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Evaluating viral marketing: isolating the key criteria

Evaluating viral
marketing

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Abstract

Purpose – There has been little evidence of any work undertaken to measure the effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns. This paper aims to report on research undertaken to determine the key criteria that viral marketing practitioners believe should be used to measure the success of viral marketing campaigns.

Design/methodology/approach – Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with some of the premier web masters, those leading the development of much of the UK's viral marketing activities.

Findings – Two forms of viral marketing were identified, “random” and “placed virals”. The paper presents a viral marketing evaluation framework that identifies three key objectives and their particular evaluation criteria. Financial objectives and the need to measure the return on investment were identified as previously undocumented key issues.

Research limitations/implications – The small size of the sample prevents generalization but the findings suggest that further research is necessary to confirm these findings and to explore the topic in greater detail.

Practical implications – Using the framework to measure the success of a campaign can help clients and agencies be more accountable and effective with respect to viral campaigns.

Originality/value – The determination of the evaluation of criteria of viral marketing campaigns is important because it is undertaken from a practitioners' perspective and is a topic not previously explored.

Keywords Marketing communications, Electronic mail, Sales campaigns, Consumer behaviour

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

For many commentators, practitioners and academics, word of mouth (WoM) communication has become a hot topic. No longer the preserve of offline communication strategists, it is becoming a central platform for interactive marketing communications. A number of reasons have been offered to explain its growth. Kirby and Marsden (2006) suggest that media fragmentation, inflated media prices, falling returns, increased consumer marketing and advertising literacy and the adoption of new advertising blocking technologies, are some of the principal reasons forcing organisations to find new ways of reaching their audiences.

People like to talk about their involvement with products and services for a variety of reasons. These include the prestige and status that may arise through ownership or a need to share their purchase experiences in order to help others. These conversations are then passed to family, friends and other people in social networks (Allsop *et al.*, 2007). This reference process is known as WoM communication and is regarded as a



powerful and influential form of communication, if only because of the perceived objectivity and credibility associated with the parties involved. Viral marketing has emerged as the electronic form of WoM and involves the principle of passing on or referring news, information or entertainment to another person.

Research by Pruden and Vavra (2004) indicates that above-the-line media are the most effective way of creating awareness in many markets. They also demonstrate that WoM is the highest ranked technique used by consumers to not only gather information but also to make purchasing decisions. Davis *et al.* (1979) found that consumers rely more heavily on WoM for purchase decisions, especially for services, than any other form of communication. This is an important aspect, as the distinction between services and products can be a critical factor in the decision making process. As Mangold *et al.* (1999, p. 73) confirm when citing Murray (1991), “personal sources have a greater influence on purchasers of services than on purchases of products”.

WoM embraces “all interpersonal communications” (Stokes and Lomax, 2002, p. 350) and now encompasses new media marketing communication channels, such as the Internet. Viral marketing has developed as a result of advancements in digital technology and can be regarded as a critical electronic extension of WoM communication, not a mere development of WoM, as Bickart and Schindler (2002) suggest.

Viral marketing is at an early stage of development and much of the current viral marketing communication (VMC) literature research is concerned with understanding the motivations and behaviours of those passing-on email messages. We believe its growth will depend partly on establishing both suitable criteria and methodologies in order to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of viral campaigns. Borrowing methods from WoM may not necessarily be appropriate and current methods based around hits and impression counts are increasingly criticised by practitioners (Bazadonna, 2006) and discounted by academics.

VMC is a relatively new topic and knowledge about its nature, characteristics and dimensions has yet to be agreed and established. To date research into VMC has attempted to measure specific aspects of WoM. For example, Godes and Mayzlin (2004) and Gruen *et al.* (2005) consider the use of online conversations to study WoM. Vilpponen *et al.* (2006) use a “whom-told-whom” methodology to trace the information flow of internet campaigns whilst Reichheld (2003) suggests that the most important measure is a customer’s willingness to recommend a product or service to someone else. In other words, although these studies have added considerably to our knowledge of this subject area, they have all been driven by traditional WoM methodologies and seek to establish answers to particular outcomes.

What is common to previous research is that there does not appear to have been any attempt to establish the general criteria for evaluating VMC. Although the setting of clearly defined objectives is understood to be an important element (Kitchen, 1999; Elliot, 1999) this fails to establish what the key criterion should be. Eastlack (1984) believes that prior to any research, it is important to know what is being researched. He suggests that different advertising objectives should be measured through different metrics and he developed a goal/measure table to substantiate the point. Although this is a good starting point, Eastlack’s table is a simplistic guideline for a possible TV evaluation research strategy, and does not give any insight into the different elements that may affect “measure” types, including aspects such as budget, product category

and most relevant to this study, the medium. However, it does stress the need for setting campaign objectives prior to any evaluation exercise and this is pertinent to evaluating VMC as much as any other communication activity.

The aim of this research is to correct this deficiency and to identify the key criteria that viral marketing practitioners believe should be used to evaluate viral campaigns. This is important as a commonly agreed framework of evaluative criteria can assist both campaign and cross-campaign measurement and promote increased efficiency and good practice. To achieve this it is first necessary to understand the thoughts of people in the vanguard of this new form of communication. These people are key process shapers and influence the direction and form of VMC.

The paper commences with a consideration of the literature relating to viral marketing in order to understand its dynamics and characteristics. This is followed by a review of current evaluative methods before reporting on research undertaken with the UK industry's key web masters, as a first step to determine how practitioners believe viral marketing campaigns should be measured and the criteria necessary to accomplish this task.

Literature review

The term "viral marketing" was developed by Juverson and Draper (1997). It was used to describe the free email service which Hotmail was providing. According to Juverson (2000, pp. 1-2), they defined the term simply as "network-enhanced word-of-mouth". However, the literature contains a variety of terminology used to explain what viral marketing is. According to Vilpponen *et al.* (2006, p. 72), some of the terminology used to describe electronic WoM includes "Interactive Marketing" (Blattberg and Deighton, 1991), "Internet word-of-mouth" and "word-of-mouse" (Goldenberg *et al.*, 2001), "stealth marketing" (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004) and "referral marketing" (De Bruyn and Lilien, 2004). Thomas (2004) tries to unify these ideas in the term "buzz marketing". He refers to the generation of marketing epidemics by concentrating on value added propositions.

Some commentators, including Welker (2002), see an analogy between viral marketing and a living biological virus. Knight (1999, p. 50) suggests that viral marketing is a similar to a "digitalised sneeze", one characterised by the release of "millions of tiny particles that can infect others who come into contact with them". Welker (2002, p. 3) stresses the contagious power of a virus and suggests that a "virus replicates (itself) with geometrically increasing power, doubling with each interaction". Wilson (2000, p. 1) defines viral marketing as "any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence". By understanding the properties of a biological virus, he argues that it becomes clear just how powerful yet completely uncontrollable this form of communication can be. However, caution is necessary as the placement of video ads, such as the Fosters "Big Ad" campaign in Australia which achieved huge viral distribution, suggests some element of control may be possible.

Although Wilson covers the essential aspects of a viral message, this definition fails to reflect the non-commercial and content characteristics of viral messages. According to Simmons (2006, p. 1), the term viral refers to "how the content – be it a joke, picture, game or video – gets around". Porter and Golan (2006, p. 33) suggest these materials

are usually seeded through the Internet, often distributed through independent third-part sites, are usually personal, more credible than traditional advertising and humour is almost unanimously employed in executions. Their definition acknowledges some of the characteristics suggested above as they offer viral advertising as "... unpaid peer-to-peer communication of provocative content originating from an identified sponsor using the internet to persuade or influence an audience to pass along the content to others".

We believe VMC concerns the informal, peer-to-peer electronic exchange of information about an identifiable product or service. Similar to Hennig-Thurau *et al.* (2004) approach, this broad ranging definition overcomes the variation, inconsistency and sometimes overly complex approach used by some to define VMC.

Just like WoM, viral marketing can be a highly credible tool, but this credibility is offset by an overall lack of message control. "Like a computer virus, viral marketing spreads a message exponentially, fanning out across community webs, like a bushfire on a gusty day, it is a fast, uncontrollable spread ... cheap and almost effortless" (Fattah, 2000, p. 1).

Yet, despite these perils of unpredictability and a lack of message control, companies are actively using VMC both internally as well as externally. For example, The National Australia Bank Group, have reputedly used one of the most successful VMCs internally to initiate corporate change (Thomas, 2004, p. 29). Externally, the success of the Hotmail story, one that has been reported extensively (Wilson, 2000; Juvertson and Draper, 1997; Fattah, 2000) has achieved nothing short of a worldwide plague. Hotmail was one of the first free email address services to be offered to the general public with one simple tag at the bottom of each message saying: "Get your private, free email at: www.hotmail.com."

The one important link which all these authors appear to make is the strong connection between WoM and its electronic form, VMC. However, defined viral marketing is becoming an increasingly important element within many organisations' internal and external marketing communication.

Evaluating success of VMC

One of the challenges facing researchers is that VMC can manifest itself in a number of forms. For example, it can be used as email marketing messages sent to existing customers who are then encouraged to pass it on to their social networks (Phelps *et al.*, 2004), it can be seeding which then becomes viral as word is passed around (Porter and Golan, 2006) or as brand pushers (Kaikati and Kaikati, 2004). The variety of ways in which consumers can engage in VMC makes the task of finding criteria to measure VMC problematic.

It is not surprising, therefore, that even though academics have repeatedly stressed the importance of VMC, the literature related to measuring its success is relatively limited. In a similar way, practitioners have also had difficulties in measuring VMC's effectiveness. Bazadonna (2006) indicates that the current practice of measuring the number of "hits" or "impressions" does little more than define the level of activity, and is not a suitable measure of the success of a viral campaign.

Several academics have put forward different ideas concerning the measurement and evaluation of VMC. Porter and Golan (2006) suggest that viral marketing measurements should be based on attitudinal criteria, namely cognitive and

behavioural changes. However, this extension of the methods used to evaluate traditional mass media may not be adequate or reflect the characteristics and context of VMC.

Helm (2000) suggests that the target of viral marketers is to maximise reach. She argues that this criterion is vital in achieving competitive advantage through a viral message; however, there is no empirical evidence to support this. In contrast, Juvertson (2000, p. 2) indicates that an ideal viral message will convert and retain a large number of recipients as new users, so he advocates penetration, loyalty and frequency as appropriate evaluative criteria. Welker (2002) suggested that viral efforts should be measured in the dimensions of velocity (speed of transmission), persistence (how long it stays around) and transmission convenience (simplicity in regards to mental barriers, costs and handling). This aspect of cost has not been referred to often but will be something we will return to later.

The importance of opinion leadership in the WoM process is undisputed. In viral marketing, one of the terms used to refer to online opinion leaders is “*efluentials*”. According to Cakim (2006, p. 108), these people are key in the generation of viral messages. They are characterised by being “*active users of email, newsgroups, bulletin boards, listservs and other online vehicles when conveying their messages . . . their families and peers regularly approach them for information opinions and advice on a wide range of subjects*”. However, there is limited discussion or research about how “*efluentials*” can be used to evaluate the success of VMC campaigns. Godes and Mayzlin (2004) used the conversations of online communities to measure WoM and suggest that the three main criteria for the evaluation of online WoM should be frequency, volume and informativeness.

The approaches used to measure and evaluate the relative success of VMC are many and varied. They range from changes in attitude and behaviour, including the number of new users or levels of loyalty, to measures of reach, frequency, penetration, speed of transmission and the content of conversations, to mention a few. What this demonstrates is that there is little agreement about what it is that should be evaluated and the criteria to be used to measure VMC campaign success or failure.

Research methodology

The review of the literature shows that there is limited consensus about suitable criteria for evaluating viral campaigns. The aim of this research is to correct this deficiency and to identify the key criteria used to evaluate viral marketing. To achieve this it is first necessary to understand the thoughts of those in the vanguard of this new form of communication, the key process shapers who influence the direction and form of VMC. We considered taking a consumer perspective but felt that exploring the views of VMC practitioners would offer a different and perhaps novel insight into the world of VMC. A four-step research approach was adopted:

- (1) Required the development of a draft Interview Guide, by using the literature and, where documented, the experiences of practitioners. The interview guide covered the major areas of interest identified in the literature and was designed with a practitioner orientation. The interviews were designed to be the most reliable and cost effective way of gathering in-depth qualitative data. The fact that there was face-to-face communication allowed for enhanced rapport and response rates. The nature of the set objectives dictated a need to ask complex

questions with various open-ended responses. Saunders *et al.* (2000, p. 248) support this methodology under these circumstances.

- (2) Involved a pilot test, using four face-to-face, depth, semi-structured interviews. Although the pilot was used with colleagues and not viral practitioners, the exercise helped test the rigour, validity and appropriateness of the questions and resulted in amendments to the structure and order of some of the questions.
- (3) The respondents were identified and selected. This was assisted with the help of the Viral Marketing and Buzz Association web site (Retrieved July 06, 2006, from www.vbma.net/). This is regarded as a respected and industry leading site, containing many active VMC academics and practitioners. From this site, a short list of twenty of the association's members was drawn as prospective respondents. The list was based on the twin criteria of their perceived expertise/industry standing and their location.
- (4) The next step was to send a letter to each of these twenty targeted respondents, inviting them to participate in the research. From this, a total of seven companies agreed to take part within a week of receipt. Another three respondents agreed following a reminder email sent two weeks later; this gave a total response rate of 50 per cent.
- (5) Involved the interviewing and data collection process. From the possible respondents, a total of five semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were carried out with prominent innovators of the VMC industry. These professionals are all considered to be at the leading edge in their specialist VMC services. This sample choice, proved to be the most time and cost-efficient option for gathering the most credible and reliable qualitative data with the resources available.

All the interviews were recorded, with the express permission of the respondents. This allowed respondents to speak freely without the need for note taking or interruptions seeking clarification. The inherent flexibility permitted adaptations in the questioning tone and sequence as required during the interview process (Saunders *et al.*, 2000).

In total, 27 questions were included in the Interview Guide, twenty-six of which were open-ended and one that was a five-point Likert scale (from not important/not applicable to extremely important). The average duration of each interview was 48 min.

The main body section of the Interview Guide was subdivided into four main themes. This sequence was designed to funnel the scope of the questioning as the interview unfolded, commencing with broad questions and then progressing to more in-depth focused discussions. The themes were divided as follows:

- Theme 1. Exploring nature and characteristics of VMC.
- Theme 2. Exploring VMC advertising campaigns.
- Theme 3. Exploring the evaluation of VMC.
- Theme 4. Exploring VMC evaluation criteria.

Each interview concentrated on the online experience VMC and although all respondents recognised that offline communications were necessary to feed online communications, this dimension was not explicitly explored. Each interview was

transcribed following the guidelines suggested by Wengraf (2001). Once the interviews were fully transcribed, the data were coded and word frequency lists were generated using Concordance software. From these lists, word patterns and relationships emerged, which were then compared and contrasted to the findings of the individual interview analysis and where appropriate the results were tabularised.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the research are discussed following the themes used to conduct the interviews.

Theme 1: exploring nature and characteristics of VMC

The respondents used an array of terminology to describe and classify the people who spread viral messages: “super spreaders”, “super e-mailers”, “sneezers”, “nutters”, “influentials and influencers” and “efluentials”. However, when asked to name the most important audience insights, all respondents agreed that knowledge of the profile of these people who spread VMC messages and understanding their behaviour and the reasons why they chose to spread messages in this way, was absolutely critical.

Respondents unanimously refer to WoM in terms of someone’s willingness to communicate with others, or as one respondent puts it, “feeling compelled to speak”. Interestingly, the majority of respondents classify VMC as being simply WoM online, and they suggest that the online medium itself could be broken down further into distinct areas.

Table I illustrates the respondents’ collective views on a classification of VMC media and sub-category tools.

This is an important distinction as there are fundamental differences and communication richness characteristics between different media, for instance a fax and an email. This indicates that WoM still retains a predominantly output orientation (Bone, 1995). This is reflected in the general view that VMC is essentially about a source’s willingness to convey information. Furthermore, this output perspective seems to completely disregard the input perspective of WoM, overlooking those who may be actively looking for information.

The main areas of agreement and disagreement among the respondents are represented in Table II. There was agreement regarding costs, the need to achieve awareness and reach, to set objectives, and the role of opinion leadership. What is of equal interest are the topics where there is little agreement. Of these, the idea that virals may or may not be placed, whether the lack of control is important and what the key success criteria may be are issues explored later in this paper.

	Text	Video	Picture	Adver-game	Podcast	RSS
E-mail	Y	Y	Y			
Mobile phones	Y	Y	Y			
Seeding websites	Y	Y	Y	Y		
MP3 players					Y	
Blogs	Y				Y	Y

Table I.
Responses to “How would you classify VMC?”

Table II.
Main agreements and
disagreements

Agreement	Disagreement
Defining WoM in terms of output	Commercial vs non-commercial placements
The need for a distinction between commercial and non-commercial placements	Advergaming popularity vs irrelevancy
Costs in terms of reach and awareness as a key strength	Lack of control seen as a disadvantage vs advantage
Defining industry best practice examples in terms of awareness and reach	Easy to target vs hard to target
Need to set objectives	Success criteria: reach vs targeting
Importance of opinion leadership	

All respondents agreed that the main advantages of VMC over traditional above-the-line media are the relatively lower levels of investment (costs) involved in developing campaigns and its ability to reach a large number of people, relatively quickly. The major disadvantages recognised by all the respondents was the relative lack of control over the message and its distribution, depending on placement.

Theme 2: exploring VMC advertising campaigns

Four of the respondents highlighted the difficulty associated with targeting and reaching specific niche audiences within online communities. From this emerged a clear divergence of views within the group. Some believe that a successful VMC campaign involves reaching the largest number of people in the least amount of time. Others in the group believe that the outcome should be measured in terms of what proportion of the target audience has been reached. These views can be observed within the award winning Burger King *Subservient Chicken* viral. This case shows how successful VMC can be in reaching tens of thousands of people. However, although a significant number of people were reached by the Burger King, creative brand awareness and sales fell.

Undoubtedly there is some variation in the benefits perceived to accrue from using VMC. However, it is clear that VMC is generally considered to be most effective when integrated with other marketing communication tools. For example, the impact of VMC can be considerably enhanced by using it to complement offline above-the-line work. The benefits can be seen in boosting both reach and frequency of exposures, and also in either reinforcing messages or providing a campaign with an element of shock value. Indeed, it was noticeable that the respondents did not mention this as a measurement criterion. As traditional media lose their cutting edge, providing a strong point of differentiation through shock value can create subsequent buzz.

Respondents pointed out that viral marketers sometimes choose to pay for their creatives to be placed on paid-for sites. Such placement allows clients to ensure that their content appears on the home pages of seeding websites. This indicates that these types of paid-for placement are not compatible with the original essence of a viral creative, namely free association and distribution. Placement of this nature constitutes an attempt to manage message distribution by placing content in controlled environments. In other words, it is paid advertising, not VMC. This also suggests that the notion that viral marketing is uncontrollable, as argued by Wilson (2000), is no longer entirely correct if, of course, paid placements are deemed to be viral marketing.

The notion that a VMC creative may or may not be subject to a paid-for media placement, reflects not only the way in which VMC has developed but it is also an issue previously hidden and not discussed openly in the literature. Essentially there is a distinction between a commercial and a non-commercial VMC message, which one respondent suggests could be based on the existence or absence of an overtly branded message or through the existence of a “call to action”. He adds that advergames are an exceptional form of VMC, because they allow for high levels of interaction with target audiences and it is relatively easy to include a commercial “call to action”, unlike viral video clips.

One view therefore is that viral creatives should be commercial-free, that is, not required to include a call-to-action, or bound by corporate control. This perspective holds that the focus should be on the entertainment and engagement generated by the quality of the viral creative. We refer to these as *Random Virals*. The other view that emerged is that virals are just online paid-for advertising in a different guise. Through careful and expensive media placement and planning, management gain a certain degree of control and are subsequently in a better position to develop a more accurate evaluation of a campaign’s success. We refer to these as *Placed Virals*. It may be that source credibility should be used to bridge these two dimensions. We know that if a source is perceived as credible then messages emanating from that source are more likely to be acted upon. In order to be perceived as credible, companies need to adopt increasingly creative methods, and in doing so achieve a careful balance between control and impartiality. What has emerged is that VMC can take one of two main dimensions and that the management and evaluation of *Random* and *Placed Virals* is likely to be different.

Theme 3: exploring evaluation of VMC

The interviews were also used to find out how practitioners viewed issues relating to the evaluation of viral marketing. Respondents were provided with a list of evaluation criteria that had been derived from the literature. First, they were asked to rank them according to importance when required to gauge the effectiveness of a VMC creative. The number of mentions and strength of opinion against each of these is shown in Figure 1. Reach and penetration achieved top placing and hits/downloads and reasons for transmission were also regarded as extremely important. Interestingly, there was no agreement that transmission convenience, shock value or informativeness are important criteria.

Respondents were also requested to offer any terms or factors relating to evaluation criteria not on the list provided. All respondents were agreed that these campaigns should be measured from a financial perspective and that the return on the investment generated was of prime concern. Reference was also made to the impact a campaign might have on brand equity although it was recognised that measuring these changes might be technically problematic.

Compared to the literature therefore, where financial measures are noticeably absent, viral marketing practitioners agree that financial measures are a critical issue. Although not questioned, it is probable that the measures of financial performance will be more pertinent to *Placed Virals* rather than *Random Virals*. In addition, it is likely that *Placed Virals* will be more highly geared to behavioural measures and outputs, whereas *Random Virals* will be more closely matched with cognitive changes.

The notion that the evaluation of VMC should consider a financial dimension is contentious. One reason is that it is very difficult to isolate advertising effects from

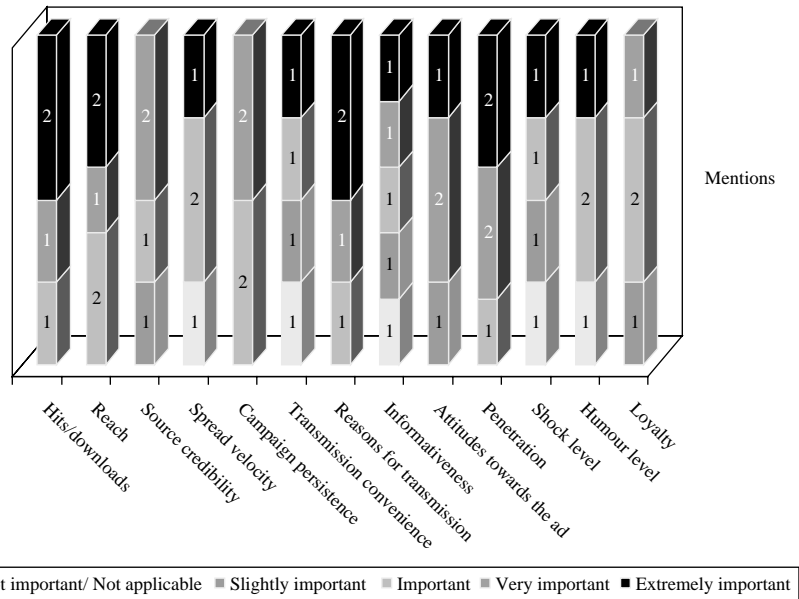


Figure 1.
Responses to evaluation
criteria importance

other variables and be able to quantify them when evaluating marketing communication activities. Lusch and Harvey (1984) cited by Rust *et al.* (2004, p. 78) refer to emphasising the need for non-financial measures. They argue that measures of ROI are often prejudicial to marketing expenditures as the pay out is over the long-term. For marketers, the ideal ROI measurement would be able to measure future cash flows as well as short-term impacts. This enables the longer-term effects of advertising to be considered. Rust *et al.* (2004, p. 79) suggest that it should include “tracking off-balance-sheet metrics (i.e. brand or customer equity) and focusing on both current (EVA and cash flow) and expected (e.g. MVA, share holder value) performance”. This is true but we argue that this is not just a VMC issue but also one which spans the evaluation of marketing generally.

In addition to these measures, respondents suggested that turnout/footfall (the physical number of people turning up at an advertised event) and attitudinal shift towards the brand (not the ad) are extremely important evaluative criteria. Although it is agreed that there should be a clear set of objectives, respondents believe that any VMC campaign evaluation methodology should include a means of measuring the financial impact. This study has therefore uncovered VMC evaluation criteria not previously cited in the academic literature.

Using concordance analysis to combine the terminology used in answer to these questions about evaluation criteria, it became evident that the respondents believe that awareness is the most popular evaluation criterion (30 mentions); reach was second (23 mentions), closely followed by PR measures (21 mentions). These results are depicted in Figure 2.

In addition to financial issues, it was also suggested that it is important to be able to measure the spread of the message, not only at the first level, but also at all

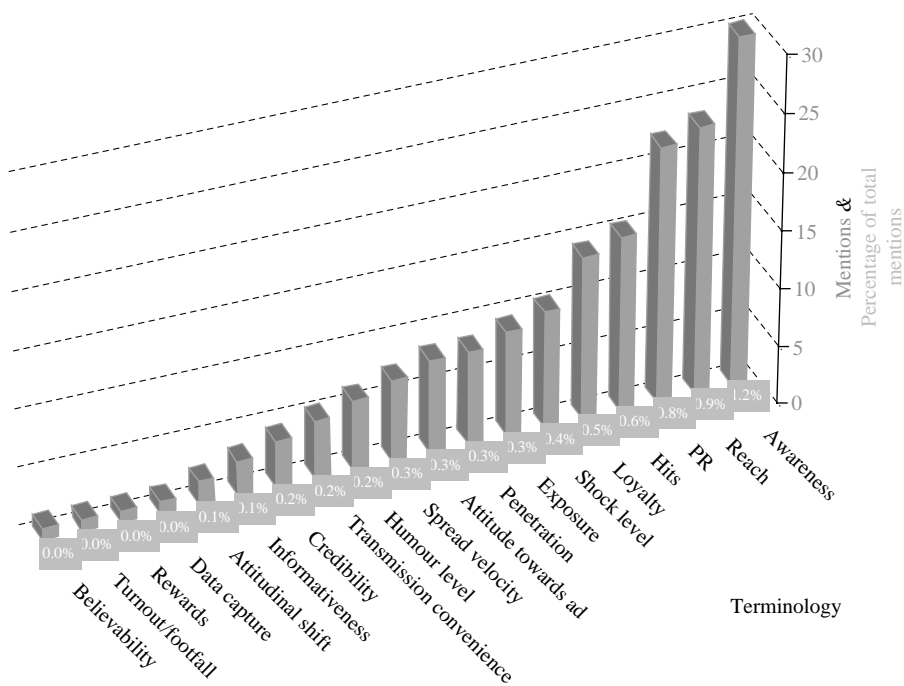


Figure 2.
Concordance of evaluation
criteria terminology

subsequent levels. This, it was argued, would give a more accurate picture of the real effectiveness of viral penetration.

Theme 4: exploring VMC evaluation criteria

Undoubtedly one of the most important points to arise from this study is the need to have clearly set objectives prior to any creative development and that they should be an integral aspect of any evaluative framework. Indeed, whilst this research found hits/downloads and reasons for transmission to be significant, it confirms the view that measures of awareness and reach are thought to be the most important factors in gauging the effectiveness of a VMC creative. The concordance study provides further support for this finding. This is significant, because the conventional view is that the most effective tools for generating awareness have been linked to above-the-line media (Davis *et al.*, 1979; Haywood, 1989; Pruden and Vavra, 2004), whilst WoM has often been linked to information gathering and for providing support for customer decision making (Christiansen and Tax, 2000; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000).

However, a contrary view is that no single metric can be a suitable measure. Reach is important but message quality in building brand equity, preference or eventually creating sales, also needs to be incorporated in any VMC metric. There are strengths associated with both these views but an understanding and appreciation of context is required. For example, reach may be the key objective for a product launch campaign, but awareness, conversion and sales objectives may be more important for another campaign.

As stated at the outset, the goal of this work was to isolate the variables associated with the evaluation of VMC and to propose an outline and preliminary VMC evaluation framework. This has been achieved and is depicted in Figure 3. The responses generated serve to highlight the need to set research objectives, and there was general agreement that these should include cognitive, behavioural and financial dimensions. We suspect that the emphasis on either the cognitive or behavioural dimensions will be a reflection of whether a *Random* or *Placed Viral* strategy is being pursued.

We conclude therefore, that the evaluation process should be shaped by the VMC campaign objectives, a view supported by the academic literature and viral marketing practitioners. These objectives will influence the choice of target audience, message, media and the tools used for its deployment. As mentioned above, three main types of objectives or goals have emerged, namely: cognitive, behavioural and financial goals.

Each of these goals should contain particular, relevant evaluative criteria. The choice of criteria will vary across different campaigns, different sectors, the communication tasks needing to be accomplished and the resources available to undertake evaluation and measurement exercises. Based on the findings from this research, the main criteria are shown in Table III.

Each of these evaluative criteria should be established at the outset of a campaign and be set out in a format providing benchmarks for both time and measurement parameters. Using the evaluative criteria, decisions can be made during a campaign whether to “abandon” the creative and leave it to take its course online; attempt to “contain” it, by applying online and offline PR; or, if successful, “reignite” it to prolong the campaign with new, revised and updated campaign objectives.

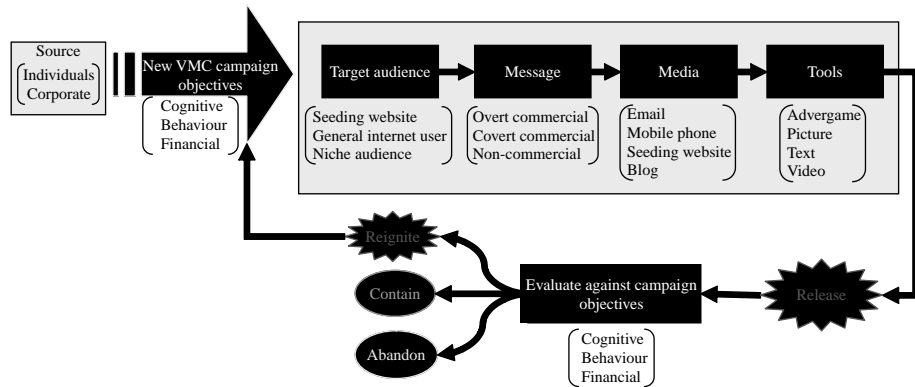


Figure 3.
VMC evaluation
framework

Objective	Evaluative criteria
Cognitive goals	Reach, awareness and knowledge
Behavioural goals	The number of hits or downloads and rate at which creatives are passed on or transferred
Financial goals	Principally ROI and developments in brand equity arising from the campaign

Table III.
Evaluative criteria

This research has shown that the evaluation of *Placed* and *Random Virals* should be based on a set of goals, of which finance is seen to be a new dimension. Within these goals the success of VMCs should be considered in terms of the evaluative criteria most appropriate to the campaign goals, but practitioners believe these will normally involve reach, awareness, the number of hits, the rate of viral transfer and some measure of financial return.

Limitations and suggestions

This research has helped to construct a broad based VMC evaluation framework. This contributes to our knowledge and understanding of the way this emerging and powerful form of communication can best be evaluated and campaigns improved. It is inevitable that pioneering research of this nature will be subject to a number of limitations. It is acknowledged that the size of the sample used limits the extent to which the results can be generalised across the sector. However, this work paves the way for further research, to build on this framework and to develop our understanding about VMC. The evaluation framework needs to be verified by others and research into VMC should be undertaken as it is an area of great commercial potential. Research into the nature, characteristics and evaluation of *Random* and *Placed Virals* also needs to be undertaken.

A further area of potential interest concerns the role of VMC in terms of a campaign's overall measures of likeability and how these can impact on brand development. Likeability scores are used as a measure of effectiveness of offline advertising, and the same measurement might be adapted for VMC work. In much the same way, how does a viral campaign impact on attitude to the ads and associated attitudinal shifts? Although these issues were beyond the scope of this project, the development of VMC calls for research to be undertaken in these areas.

This research was deliberately focused on those actively and commercially engaged with creative development and placement. Future research could involve those who are involved with other parts of the VMC process, namely receivers.

Conclusions

VMC is a developing and emerging sector and it is important that agencies are able to understand how viral marketing works and be able to evaluate the contribution these types of campaigns make to a client's marketing communications. This work confirms the thoughts of Godes and Mayzlin (2004) when they refer to the need to measure frequency, volume and informativeness. More precisely however, the literature indicates the need to have clearly defined objectives, as proposed by academics such as Kitchen (1999) and Elliot (1999). This research supports Eastlack's (1984) earlier work when he stresses the need for setting campaign objectives prior to any evaluation exercise. However, broad objectives alone are insufficient and specific evaluation criteria are necessary to provide suitable campaign measurement.

We believe this is the first VMC evaluation framework to be offered and it offers valuable insights into the nature and characteristics of VMC, based on those people who are actively involved in developing the market. This research is important because of the huge commercial opportunities offered by VMC, as witnessed by the continuing trend away from traditional approaches to marketing communications, evidenced by the continued growth of online advertising revenues.

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Further reading

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