

Viral Marketing in Healthcare

This is the kind of virus you actually want to catch.

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With the recent COVID-19 pandemic, the world was forcefully reminded of the unmitigated power and persistence of a novel virus. Perhaps an effective way to fight such an outbreak is with a different kind of novel virus, one that instead of spreading infection propagates awareness and support. The “good kind of virus” we are referring to is spread through viral marketing tactics. Viral marketing is a strategy that uses network-supported word-of-mouth in digital marketing promotions.¹ In the healthcare sector, it lives up to its name by rapidly spreading information about a cause, practice, service, or medical professional with consumers through their social networks.

In the history of marketing strategy, viral marketing can be considered one of the new kids on the block. Traditional marketing media such as print, television, and radio have become com-

mon and effective tools in promoting healthcare services. However, modern technology now allows for digital marketing as an additional medium, and viral marketing is one such untapped marketing vehicle that is extremely

Viral marketing allows practices to access additional customers and enter new markets, thereby increasing the total number of potential patients who can avail themselves of the practice’s services. Before dis-

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popular in mass markets, highly efficient by nature, placing minimal demands on the organization’s budget. It is viral marketing that allows medical practices to reach out to potential patients who may not otherwise be aware of the practice or its message.

cussing how to put viral marketing to work for the practice, it is necessary to clarify what viral marketing is and how it works.

What Is Viral Marketing?

The term viral marketing was coined by two venture capitalists to describe the rapid growth of an organization as a result of consumers spreading a message through their own word-of-mouth networks.² Their main observation was that viral messages spread organically, with spatial and network locality, very much like biological viruses.³ The metaphor depicting viral

Continued on page 56



Viral Marketing (from page 55)

marketing as a biological virus is largely due to the ideas that: 1) marketers should encourage consumers to disseminate content so as to create the potential for exponential growth;⁴ and 2) the viral content's spread and effect on consumers is an inherently uncontrollable risk.

In a review of the viral marketing literature, Reichstein and Brusch¹ combined several existing conceptualizations of the phenomenon in order to provide a more comprehensive definition: Viral marketing is defined as marketing strategies that permit exponential distribution of content in network-based channels in the shortest time with comparatively little effort and additionally generate measurable added value through the content, which leads to a high cost-benefit effect.

The benefits of viral marketing are of enormous importance

today because of the pervasiveness of virtual social networks through which viral content can be spread. An astonishing 2.94 billion people are estimated to actively use social networks, which represents more than one in three individuals worldwide.⁵ Hence, organizations are advised to consistently attempt to create viral content on social networks in order to improve the perceptions of both current and potential new customers.⁶

Discussion—How Does Viral Marketing Spread?

The traditional method of marketing a healthcare center by describing what the practice does and how it's different from other service providers in the community pales in comparison with the results of viral marketing. Conventional healthcare marketing often is predictable and uninspired—even when it uses modern technology to engage in digital

and social media marketing. Just because the content is available online does not mean that it will go viral. The message and its delivery must be highly creative, while still conveying key information about the practice, in order to stand out and entice consumers to share the content with others in their social networks.

The advantage of inspiring viral marketing is that the creative content organically attracts people to the marketing message by using existing and potential patients to keep the message alive, without additional effort or expense by the organization. In a healthcare context, an effective viral marketing program can generate positive reactions or experiences for potential patients, and motivate them to share the experience with others in their social networks. The real value of viral marketing is that the marketing message will perpetuate itself because others will be

Continued on page 57

EXTERNAL MARKETING

Viral Marketing (from page 56)

attracted to the creative content and want to engage in the experience.

Patients ultimately are consumers who are exposed to hundreds of marketing messages every day. Because it is not possible for humans to consciously attend to all of our sensory inputs at the same time,⁷ most potential patients inevitably ignore most messages. With viral marketing, a message is able to break through the clutter of information overload that is common in traditional marketing communications. This gives the practice an opportunity to make a real impact on potential patients, which allows the marketing message to be much more effective. So, how do you create a viral marketing epidemic? According to Kaplan and Haenlein,⁸ to make viral marketing work, “the right people need to get the right message under the right circumstances.” The following

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section spotlights several viral cases that got these timing elements right.

Viral Marketing Cases

Perhaps the greatest viral marketing example of all time is the Ice Bucket Challenge for amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). The Ice Bucket Challenge, which began in 2014, was used to raise awareness and funding for ALS by having participants challenge friends to dump a bucket of ice water on their heads. The program was extraordinarily successful, enticing over 28 million people to join the virtual conversation by posting, commenting, or liking a challenge, and inspiring 2.4 million Ice Bucket Challenge-related videos to be shared on social networks.⁹ As a result, \$115 million was donated to fight ALS in just an eight-week period, an amount that funded over 200 research projects and global research collaborations; led to the discovery of five new genes, which spurred innovative therapies and drug trials; and helped 15,000 patients per year receive the treatments and care that they needed.¹⁰

The Ice Bucket Challenge gave everyone a fun way to get involved and give to a worthy cause. The challenge demonstrated the power of social media and how it could be effectively harnessed, directed, and managed to rapidly spread a message to the mass public. Most importantly, the Ice Bucket Challenge was a simple call to action with a stipulated time limit for those invited to participate. Participants had to accept and complete the Ice Bucket Challenge within 24 hours.¹¹ We contend that the time limit that was placed on the challenge created a sense of urgency and was one of the main reasons why the cam-

Continued on page 58

Viral Marketing (from page 57)

paign spread so quickly.

Because the Ice Bucket Challenge was so successful, other organizations could play off the same idea in an attempt to create their own viral marketing campaigns. For example, ROI Online did this

special messages to Healthcare Heroes (e.g., delivered by Bette Midler, Robert De Niro, Jennifer Lopez, New York Fire Department).¹³ Another example that recently went viral comes from Daniel Akinyemi, an ICU nurse in Montclair, New Jersey. Mr. Akinyemi had a COVID-19 patient on a ventilator whose hus-

band mentioned that her favorite song was Blue Bayou and her favorite reading from the Bible was Psalm 23, so he sang the song and recited the biblical passage to her, and in an amazing recovery the very next day, she was able to be weaned off the ventilator.¹⁴ These types of messages have the power to capture widespread attention and bring positive awareness to the medical practice.

of their organization (e.g., immigrant health and wellness). The ultimate purpose of using viral marketing in healthcare is to inspire patients to share the practice's content with others in their social networks so as to exponentially grow the pool of patients who can be assisted by or attracted to the practice. If viral marketing works, it creates a veritable buzz about the practice and its service offerings. Moreover, even if the content does not go viral, it is still reinforcing the practice's marketing mix and digital presence, which ultimately will build brand equity and benefit the practice in the long run.

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with their Nice Bucket Challenge. They built on the success and good intentions of the Ice Bucket Challenge, but added a unique twist of their own by filling the buckets with cold water bottles, food, socks, and toiletries to give to those in need.¹² Their campaign did not make as big a splash as the Ice Bucket Challenge, but it was another example of using a viral marketing strategy to communicate a message about improving health and well-being, and it generated some positive publicity for the organization.

Viral content should be timely not only in that it motivates consumers to act immediately, but also in its relevance and importance to society. We can see current examples of relevant viral content related to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, there have been many stories during the last year about healthcare workers who risked their lives on a daily basis to care for COVID-19 patients. This presents an opportunity for the healthcare industry to use storytelling to highlight and bring awareness to the outstanding care that the practice or hospital provides. Healthcare, in particular, is a perfect candidate for telling the uplifting success stories of patients who were saved by the care of a medical center.

New York-Presbyterian Hospital is one of the best examples of a healthcare organization that shares these viral-worthy and heart-tugging stories. They frequently post My COVID-19 story excerpts from their healthcare workers, as well as

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Getting Started

As previously demonstrated, viral marketing strategies are extremely

Measuring Results

The main goal of viral marketing is to attain exponential growth that results in high proliferation rates. This means that consumers must view the message, respond to the call for action, and share the content with others in their social networks. Therefore, as in epidemics and pandemics, the distribution rate of the viral content must be greater than one in order to achieve exponential growth. Kaplan and Haenlein⁸ note that the exchange of electronic word-of-mouth, which is the driving

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applicable for the healthcare industry because they have time-sensitive missions in both urgency and relevance to patients. For instance, the practice could offer a discount for a short period (e.g., new patient discounts) or come out with limited-time service offers (e.g., free foot screenings), which would create a need for immediate response from those interested in the practice's services. Furthermore, the practice could create innovative content that is related to pressing social or societal issues that are significantly aligned with the work

force behind the distribution of viral marketing, is substantially easier to monitor than traditional word-of-mouth behavior, and allows for a more accurate analysis of its impact on tangible business outcomes such as new customer acquisition and profitability.

The effectiveness of viral marketing efforts can be measured by comparing the number of online responses (e.g., likes, shares, comments, new posts) to changes in firm performance pre- and post-exposure

Continued on page 59

EXTERNAL MARKETING

Viral Marketing (from page 58)

to the marketing content. Thus, practices are better able to calculate return on marketing in a digital environment when employing these viral marketing tactics.

Viral marketing allows practices to break through the information clutter that bombards the public on a daily basis in order to have a real impact on potential new patients. Even if a viral marketing effort does not result in a new patient calling for an appointment, there is a good chance that it will help the practice gain exposure and build an enhanced contact list. For example, more people may sign up for the practice's newsletters and e-mails if they become interested in the online content. This en-

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hanced e-mail list can generate future marketing opportunities for the organization.

Marketing, whether conventional or viral, often requires several contacts between the practice and new patients. It is not uncommon for a first message to capture the attention of potential new patients, yet not be strong enough to prompt them to immediate action. It is typically necessary to follow up with additional marketing efforts in order to influence behavior. After several contacts, it is more likely that the new patient will not only recognize the name of the doctor, practice, or hospital, but also have a more developed attitude towards that healthcare provider, which finally motivates them to become a patient.

Bottom Line

When it is done right, viral marketing can generate visibility and enhance the reputation of the practice, highlighting unique aspects that make the practice and its services attractive to the patient. Because viral marketing commonly relies on the concept of a word-of-mouth endorsement, the practice gains credibility with prospective patients in a very short period of time due to positive recommendations by those in their social networks. This enhanced credibility creates better opportunities to convert potential patients into actual patients. Thus, if exposure and rapid growth are the goals, then viral marketing in healthcare represents the kind of virus that you want to catch. **PM**

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Continued on page 60

Viral Marketing (from page 60)

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