

A Brief Introduction to Viral Marketing

Have you ever stopped to consider why you shared a particular meme, cute pic, or article on Facebook? Chances are you hit that “share” button instantly by the time you were done reading that intriguing article.

And chances are if it was good for you – and assuming you are friends on Facebook with like-minded individuals – it’s going to be just as good for your friends and family to share as well. And so on, and so on, and so on...

Some items go viral and there’s no explanation needed – like the recent tragic and sad death of the infamous comedian and actor Robin Williams. When I opened my Facebook newsfeed that morning it was flooded with posts and shares from friends and family who shared about his death.

But what causes something to go viral when it’s not about someone as famous as Robin Williams?

And why should you care?

Because you can take advantage of the crazy traffic that results from something that goes “viral”. You can multiply your efforts exponentially when you ride the coattails of viral traffic.

Whether it’s your Facebook Page promoting anti-aging products, your e-commerce survivor site, or even just your blog about paddle boarding, you can take advantage of the massive traffic generated by viral content.

Those articles, posts, and emails get read and shared in massive ways – just think about how you and your close friends interact with them.

And I don’t even want to mention how both my Mom and Grandma are always sending me crazy things!

So we need to have a general understanding of what causes something to “go viral”.

To take this journey, we need to walk through the natural progression of viral marketing:

- What it is
- How to get the traffic
- How to make money from the traffic

Happy marketing!

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Virality

The first thing you need to look at is what exactly is “going viral”?

Going viral is that magical moment where your site/article gets spread quickly and widely to others. This is typically done with social media (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.), but can also be done by email or even SMS. Going viral is the goal of just about any blogger or site owner, because it brings massive traffic practically instantly.

There are three principles to content going viral¹:

1. Ethical appeal
2. Emotional appeal
3. Logical appeal

If something is credible, if it invokes a sudden emotion and makes logical sense - that is the recipe for going viral.

But, to keep this document a fast and actionable read, let's look at '*what*' goes viral and leave the '*why*' for later.

- **Longer content**

Articles that are 3000+ words get almost 100% more shares than articles under 1000 words. Since most articles are under 1000 words, this is an easy way for your content to stand out. By all means keep sharing the memes and baby videos, but know that one great piece of content is more likely to hit it big than 10 small pieces.

- **Images are great**

If you include at least one image in your post on FB, you'll get 130% more shares. If you pick a compelling picture, it'll get even better results. Believe it or not, Twitter shares are also a bit over 100% better if you include a link to an image.

- **Tailor the content to your audience²**

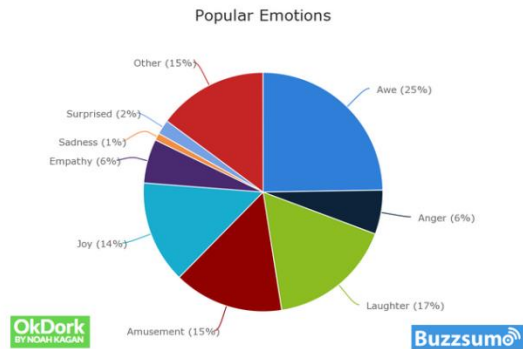
Over time you'll learn what your users will share and can adjust your writing style to what makes them respond. Short vs long. Video vs text. Localized vs global. Watch and learn.

- **Evoke emotions**

Buzzsumo looked at the top 10,000 shared articles and mapped them to emotions. Notice that negative emotions can trigger those clicks, but generally the positive emotions perform best.

¹ <http://www.newyorker.com/tech/elements/the-six-things-that-make-stories-go-viral-will-amaze-and-maybe-infuriate-you>

² http://www.cjr.org/feature/going_viral.php?page=all



- **Headlines and Images are critical³**
Headlines should inspire curiosity and make people WANT to click. Images should make people lean closer to their monitor to try and figure out what is going there. Both lead to clicks. Look at the successful sites to get ideas, split test on your own, and just pay attention to what your audience likes and adjust over time.
- **Fits one of the standard viral archetypes**
Infographics, lists, 'why' posts, 'what' posts, 'how to' posts, surveys, videos. Think to what you would like to read and share and work backwards so that it fits one of these types.
- **Lists are great – and the number 25 is the winner. Or is it 10?**
Buzzsumo says that lists of 10 perform the best based on their Meta analysis. But viral site BuzzFeed says that 25 is the clear winner. Bottom line is making your list have at least 10 items so it's meaty enough, and make sure the content fits the audience so they see the value of sharing.⁴⁵
- **Influencers have an amazing impact**
If you're able to get just one influencer sharing your post results in 31.8% increase in social shares. If your content is good enough to get five influencers, you'll see your shares go up 400%. Writing content tailored to an influencer is a perfectly valid method of content generation as is relationship outreach.
- **Schedule the good stuff**
Posts made during the week get more than 150% more shares than posts made on the weekend. Tuesday and Thursday are the best days to post.

Let's wrap this up looking at what the New York Times found when they did a survey on why people share their content⁶:

³ <http://www.viperchill.com/headline-millionaire/>

⁴ <http://blog.rjmetrics.com/2013/11/21/buzzfeed-posts-whats-the-magic-number-for-best-of-lists/>

⁵ <http://okdork.com/2014/04/21/why-content-goes-viral-what-analyzing-100-millions-articles-taught-us/>

⁶ <http://nytmarketing.whsites.net/mediakit/pos/>

1. To share valuable and/or entertaining content [most of what we think is viral]
2. To describe themselves to others [quizzes and surveys, which are among the top shared]
3. To give value to someone else [being mindful of what others may value]
4. To share info on causes they care about

If you think about it, these guidelines are all really common sense. You make content well suited for your audience in ways that inspire them to click through and read it. And, assuming they like it, they'll share with their friends. Now we at least have some actionable, specific directions based on research!

Time to take a look at how these viral sites get traffic...

Traffic

Say we have some great viral content flowing across our web site and/or FB page. How exactly do we use this to drive traffic and get shared?

There is the old adage 'if you build it, they will come'. While this can be true, your posts are just as likely to be lost in the sea of content, so they need to stand out in some way.

- **Look at your current traffic sources, amplify it, and diversify for long term success.**

Take a look at your existing site and understand how traffic is coming to you currently. That will most likely be your low hanging fruit that you can easily grow into way more traffic with minimal work. After all, if people are coming to you from Facebook currently, with a few tweaks you'll be able to get a lot more.

At the same time, you need to diversify. If you get 90% of your traffic from Facebook, one algorithm change can sink your traffic. (This actually happened to Viral Nova earlier this year) So plan on getting diverse traffic sources – Facebook, Twitter, email marketing, display ads, sponsored posts, etc – to drive traffic.

- **You need a seed for the traffic**

If a viral post falls down in the woods, does it make a sound? Unfortunately, I can say for certain it doesn't. An orphan article on an empty fan page or un-trafficked web site will never be seen. You need people to see it to assure it has a chance of going viral.

So where can we get that initial seed of traffic?

Your Facebook page!

- **Post up your article on a page that has followers**

But don't just post a link, use pictures and videos where you can as those get significantly more interaction.

- **When you make posts, you don't want them to appear dead**

Make sure your friends and family are fans and are liking your posts and consider getting a service like socialadr.com for purchased social signals to get social proof. After all, likes and shares are contagious and people are significantly more likely to engage your post after they see others doing it.

- **You'll get likes on autopilot over time as others stumble on your shared articles**

Once you have a large enough following, people will naturally come across your posts and like/share it. It typically doesn't go viral at that point, but I'd consider it free traffic.

Buying ads is the easiest way to seed traffic

- **Pretty much all of the viral sites buy traffic in some way.**

Buying traffic assures the posts get traffic to see if they have that viral spark. Even with Facebook pages, you should still sponsor posts to assure fans see the fresh articles. It doesn't have to be a lot of money, but you need to follow and track clicks/shares to see which have potential to blow up.

- **FB with targeting**

Any type of Facebook ads can work to start the viral fire. You can make dark posts, use your own page, or simply buy straight ads. I recommend you build a page and get fans, that way it reduces the overall ad cost over time and begins to build a tribe. Just remember that if you see an article is going viral, by all means push it hard with whatever ads you can.

Viral Nova uses this tactic very well, having several unrelated pages with over 1,000,000 likes. They'll post 80% Viral Nova articles and 20% articles dedicated to the niche of the fans. This works well because viral content generally appeals to mass audiences, so they'll appreciate the funny dog video next to their inspirational Jesus cartoon.⁷

- **Twitter**

Here is a sneaky option to throw out there... You can buy Twitter ads and then target the Twitter accounts of your niche. BUT you can also target other viral sites since you know their followers will most likely like your content as well.

- **Outbrain and other content networks**

While we all love and are generally comfortable with ads on the big social networks, don't forget there is a whole wide web of other sites that you can just as easily target.

- **Other social networks**

- o Post to other social places – Reddit and Imgur are good ones for getting viral spikes
- o Pinterest
- o Stumbleupon
- o etc

⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/PeopleWhoBelieve>

- **Mailing list/newsletter**

It would be foolish not to squeeze an email out of all this traffic you're getting. Digg, Viral Nova, UpWorthy, and most of the other large viral sites build email lists and send daily/weekly digests of top posts. Obviously you need to spend money to launch posts and get some seed traffic, so when you send a daily mail that's effectively free marketing. Don't pass up the possibility of free traffic. 😊

- **SMS/chat clients**

This is a unique one that needs a bit of creativity to leverage. One site uses a Whatsapp group list to spread new posts. Users receive the notification and push it along to their personal lists. This came in handy recently when spreading news about the Gaza conflict because it's this type of messaging is fairly private.

- **SEO**

Our old friend SEO shouldn't be ignored. Once you start getting a lot of content and a lot of interaction on your site (aka good quality metrics), Google takes notice. As you organically get links and social interaction, Google begins giving you some long tail rankings and your traffic grows accordingly.

- **Try, try again**

Posts that don't work now may work in an hour (or day). In other words, the same article posted at two different times can get different results. So if you have put in some time on what you think is a winner, post again a little later. And don't be afraid of reposts of previously successful posts – that's a famous way to get wild success with Reddit posts.

- **Patience**

Finally, one major thing you need to know is that every given viral site gets most of their traffic every month from 3 or 4 or 5 posts. In other words, they'll go 30-50+ posts before getting one that hits.

Branding

No discussion on site building would be complete without touching on branding. As you're building your site and working to get traffic, there are a couple very important things that need to be taken into account. It's a huge topic that encompasses books, but for our purposes let's make it simple...

- **Site Name**

Make it memorable so people will know to come back. DrudgeReport, HuffingtonPost, Reddit, UpWorthy, etc. all have names that are easy to remember. Learn from them.

- **Content**

Know your niche and make the content relevant to your audience. Don't try to be all things to all people.

There are two great examples of sites building a brand and making magic happen. TheChive is targeted to the under 25 crowd and has built a very passionate following. You've seen their shirts, bumper stickers, built unofficial local groups in major cities, and they even have a traveling festival.

Another great example is BuzzFeed who now blankets all the major media channels. I came to know of them due to their viral content on my Facebook feed, and my 13 year old son only knew of them because of their YouTube channels. They do a great job of diversifying their marketing efforts and hit a much larger audience because of it.

Bottom line: think of your site as having an identity, just like a person. All of your posts, images, name, etc. should reinforce that identity. This will resonate with people and you'll build a tribe of people that love you for it.

Monetization

Now that you know what viral marketing is and how to get some traffic, it's time to explore the \$1,000,000 question: **how to make money!**

The thing we all like about viral marketing is it drives massive traffic to your web site or fan page or wherever else you want to send them. Simply, it is a tool that drives traffic and increases your brand awareness. If your site is niche focused, you can usually find targeted products to push, while broader sites typically have less attractive options but higher traffic volume to make up for it.

Monetizing your traffic can work just like it does for every other site or product. Viral doesn't limit you in any way like other marketing methods can.

To give specific examples of viral monetization:

- **Affiliate Offers**

We all know what affiliate offers are and how they work. You can embed products in your site along with a link to buy it and make a commission. But once you have viral content flowing, don't forget you can monetize your social newsfeed as well. As an example, [this Facebook page](#) has 3,400,000 page likes, engagement of 2,400,000, posts more than every hour, and every 3rd or 4th post is an affiliate offer.

- **Sponsored Posts**

Once you have either a well defined niche or good traffic, you can start selling sponsored posts. Buzzfeed.com uses them extensively, expecting to sell 600-700 marketing packages in 2014 hitting an impressive \$120,000,000 in revenues.⁸ Nuts!

- **AdSense, Chitika, Clicksor, etc.**

The Made For AdSense (MFA) sites are back with a new twist. Viral Nova only uses AdSense for monetization and made \$400,000/month as of last year.⁹ One site owner found that a post hitting the front page of Reddit and imgur earned him a cool \$7500 in AdSense money.¹⁰

- **Site flipping**

⁸ <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-12-03/buzzfeed-said-to-expect-2014-sales-of-up-to-120-million.html>

⁹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-viralinova-might-sell-2014-1>

¹⁰ <http://unethicalhacks.com/much-front-page-imgur-reddit-worth-8050>

Once you have a catchy site and some traffic, you can easily sell the site on Flippa.com. If you build it into a money maker, you can sell for millions. Christian viral site GodVine sold to Salem Communications for \$4,200,000.¹¹ For the rest of us, completed sites with traffic+content and limited monetization routinely sell for \$500-\$2500 on Flippa.

Show you get real traffic for 6 months, sell ads for 6 months, get much better multiple. Look for high volume KWs with low CPCs for low competition. 10x monthly with only a couple of months was common back in 2012. 20-25x is the ceiling with a very strong history.

- **Direct eCommerce**

Of course the most obvious way to make money on massive traffic is to sell something of your own. Whether you have a training course, a book, or some other product, you can monetize the traffic.

By now you should realize that you can make money in any number of ways. Viral is just a tool for traffic that you can use for whatever you want.

At this point it makes sense to talk about how to run this from a business perspective. As you buy links/ads/traffic to your posts, you need to track your spend and compare it with the sales/profit that you're making. In other words, you need to make sure you're getting a positive return on your investment (ROI).

For example:

10 posts per day x \$2 Facebook ads per post = \$600/month

2 posts "go viral" per month, netting you \$500 each from AdSense and another \$75 from CPA offers.

So if you spend \$600 and get \$1075, you have a positive ROI and are making money. **At this point, it's time to scale and make massive money!**

¹¹ <http://www.thewire.com/technology/2014/01/haunts-me-night-man-behind-viralnova-viral-bubble/355677/>

Wrapping it All Up

Hopefully by now you recognize that viral marketing is both real and attainable. We've touched on what makes a site "go viral" – ethical, emotional and logical appeal.

We've reviewed the research on best practices for tailoring your content for a viral audience: posts that are 1000+ words and longer, negative posts can evoke just as much action and sometimes even more than positive, always include images with your posts, etc.

We've touched on traffic and how to plant seeds through your Facebook page and buying ads. We've gone over how important branding is and to think of your site/page as your identity.

Lastly, we've discussed the primary purpose of going viral – to make money! Through affiliate offers, AdSense, sponsored posts, direct ecommerce and site flipping.

You've seen the massive successes by dozens of sites like UpWorthy and ViralNova, which pull in millions of visitors per month. You've also seen these sites making hundreds of thousands or millions per month monetizing their traffic. Now it's up to you to make this happen.

- **You must ACT to see success**
- **Don't try to get things perfect first – adjust as you go.**
- **You *must* have patience to wait for the handful of articles that go viral.**

Your Jumping off Point - Get to Know Your Sites

The line between viral and interesting is blurry and subject to interpretation. Take a look at some of these sites, get some ideas, and ultimately judge for yourself.

- 9gag
- Bored Panda
- BuzzFeed
- Chive
- Distractify
- DudeIWantThat.com
- Engadget
- Hellou.co.uk
- iFunny
- ImgFlip
- Imgur
- IJReview
- Know More
- Mashable
- Paw My Gosh
- Play Buzz
- QuickMeme
- SFTimes.co
- Smatterist
- TheChive
- Twitchy
- Upworthy
- Viral Nova
- Zergnet

