

How to Make your Marketing Contagious

Businesses can use viral marketing to spread their marketing message. Ideally it works like this: Marketing messages spread like flu, passed by word of mouth or via the Internet from one friend to another three more, until there's a contagious epidemic and products are flying off the shelves. While dot-coms have been ***viral-marketing*** for years, traditional small business owners are starting to use these marketing techniques.

Viral marketing is cheap and powerful, and can actually attract potential customers. One only has to review the well-documented success of free e-mail service Hotmail to discover the power of viral marketing. Hotmail's creators placed a message at the bottom of each e-mail that says, "GET YOUR FREE E-MAIL AT HOTMAIL.COM?" It spread to 11 million users in 18 months--with no other advertising.

There is one basic principle that makes viral marketing successful; businesses must give people an incentive to pass their message on. Here's what the smart companies are giving away to get their word out.

- **DISCOUNTS.** That's what AT&T Wireless San Francisco figured when it sent e-mail to college students. The company offered them a discounted cell phone, a calling plan with many free features, and a \$25 credit on their bill for each referral who signs up with AT&T Wireless (up to a limit of five). Their friends get the same offer.
- **FREE MERCHANDISE.** Refer ten friends to the Website for Procter & Gamble's new Physique shampoo, and you'll get a free, travel-sized styling spray and be entered in a sweepstakes to win a year's supply of the shampoo.
- **THE CACHET OF BEING A TREND SPOTTER.** Part of the appeal of the Internet is all the outrageous stuff out there. When you find something really cool, you want to share it with your friends

Suggestions on how to make viral marketing work for your company:

1. Give people an incentive to pass the message along.
2. Make the message short and sweet. Fancy graphics are nice, but emphasize the message.

3. Limit the number of pass-alongs you reward customers for. You should encourage the person to pass the message to 5 people and not 500. You want to avoid turning this promotion into a spam activity.
4. Reassure people that you won't keep their e-mail addresses without permission. Also, you should have a strong privacy policy that says you will not re-sell the collected information.
5. Promote a valuable product or service. No friend will want to pass along a bogus offer to their friends.