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Finding Your Success in Viral Video

The boom of online video has left many organizations trying to discover the recipe for a successful viral video. At the same time, the typical content of a viral video often leaves top executives wary. Yet some organizations are succeeding. What is the recipe?

The burning question for many in marketing: Has anyone figured out the recipe for making an online video go viral? If you have been involved in creating a successful viral video campaign, then you surely know about the level of thought involved. It has about the same level of difficulty as intentionally writing a song that will go multi-platinum. Has anyone completely figured out that recipe? No. Otherwise, every artist would be multi-platinum. What is the point being made here? Trying to figure out the complex viral video recipe can be futile. However, this is not the time to throw up your arms and say, "Why bother?!" It is important to participate in this emerging marketing medium. The rewards are often too large to ignore. If you want to get "something" out there, then there is a need to simplify the video creation process.

What is viral video success?

According to popular belief, a successful viral video is an online video that has received millions of views on something like YouTube. Are millions of views a good measure of viral video success? Not really. Having millions of unqualified customers' view your video does not necessarily translate into bottom line dollars. Here is a gut check: Getting one million views, by viewers, between ages twelve and eighteen will not work if you are selling expensive champagne. They are under legal age, and probably cannot afford your bubbly brew. Remember, anyone can view your video online. Viewers select the videos they wish to view online at anytime. Unlike television with prime time viewing and content specific program slots, your message control is more limited. As a rule of thumb: A viral video with only a few hundred or thousand views can be considered a success if it mostly hits your target audience. For example, a website like ProfessorString.com has a viral video demonstrating how guitar strings are made by hand. A search of "handmade guitar strings" on YouTube displays this video. It has had only a couple of thousand views. However, since the release of their video in 2008, orders increased by 350% over nine months.

The main ingredients

While the viral video recipe might be unknown, the ingredients are better understood. A video that is authentic and entertains is a good starting foundation. But if you are going for big numbers, then something offbeat under three minutes is the mainstay. Videos that have gone viral in big numbers typically touch on at least one of the three main ingredients:

1. Humor
2. Something Strange
3. Daring

In the conservative corporate world, these typically can be considered risky elements. Many high level corporate executives cringe at the thought of putting the company image out on a limb with something strangely silly in a video. It can be a serious backfire if the video is misinterpreted. For this reason, selling the ingredients of viral video can be a long uphill battle with the executive chain of command.

Executives often want the company's best foot forward with quality. Their jobs depend on keeping the corporate image polished and shareholders happy. Unfortunately, successful viral video can be heavy departure from this philosophy. Unlike polished corporate TV commercials and ads, viral video footage is often rough cut with an amateur-like hint of production. Why? Viewers want things that are genuine and honest. They do not want to spend their time listening to marketing hot air from the corporate podium. Viewers tend believe an authentic video that appears to be uploaded from somebody's phone, or hand held camera, could not possibly come from a large corporation. In a word, raw sloppy footage is more trusted. Why? Raw sloppy footage is not something a corporate CEO would ever approve...or at least, that's what most viewers want to believe.

Something Unexpected

Perhaps the most common thread in successful viral video content is seeing something unexpected. Viewers enjoy the unpredictable. A viral video with a surprise element can be almost without bounds. This is particularly true if passive branding is used. An example of passive branding being used in a viral video can be seen in the popular "Jealous Crane Operator" video. This video featured a crane operator finding his wife cheating with another man inside a mobile trailer. The crane operator unexpectedly shows up with a boat attached to a wrecking crane, and proceeds to smash the boat into the mobile trailer. The boat is also smashed into a car sitting in the trailer's driveway. Viewers will notice the boat appears to go undamaged as the trailer caves in from the impact. In addition, viewers will also notice the word "Triumph" on the side of the boat. It is a candid demonstration of how tough Triumph boats are designed. How is this passive branding? There are three things making this passive:

1. Triumph Boat company never formally announced the release of the video.
2. The video appears raw without any credits or messages by Triumph.
3. It left many viewers wondering if Triumph was actually involved with the video.

By being completely out of the production credit spotlight, the company avoided the typical marketing risks associated with the video's content. The video leveraged the three ingredients: humor, boldness, and something strange. In addition, it was something completely unexpected.

Viewer Involvement

Viewers want to interact and contribute their own content as it relates to a video. You want to allow them to post comments to the video and rate it. Their involvement is critical to viral spread. Be open to the video receiving comments that are good, bad or indifferent. You will learn a lot about your efforts by observing their reactions. Some of the more successful viral videos have had spoofs done on them. A spoof on your video is a form of viewer involvement. Viewers will sometimes do a knock-off video if your video is well received. Spoofs should be welcomed as they are a complement in the online world. Spoof videos are another way of getting your message out there. So, be

prepared to have a very loose grip on your copyrighted trade dress. For some marketers this may seem a little uncomfortable, but in the Web 2.0 world, consumer's voices can be just as thunderous as your message. Interactive online videos are here to stay. They are an important component in the marketing mix. The number of organizations leveraging this powerful new medium will only grow larger in the foreseeable future.

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