

REPORT SMALL BUSINESS

HOW-TO

7 tips for healthy viral marketing campaigns

Efforts spread the word exponentially

BY TINA TRASTER

LANDY UNG doesn't worry about getting the word out about her company, 8coupons.com, because she figures her cus-

tomers will do it for her. They visit the site to download free coupons for restaurants, shops and salons in the East Village, West Village and the Lower East Side. And if the deals are hot enough, users can be counted on to disseminate the news. "When customers download a

coupon for an 8-cent burger or 88-cent beer, we prompt them to tell their friends about it by forwarding the coupon by e-mail," Ms. Ung says. "And they do, which makes the word spread fast and exponentially."

Chalk up another victory for viral marketing—the Internet's ver-

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PEOPLE in the average close network of family, friends and associates

sion of word of mouth—in which companies use their customers, as well as customers' social and business connections, to promote their products.

That said, some basic understanding is needed to handle viral marketing correctly. Here's some guidance on how to get started.

TIP 1 Build an e-network.

SOCIOLOGISTS SAY everyone has an immediate network of at least eight to 12 people, including family, friends and associates. A broader network can number in the hundreds or even thousands. Tap into them by placing the company's message on other people's blogs, discussion forums, social networking sites and podcasts.

Accountants at Eisner & Lubin are being prodded to maintain profiles on professional network LinkedIn.

"We are encouraging all of our professionals to create an account on LinkedIn because it's a great way to put our company's name out there and recruit talent," says Vicki Rimasse, director of marketing at the Manhattan-based firm.

TIP 2 Convert customers into marketers.

GIVE CLIENTS A REASON to pass along the business' message. Offer them an incentive, such as a discount coupon, to tell a friend. Offer humorous electronic postcards or greeting cards that carry the company's logo or URL.

Or simply offer such a good deal or exceptional service that customers will reflexively want to tell others about it.

TIP 3 Go where the eyeballs are.

SOCIAL MEDIA SITES like Facebook, Digg and YouTube are not just for teens and college kids. These vast social networks are optimal for generating buzz about a company's philosophy, product launch or good deeds.

Businesses can participate in an online community by setting up a company-specific page or by participating on the kinds of sites on which prospective customers exchange messages and information.

On its MySpace page, Sweetriot Inc. of Manhattan involved a global community in helping to fine-tune promotion by asking customers to submit and vote on artwork for the packaging on its dark chocolate.

"We use social networks to invite people to join the 'riot,'" says Sarah Endline, who has the unusual title of mastermind and chief rioter. "Artists from as far away as Serbia and Italy have sent us pieces of art."

TIP 4 Make it interesting.

MESSAGES NEED to be novel, entertaining or really useful to prompt customers to pass them along. Use fresh, creative, interactive approaches to capture people who are tired of Madison Avenue-speak. Humor is key in viral marketing. Use alluring headlines, and don't be afraid to shock. Run wacky contests. Sponsor events.

Fran Gross, president of Queens-based design firm Advantages Inc., is paying \$3,000 for a production company to create a snappy video showcasing the firm's talents. The aim is to generate lots of buzz on YouTube.

"We want to stand out and be noticed," Ms. Gross says. "We need to do that visually in 30 seconds."

TIP 5 Give them something to chew on.

AN EFFECTIVE viral marketing cam-

paign must tap into the passions and interests of its target audience. It's important to know what drives a certain demographic group. Is it the desire to be cool, to be first, to be seen as green?

All these things can provide a powerful motivation to pass on personal discoveries of hip fashions, popular restaurants and useful health advice to as many friends as quickly as possible. The trick is to make sure that the company's name becomes part of those messages.

TIP 6 Emulate a classic.

FOLLOW THE EXAMPLE of free e-mail service Hotmail. At the end of each message sent by one of its millions of customers, the company pasted a small note offering free accounts and including a link to the company. The move turned every member into a virtual "carrier" of its message.

One of the lessons: Make sure that every e-mail sent by anyone at the company includes its URL.

TIP 7 Keep it simple.

VIRUSES SPREAD only if transmitting them is an uncomplicated, straightforward process.

The medium that carries a company's marketing message must be easy to transfer and replicate: e-mail, Web site, graphic, software download. Make the marketing message direct, and shorter is better.

And don't forget to add "Tell a Friend" links to product catalogs or promotional offers.

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