

Viral advertising: Enabling your consumers to benefit by sharing your content

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Abstract

Viral advertising has come to mainstream marketing with the promise of saving on ever increasing media costs, as well as higher customer engagement via word-of-mouth effects. Here, I summarize the findings of a recent stream of my eye- and face-tracking research on what makes consumers most willing to engage with and share ads. The first major finding is that consumers have an unconscious aversion to (forceful) brand images, as these are associated with intrusive persuasion attempts. A second key finding is that consumers seek emotion changes: they engage with ads that provide positive emotions but also adapt quickly to them, reducing attention if an emotion lingers too long. Successful ads are the ones that deliver emotions that alternate between high and low intensity. Lastly, if brands expect to replace paid media (e.g. TV), as distributors of commercial content, with consumer sharing, they will have to provide incentives: monetary or not. I show how viewers who send ads that go viral in their social networks desire to be rewarded with 'social capital' in the process. Their status as innovators, sources of privileged content, and trend-setters is reinforced by sharing specific ad types. If done right, this *advertising symbiosis* can benefit both brands and consumers.

Introduction

Online video advertising has grown tremendously in the past year with the help of increased broadband penetration. By 2014, video will represent 91% of online consumer traffic, according to Cisco. According to eMarketer, online video ad spending increased by 40% in 2010, compared to only 6% growth for search ads. Whereas advertising in 'paid media' such as TV requires the purchasing of expensive ad space, firms now have the possibility of casting ads online free of charge. Non-paid, earned media offer an even more lucrative opportunity for advertisers if they can motivate consumers to disseminate these video ads via social sharing. For that to occur, two actions are needed: exposure and dissemination. In order for a video ad to go viral, consumers first need to view and then decide to share it. Next, I present new research that explains (1) which ads get viewed more often, and (2) what gets shared and why.

Ads that get viewed

Consumers like brands. What they don't like is being sold to, particularly while they are consuming another

valued product: entertainment. In a study involving 2000 consumers, my colleagues and I used infrared eye-tracking technology to understand what objects viewers look at and how what they see affects their ad skipping patterns. We found that viewers are more likely to stop watching TV commercials, e.g. switching the channel, at the moment in which brand logos appear on the screen. This effect is not a function of whether consumers like or are familiar with the brand; it happens systematically across brands and people. It is also not the result of the viewer's curiosity being satisfied by the revelation of the brand, as more and more people 'zap out' each additional time the brand appears within the same ad. In addition, longer brand exposures, bigger logos, and logos in the center of the TV screen all contribute to further reductions in viewership. This effect of branding avoidance is so strong that it seems to be incorporated into people's subconscious—they are not aware of their own passive resistance to persuasion.

Because an ad without branding loses its purpose, this effect puts advertisers in a difficult position. The dilemma, as seen in the comparison of ads below, is whether to show the brand centrally and risk that consumers will stop watching or to hide the brand and risk that consumers won't see or remember the brand. So, what is an advertiser to do?



Figure 1: Density of eye fixations. Red represents more attention. Source: Tobii Technology.

Using computer simulations and lab experiments we found that there is one strategy that minimizes the loss of viewers in TV and online ads. Showing the brand repeated and briefly, but not too intrusively, actually

causes consumers to get used to the brand, so they are less likely to stop watching when it appears. We have termed this strategy *brand pulsing*. It is actually a branding strategy regularly used in car ads. The logo on the car (brand) is showed multiple times, but briefly, throughout the ad as the camera captures the car at different angles and turns.

Emotions, the real attention grabber

If brands as symbols of persuasion attempts deter viewers from paying attention to ads, one powerful means for advertisers to attract attention is to evoke emotions. In another collaborative study, we used proprietary software to measure the type and intensity of the viewers' emotions at each quarter second of ad exposure from their facial expression (see below).



Figure 2: Automatic facial expression tracking of viewer.

We found that the emotions of joy/happiness and surprise are powerful attention-grabbing instruments in ads. Surprise works mainly to attract attention for brief instances, but by itself it is not enough to engage the viewer. To retain viewers to see the persuasive portion of the message, ads should deliver joyful (e.g. happy, funny, warming) content as well. It is as though viewers operate under an implicit agreement with the advertisers: "You entertain me and I'll stick around to hear your message."

The most surprising finding here was that stronger and longer emotions weren't the main features of the most successful ads. It was the pattern of the 'emotional delivery' that mattered most. Ads with constantly high levels of joy (light gray line, see graph below) or with spikes of joy at the end (mystery or punch line joke, black line) were viewed for less time than those that caused viewers to alternate between feeling higher and lower levels of joy (gray line).

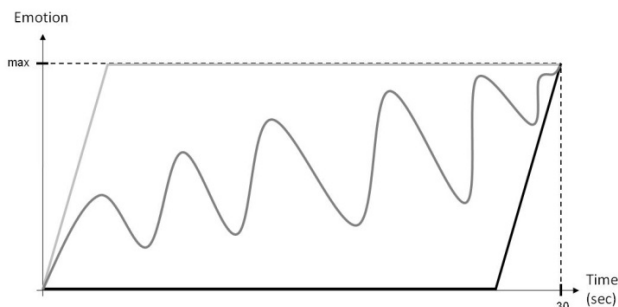


Figure 3: Zig-zag pattern of emotion retains most viewers.

Yet, as in most advertising research, there is a trade-off. While the *emotional rollercoaster* of high and low emotion feeling is best at retaining viewers, it is also somewhat distracting. Viewers are less concentrated on the message as compared to ads in which the emotion is felt at a constant level throughout.

Takeaway. If a primary goal is to get viewers to watch ads until the end, TV and online video ads should not show the brand logo too intrusively and should pulse it (on-off-on) whenever possible. One way to do this is to have the brand act as a hero in the story, as opposed to a persuading symbol. And to attract attention, ads should evoke surprise followed by joyful or happy scenes, not the other way around, alternating between high and low levels of joy. Entertaining the viewer first pays off to some extent. Using purely humor ads with the brand at the end is too high a price to pay with too little time left to persuade.

Ads that get shared

As stated before, viral ads can have greater persuasive power due to word-of-mouth and save on media costs by using the consumer rather than paid media to distribute the ad. The previous section explains what videos get watched. In order to understand which videos will go viral we have to understand what gets shared as well. My research on videos that get shared is based on lab experiments and field studies that track individual dissemination of ads in social networks.

Similarly to previous work, consumers were given the opportunity to view and share video ads. In the process, their eye movements as well as emotions inferred from facial expressions were tracked second-by-second. However, while attention and emotion patterns are important indicators of the ad's success, predicting sharing behavior requires an understanding of social and personality factors as well.

What motivates different people to share commercial messages? I found that there are two general motivations for consumers that act as ad distributors: altruistic motives to share what may be valuable to acquaintances and egocentric motives to benefit personally from the act of sharing. The former is clear. People share what they like if they think acquaintances will somehow benefit from the content. The second, and predominant, motivation to spread viral ads is the sharer's desire to gain personally from being the source of content, ad or not, that is appreciated by the receiver. For some, this gain can take the form of simple gratitude. For others, the gain is increased social status, as receivers may perceive the sender to be an innovator, to have privileged sources, or to be a trend-setter in a social group. This added social status is termed social capital or currency and is a strong motivator for viral ad sharing.

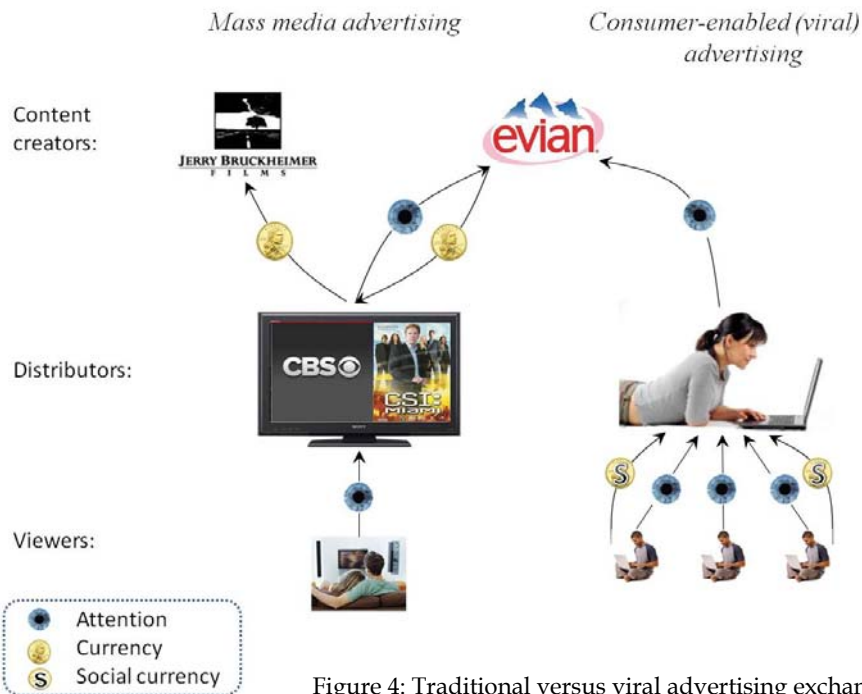


Figure 4: Traditional versus viral advertising exchange

Figure 4 depicts two routes an advertiser (Evian) can take to reach its target viewers. In the traditional method, Evian purchases attention by using paid media placement (CBS) which attracts viewer attention by purchasing entertaining content (CSI). In the consumer-mediated method, the brand directly embeds entertaining content in viral ads and uses consumers interested in gaining social currency, i.e. status, to spread these ads within their social networks.

Of course, content matters. People are much more likely to share entertaining, versus informative, content. In a field study that tracked viewership of medium to highly successful viral ads, humorous ads were viewed/shared almost three times (2.88) more than low-humor ads (see Figure 5). Counter intuitively, humorous ads with surprises were viewed/shared more than average, 81% more, but less than purely humorous ads. Senders are more cautious about sharing these ads as they may ‘rub people the wrong way’ and reduce their social capital gains.

Apart from content, the personality of the consumer plays a major role in sharing behavior. Extraverted consumers garner almost four times (3.81) more derived views of humorous ads than introverts sharing low humor ads. But if they are other-directed, a trait related to pleasing others, as opposed to self-centered or directed, they are less likely to share. Thus, viral ads are more successful the more (non-surprising) humorous content they have and the more they are sourced to extraverted self-interested viewers, who most value and are willing to “work for” social currency. Self-directed extraverts are often those who blog, upload self-depicting videos online, and aspire to be personalities.

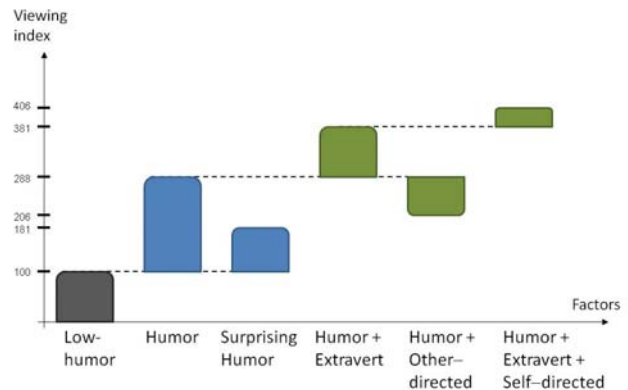


Figure 5: Effect of content and personality on derived views.

Takeaway. To create successful viral ads, brands need to enlist the right consumers to do the distribution job. Certain personalities are two times more effective at getting derived views than others. Brands need to ask the question, ‘What’s in it for them?’ Providing desirable ad content (humor), and allowing them to gain social status in the process is the key to enlisting consumers to work on behalf of your brand. This symbiosis benefits both senders and the advertiser.

Conclusion

Consumers expect ever more from major brands. Ads, not just products, need to serve those consumers. Brand building across media requires addressing this issue. New methods such as eye- and face-tracking provide novel insights into consumers’ decisions and a deeper understanding of content that delivers valuable incentives, whether they be entertainment or the means for social status. Empowering consumers to benefit personally permits brands to engage in a more persuasive and pervasive conversation.