathy for BNN and the service it provides resulted in forwarding behavior.

In another example of clever targeting, Motorola increased the success of its viral campaign by using a database containing the e-mail addresses of people who previously registered on the company's website. As these individuals had already shown an interest in Motorola's telephones, they comprised the perfect target group (as compared to sending e-mails to random prospects, who may or may not

have been interested in the product). In a period of just two weeks, the campaign grew the original database by 400%. On average, 75% of the recipients referred at least one friend, and 40% clicked on the link to visit Motorola's website to investigate further their V70 model.

6. Six things to remember for achieving fit between emotions and viral messages

Our analysis of the nine viral marketing campaigns leads to the important managerial implication that marketers must achieve fit between a key emotion and their brand or viral marketing campaign because this will ensure increased chance of forwarding. Keeping in mind that all campaigns must achieve an element of surprise, suggested fit is covered in the six points below.

- (1) Viral marketing campaigns that use joy are best suited to irreverent or fun brands (e.g., Virgin, Apple, Chick-Fil-A), or efforts that seek to encourage interest in a mature category (e.g., Amazon's Weapons of Mass Destruction, Ford's Evil Car, the Australian Meat Board's Eat Lamb initiative). Joy-based campaigns are also well matched to brands that seek to revitalize their image (e.g., Honda). Brands that target younger customers may also benefit from using joy. In contrast, more serious brands or issues would be ill served by campaigns that centered around the emotion of joy.
- (2) Viral marketing campaigns that utilize sadness are best suited to social marketers who seek an immediate response to disasters, particularly Acts of God. In such situations, timing is critical. Consumers reacting to campaigns dominated by sadness were likely to show a short-term commitment to the brand or campaign, rather than become encouraged to engage in long-term change. For example, campaigns seeking child sponsorship in less developed countries were viewed as less successful when relying solely on sadness. Instead, these campaigns were often dominated by images of hope and messages that small contributions would make a big difference. Marketers must be careful to ensure that campaigns based around sadness encourage benevolence rather than guilt.
- (3) Viral marketing campaigns that employ anger are best suited to single issue crusades that seek an immediate reaction to injustice. For example, the Save BNN campaign sought public

support against a perceived unjust act of the Dutch parliament. Similarly, anger-based campaigns may be launched by social marketers in reaction to threats against wilderness preservation, threats from governments (including forthcoming acts), and perceived injustices perpetrated by corporations. Brands that face competitive threats, whether they wish to mobilize support for their cause or secure governmental action limiting a competitor's effort (e.g., Wal-Mart opening a new store in a local area), may also benefit from anger campaigns. As anger is a fleeting emotion, it is ill suited to campaigns that require longer-term action (e.g., climate change). Further, it does not serve initiatives that involve complex or subtle issues, as these do not typically elicit an angry response from many people. Optimally, anger is best utilized in situations in which people are being cheated, as the emotion then takes on something of a protective role.

- (4) Viral marketing campaigns that center on fear must be used very carefully and sparingly. As evidence of this, consider that the Rock the Vote initiative received the most mixed response of all the campaigns analyzed in our study. Fear is also a short-term response to a perceived threat. Therefore, campaigns that seek to change behaviors such as drunken driving, drug usage, risky sexual practices, or speeding may be best suited to fear when the emotion is combined with either a solution (e.g., designated drivers, using condoms), a punishment (e.g., speeding fines), or links to further information for concerned recipients.
- (5) Viral marketing campaigns built on foundations of disgust or bad taste are most effectively targeted toward young males, rebel-style brands (e.g., Australia's Maverick Channel Seven), or cultures that generally find disgusting events humorous (e.g., Japan, Germany, the Pacific Islands). Disgust-based campaigns, in particular, must walk a fine line of acceptability and provide a humorous and surprising message at just the right time. Brands should use disgust campaigns only intermittently, for example during major events such as the Super Bowl or during the Christmas season, and target them carefully to avoid unnecessary offense. Interestingly, we note that gender has a moderating influence on forwarding behavior, especially as regards the emotions of fear and disgust/bad taste. As indicated by our study, male recipients of viral marketing messages

are more likely (63% male to 37% female) to pass on those messages than are female recipients. Men are also more likely to pass on messages involving humor, particularly disgusting humor, than are women. In addition, we found the emotional responses of fear felt by female respondents were stronger than those felt by the male respondents. For example, when responding to a campaign featuring a fear element, female respondents used all three fear-related terms: afraid, scared, and fearful. Male respondents were less likely to use all three terms. When, indeed, female study participants felt fear in response to a viral marketing campaign, they were more likely to forward the message to other women, this in attempt to alert them to the perceived danger or potentially scary situation.

- (6) Finally, culture's influence on viral marketing campaigns will need to be taken into account. For example, in contrast to bricks-and-mortar businesses, online companies are not confined to a single country with a well-defined culture. Studies have identified cultural background in this context as a key managerial consideration (Singh, Zhao, & Hu, 2005). In our study, in a similar fashion, whilst respondents think of sadness as being an unwanted emotion, people in several Asian countries regard feeling sadness as a step along the road to salvation (Izard, 1991). It is likely that incongruities also exist in how people from different cultures experience the other five primary emotions. The global nature of viral marketing means the issue of culture must be addressed prior to the launch of a new campaign. Just as online technologies facilitate the spreading of viral messages, they also make it much easier for recipients to complain to others about a campaign they find offensive. While no easy feat, viral marketing must walk a fine line between innovative advertising and offensive attention seeking. This delicate balancing act is crucial to campaign success.

7. Conclusions

In today's increasingly competitive business environment, viral marketing is only an effective marketing tool so long as it encourages consumers to take action as a result of the message (i.e., consume the brand, product, or service advertised) and pass along that message to other prospects. Therefore, the goal of viral marketing is twofold: consumption and forwarding behavior. This article contributes to

the literature by considering nine viral campaigns and the success or failure of each on forwarding behavior. Our findings highlight that successful viral campaigns link emotion to the message (to encourage the recipient to respond to that message); however, the use of emotions may not be enough. Companies must ensure that their message captures the imagination of the recipient (in order to differentiate it from all the other messages the recipient is exposed to on a daily basis). Also, companies must consider targeting cleverly. Sending a message to a cohort that is receptive to a brand, product, or service offers a better chance of success than simply e-mailing to the world at large.

While some authors have attempted to categorize the types of people who offer referrals (e.g., Gladwell, 2000; Higie, Feick, & Price, 1987; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Slama, Natarajan, & Williams, 1992) and to consider the role of gender in referral behavior (e.g., Wiedmann, Walsh, & Mitchell, 2001; Wood, 2005), the literature still does not empirically identify the impact, if any, of gender on referral behavior. Our findings contributed on this important topic by identifying empirically the impact of gender on referral behavior.

We already know that people talk to other people. The Internet and communications technology make this far easier, faster, and less costly than at any other time in history. For practitioners, viral marketing offers a means of communicating marketing messages at low-cost, with a significantly reduced response time and increased potential for market impact. Has your organization learnt this marketing language yet?

Appendix A

Box 1

With regard to the number of respondents, Rust and Cooil (1994) have demonstrated a high probability of good reliability of uniformity between the different respondents when a panel of 20 respondents and 5-point Likert scales are used. If we want an exploratory proportional reduction in loss reliability of 70% (which is generally agreed to be acceptable), then a proportion of interjudge agreement of 0.235 is needed (Rust & Cooil, 1994). The proportion of interjudge agreements is found as the total number of actual interjudge agreements relative to the total number of all possible interjudge agreements. For the Weapons of Mass Destruction campaign, the value of $1803 / 3420 = 0.527$ (which is higher than 0.235)

indicates that we have good reliability of uniformity between the different respondents (Rust & Cooil, 1994). For the other campaigns, the lowest proportion of interjudge agreements was 0.324, while the remaining proportions of interjudge agreements were between 0.477 and 0.765, all above the required 0.235. This means, therefore, that it is possible to make reliable assumptions with regard to how different emotions were felt in each campaign.

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