Research on the Risks and Strategies of Using Viral Marketing in the New Media Age
--Take the Film and TV Industry for Example

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Abstract. Viral marketing has become a popular word in marketing as the Internet developed and media format changed, which offered new opportunities for businesses to market their products or services. Although this kind of marketing method is famous for its low cost and high efficiency, it is still risky. The paper does a lot of literature analysis and case studies, finding out there are three main risks of viral marketing: uncontrollable process and results, negative influences due to the difference between the reputation and the quality, and consumers' tiredness to too much repetitive information. The paper recommended optimizing the proportion of different kinds of campaigns, more realistic marketing without excessive exaggeration, and increasing the variety and diversity of viral marketing instead of the quantity of the information. The paper aims to help marketers and company leaders better understand the risks and dangers of using viral marketing inappropriately and develop recommendations to grow viral marketing more safely and effectively.

Keywords: Film and TV Industry; Risks; Strategies; Viral Marketing; New Media Age.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the rapid development of the Internet and the prevalence of digital media, new media centered on the individual has moved from the margins to the mainstream. Social media platforms have become an easy and important way for people to not only get information but also give information and disseminate information. The phenomenon has encouraged marketers to pay more attention to taking advantage of the information dissemination between consumers. The conception of 'viral marketing' was created and has become widely used based on this background. Viral marketing describes a marketing approach that uses tools such as online social media through word-of-mouth propaganda from users so that the message gets replicated quickly and spreads like a virus [1]. It is an effective and low-cost way of marketing since individuals are encouraged to pass on promotional messages spontaneously through peer-to-peer communication, and many of these communications result in the exponential spread of information [2].

1.2 Literature Review

According to Dr. Ralph Wilson, a famous e-business consultant in the United States who is the first person to propose the theory of viral marketing systematically, viral marketing should consist of six fundamental elements: providing valuable products or services, providing an easy way of delivering the information, the scope of information delivery can easily spread from small to large scale, taking advantage of public activism and behavior, using of existing communication networks, and using other people's resources for information dissemination [1]. This theory summarized the characteristics of viral marketing in general. It gave the public some tips about why viral marketing can achieve the goal of spreading the information wider at a lower cost.

Many researchers have proved the effectiveness of viral marketing. Take Matthew Richardson and Pedro Domingos' research, for example, and they built probabilistic models from the data of consumer behaviors and profit results collected from a knowledge-sharing site in order to choose the best viral marketing plan on a firmer footing. Their model found that profits from viral marketing are

significantly higher than from direct marketing and no marketing, the same conclusion as the model from continuous marketing scenarios. To make the conclusion more robust and convictive, they also analyzed estimated and actual differences between viral marketing and direct marketing profits with incomplete network knowledge, resulting in large additional profit by viral marketing compared to the other method [3]. Richardson and Domingos' research shows that the effectiveness of viral marketing is significant and reliable, which encourages more marketers to use this method.

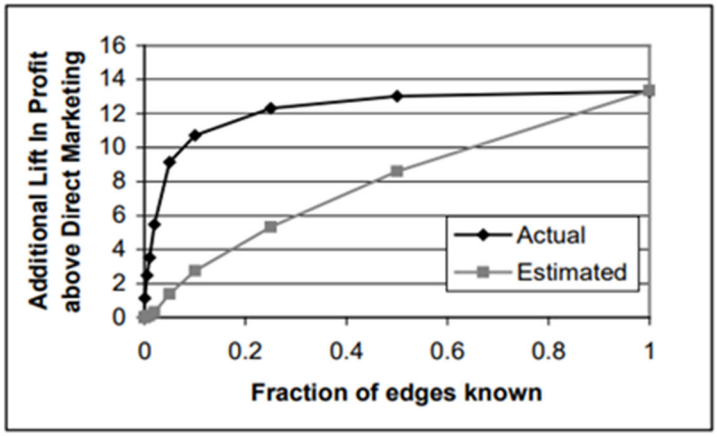


Figure 1. The actual and estimated difference between viral marketing and direct marketing profits with only partial network knowledge (http://www2.denizyuret.com/ref/domingos/www.cs.washington.edu/homes/pedrod/papers/kdd02b.pdf)

Viral marketing is most often used on popular social media platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter. The biggest social media platform in China is Weibo, which has naturally become where viral marketing is most concentrated. Li proposed that as an open platform for users to obtain information and communicate and spread information, Weibo's audience group is highly compatible with the target audience of TV dramas, thus becoming the preferred platform for the viral spread of each movie and TV drama. She pointed out that in the viral marketing process, audiences on Weibo tend to initiate information dissemination and form two-way interactions with information producers through comments and followers rather than being information receivers in the traditional sense. The relationship between the official Weibo account and individual Weibo followers is not like that between a business and a customer but is collaborative. The interaction between individual followers and corporate accounts through hashtags and topics attracts more individual followers, thus forming a huge fan base, like a snowballing process. Compared with large paragraphs of text, viral marketing conveys more information through graphics, emojis, pictures, videos, and comics [4].

1.3 Research Gap

Several researchers are concerned about the importance and effectiveness of viral marketing and discuss its characteristics and ways of delivering the information. In contrast, there is not enough research on the specific risks it may create and the strategies to try to avoid them.

1.4 Research Framework

This study first analyzes the current viral marketing situation in the new media era. It then analyzes the application of viral marketing in the film and television industry, starting from the consumer behavior of the film and television industry. This article will use literature and case studies to analyze and summarize the risks of viral marketing in the film and television industry and propose optimization strategies.

2. Methods

2.1 Literature Analysis

The literature analysis method studies and summarizes the context and main ideas of different kinds of literature and references, analyzing their connections and logic. In this article, we will use literature analysis to examine people's perceptions of viral marketing and their concerns about the risks it may generate. Then, we will combine this with reports and analyses done by previous researchers to propose practical and actionable optimization strategies for these risks.

2.2 Case Study

Case study refers to the research method of studying a specific real-life case to analyze the research topic in a realistic scenario, which consists of the industry environment and actual situation. This method often enables the researchers to give more detailed recommendations and gives the audience a better understanding of the issue. In this study, we will use the case study to determine the potential risks of viral marketing by analyzing an example of the usage of viral marketing in the film and TV industry. To show the realism of the risks and the study's usefulness, make it more understandable for the risk analysis and further strategies.

3. Results

3.1 The Popularity of Viral Marketing in the New Media Age

As mentioned earlier, with the development of the IT industry and changes in people's lifestyles, social media has become an indispensable channel for people to obtain information, so online marketing has taken up an increasingly large part of marketing activities. Viral marketing has been separated from traditional marketing theory and piggybacked on the Internet as if it were a hurricane in the marketing field, with a rapidly expanding influence. As early as the early development of the Internet, viral marketing has emerged in many marketing cases, such as Hotmail, founded in 1996, has achieved great success in marketing through the method of viral marketing. When Hotmail promotes its mailbox service, it sets a link in the email, and everyone who receives Hotmail emails can register free mailbox easily through the link. In this way, every user of Hotmail also becomes a free promoter of it. Through this marketing approach, Hotmail has grown to over 12 million users in just over a year [5-6].

Another successful example of viral marketing using emails is the classic "Pizza Hot", in which Pizza Hut sent an email to some of its customers about the "Pizza Hot". It introduced a little trick for loading a salad buffet, cleverly using carrot sticks, cucumber slices, and pineapple chunks to build a wider bowl rim that could hold up to seven plates of salad at once, along with real photos and notes. Consumers who received the email were so intrigued by the fun and the sense of gaining an extra advantage that they asked their friends to come and try it. This seemingly proactive approach to letting customers take advantage not only didn't decrease Pizza Hut's revenue but also attracted many customers [7].

Not only through email, but viral marketing is also common in other communication or media platforms. On many company websites, the clients can find a reference code on their account page. By giving the reference code to others and encouraging others to sign up on the website, the existing client could get some credits or coupons. Through this method, the company's clients will continuously recommend the website to more people who would also become promoters. This method is also widely used in mobile applications.

3.2 The Marketing Strategy and Consumer Psychology of the Film and TV Industries in the New Media Age

In today's new media era, the influence of radio, newspapers, TV, and other communication ports of information acquisition is declining. In contrast, new media's timeliness, interactivity, and social nature provide new opportunities for marketing in the film and TV industry, with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo becoming key areas for marketing. On various social media platforms, marketers in the film and television industry have begun to promote and market their films and dramas through strategies such as leveraging IP (intellectual property rights), building word-of-mouth, using scenarios, managing fans, and integrating marketing [8].

In the new media marketing of film and television, the fan base effect is an important concept and is often exploited by marketers. Due to the expansion of social network platform audiences, more and more people become fans through Twitter, Weibo, and other media platforms. When the number reaches a certain scale, fan groups are created. By taking advantage of the fanbase effect, film and TV drama promoters can unite fans for marketing and give full play to the effect of idol fanbase, film, and TV fanbase. Song fanbase is a powerful assistant for film and TV drama marketing [8].

In addition, marketers in the film and television industry consider consumer psychology important in their marketing. We will take some effects regarding the consumer psychological factors, for example, usually used in marketing and advertising. The first is the celebrity effect. As public figures known to consumers, celebrities have their specific charisma and influence and receive more attention and love than ordinary people in a wide range. Their words and actions will be discussed and imitated by ordinary people. Celebrities represent a mainstream consumer trend, and consumers will take the initiative to learn about the information and functions of the products out of their love for the celebrities and want to experience the consumption experience of the celebrities. The second is the emotional effect, people always think more of those who have played an important role, and marketers want consumers to feel that their brand is "more important". Hence, they use the consumer's inner emotions to promote their products, such as linking the product to a scene from the consumer's childhood, linking a certain flavor to a specific memory, etc. The third is the repetition effect. According to modern cognitive psychology research, repetition is the most important condition for external information entering people's long-term memory system. Therefore, the most important means to improve consumers' memory effect of advertising information is to repeat it continuously so that consumers can deepen their memory of it. Fourth is the big event effect. The big event refers to the major events that happened in a certain period. Due to the psychology of fear of information blockage and unwillingness to be left behind by the trend, the public will pay more and more attention to big events, and the scope of attention will be more extensive. If marketers can link big events with their brands or products, they can use the public's attention to big events to increase product awareness. Fifth is the anti-thinking effect. People have the psychology of seeking novelty, different "selling point" is sometimes more attractive to consumers' eyes [9]. Advertisers mostly consider these effects, but it is important to take advantage of them in marketing.

3.3 Viral Marketing in the Film and TV Industry

Combined with what has been said above, there is great promise for applying viral marketing in the film and television industry. Viral marketing is not uncommon in the marketing of the film and television industry. For example, the hit Korean drama Descendants of The Sun 2016 used viral marketing on Weibo. The drama's official Weibo account first attracted users to interact with it by posting popular topics and hashtags. Then, to meet the fast-paced reading habits of online users, it broadened the form of information dissemination by using more emoji packs, GIFs, small videos, and comics. This is more acceptable and widespread among young online users to spread the highlights and clips of the drama. Many netizens made expression packs of the characters in the drama in the form of spoofing, saved them on their cell phones, and spread them through other social platforms such as QQ and WeChat, expanding the scope of the drama. Once the publicity of the show has triggered the first wave of audiences' interest in watching the show, more audiences will also become

interested and curious about the show due to the influence of information related to the series and the recommendation of Weibo followers, thus joining the masses who watch the series and discuss the plot. It can be said that the drama Descendants of the Sun could not be such a big hit in the Chinese region without the influence of viral marketing [4].

3.4 The Viral Marketing Risks and Strategies in the Film and TV Industry.

Although viral marketing is regarded as an 'ideal' way of marketing by many marketers, because of the high efficacy and low expenses, there are still risks when applying it. This paper will discuss the potential risks in viral marketing and the strategies to minimize these risks.

4. Discussion

4.1 Risks Analysis

One of the most important risks is that viral marketing is hard to control. The essence of viral communication is to let the users become the communicator to start actively spreading information when the source of information. That is, the "pathogen" is created, and the primarily controlled dissemination is done, the spread of information, that is, the "virus" is out of management, and the result is often beyond the control of the information maker, that is, the marketer. This situation is the most fearful in the viral marketing process, but it is often the case. As a marketing method with a wide range, longer duration, and more arbitrariness, it isn't easy to always get the desired positive effect from viral marketing [7]. This requires more thorough consideration before marketing to prevent undesirable consequences. A classic failure is the "suicide bomb" commercial for the Volkswagen Polo, in which a man in Pakistani attire enters a Polo and drives it to a stop in front of a restaurant full of diners. The man detonates the bomb device, killing only himself. This marketing campaign, which was supposed to promote the "sturdiness" and "safety" of the car, not only failed to have the desired positive effect but also seriously affected the company's image. VW even filed legal action against the producer for the incident. Because of the Internet's special nature, viral marketing's impact is often widespread, regardless of geographic or national boundaries. Sometimes, it can ignore or even anger other customers by reaching them [10]. Likewise, it is very difficult to avoid all the factors in marketing in the film and television industry that might make some people have negative emotions. The uncontrollable nature of viral marketing makes marketers often find that consumers do not catch the 'point' that the marketer wants to spread or catch the wrong 'point', and thus may not only lead to a failure of the marketing but may also have a negative impact on the brand.

The second risk is the fallout due to the quality of the product itself not matching the advertised word-of-mouth. In the process of word-of-mouth, the promotional content can easily be exaggerated or give consumers too much expectation. When consumers use the product and find it does not match their expectations, the huge psychological gap may bring the opposite effect to the marketing. For example, the urban youth comedy "Love Apartments" has accumulated a lot of good word-of-mouth through its first to fourth seasons. As a result, before the release of the 2018 "Love Apartments" movie, the movie promoters also conducted viral word-of-mouth marketing through new media, which led to high expectations for the movie. However, with the movie's release, many audiences thought the content of the movie was poor, leading to a plunge in word of mouth. And people complained online about being duped, and the marketing image of the movie was greatly reduced, leading to a significant decline in the movie's box office [8].

The third risk of concern is consumer resentment due to the proliferation of messages and mechanical repetition. Too much homogeneous information can make consumers feel that the marketing message is too deliberate and even become bored with the message, thus losing interest in spreading the message. For example, in many web series nowadays, in a rush to raise awareness and unable to find new selling points, many marketers repeatedly mention a certain point in the series and mechanically replicate the message on various platforms. Although this may deepen consumers' impressions of the message due to the repetition effect, consumers may become distracted by a large

amount of repeated information or feel that it is "obvious marketing" and develop negative emotions toward the message. Similarly, consumers might put the businesses' emails on the "spam" list and block all messages they send because of the frequent advertising emails, suggesting that an overload of messages may turn consumers that business off and, in turn, lose interest in any messages from the business.

4.2 Strategies Development

Depending on the customer's motivation, there are three types of viral marketing strategies: customer-unmotivated campaigns, customer-motivated campaigns, and campaigns aimed at building customer loyalty. The first type usually refers to customers' unmotivated delivery of corporate messages. Usually, it is an emoji, a classic line from a movie or TV show, etc. The message can be discussed and spread if it is interesting enough. The second type refers to enterprises actively attracting customers to promote information with small benefits. This approach is very common and easier to control than the first type because most of the consumers who spread the information are profit-oriented, which reduces the possibility of negative feedback on the information in the dissemination process because they are too concerned about the content of the information. The third type mainly refers to the development of membership alliances to promote corporate information, although companies will pay for this alliance membership. However, the resulting membership alliance will have stronger loyalty and be more inclined to spread the message in the form the marketer wants. This is, therefore, the most controllable and promising strategy for companies today [11]. Hence it is practical for the business to increase the portion of the second and third types of viral marketing in the marketing strategy so that the process and result of the viral marketing will be more controllable.

In addition, in order to avoid the difference between the marketing information and the actual product to bring consumers a huge psychological gap, marketers in the release and dissemination of information as closely as possible to the reality to avoid excessive exaggeration of the content for the publicity effect. To do this well, marketers should clearly understand the product's advantages and disadvantages, publish more content related to the product's advantages in viral marketing, and minimize or avoid mentioning and modifying the disadvantages of the product. Try to expand the appeal to consumers at the same time to avoid misleading consumers in the promotional message.

If only a single platform and a single strategy are used for viral marketing, certain limitations will be formed in the marketing effect. Microfilms, jingles, posters, cartoons, and other forms can be used to expand the links and contents of marketing. While integrating viral marketing with traditional marketing approaches and increasing the opportunities to be placed on TV, radio, outdoor projection screens, and other media to increase marketing coverage and improve the public's awareness of the product. At the same time, the diversification of forms will also control the risk of accidental "mutation" of the "virus", as far as possible, to ensure that marketers get the same results and the original intention to ensure the actual effect of marketing planning [6]. Marketers in the viral marketing process should also pay attention to the frequency of marketing to avoid fatigue or "reverse psychology" due to too intensive information to consumers, thus resisting the acceptance and dissemination of more information.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Key findings

After analyzing the literature and studying the cases, the paper summarizes the risks that the marketer or the company would take when using viral marketing, which is an uncontrollable process and results in bad effects due to the difference between the reputation and the quality and consumers' tiredness of receiving a mass of repetitive information. The paper presents three viral marketing strategies to help marketers and the company minimize the influence of these risks. These are to improve the proportion of the type of customer-motivated campaigns and campaigns aimed at

building customer loyalty during viral marketing, marketing based on reality and avoiding excessive exaggeration, and increasing the variety and platform of viral marketing as well as avoiding doing the marketing too many times.

5.2 Research Significance

Since viral marketing is getting increasingly popular because of its low cost and high efficiency, many marketers, especially start-ups, take it as the first option in the marketing process. Nevertheless, it is possible to go the opposite way and have bad effects on the brand and the company if the marketers underestimate the risks of it and use incorrect strategies. Bad marketing can easily have a far more significant effect on the company's reputation than a good one. Therefore, marketers and company managers must understand the risks of viral marketing and know the appropriate strategies to minimize and even eliminate these risks. This paper summarizes the risks and recommendations of the viral marketing strategy to the marketers and company managers, aiming to help them with better usage of viral marketing and a higher possibility of achieving successful marketing.

5.3 Limitations

Despite a large number of the literature analyzed and realistic cases studied, the paper still has limitations. There is a lack of primary data usage in the article, and only secondary data could be found. Surveys, questionnaires, and interviews could be used to gain primary data. One thing that should be paid attention to is the scale of the population, the regions, the income levels, the ages, and other factors that should be considered while gaining the primary data to avoid bias in the results.

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