



2 SURPRISING TRUTHS ABOUT VIRAL CONTENT (AND 2 THINGS IT MEANS FOR YOUR BUSINESS!)

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Introduction

For the purposes of this whitepaper, let's set a few things straight:

Viral content is any content that 'goes viral' (it spreads quickly via social media and is viewed, read and shared hundreds or thousands of times).

Viral marketing, on the other hand, involves specifically tailoring a piece of content to go viral (usually at the expense of any other purpose). The goal of viral marketing is to create viral content.

Right, that's simple enough. But not all viral content is the result of viral marketing. It's an important distinction (and don't worry, we promise this gets easier).

When it comes to your business, the difference between viral marketing and viral content matters. Think about it: when was the last time you were truly enlightened by a BuzzFeed list? How about that meme you just had to share with 15 people - is that really something you're going to remember next week? Probably not. These are examples of viral marketing that reach a huge number of people but, for the most part, are quickly forgotten.

On the other hand, you likely remember exactly where you read that extremely useful, in-depth article that actually made a difference with a problem you were having. The number of shares this useful article got paled in comparison to the mildly funny list, but that's not what affects you. For you and others who are searching for similar answers, timeliness and value are much more important than a fleeting chuckle or a brief, "that's pretty cool" moment.

Over time, maybe this useful article becomes so valuable to such a large number of people that it is eventually considered viral content - but that's not what really matters. It's just a bonus. What matters is that people will add, follow and like the author (and the brand) who published the post and tune into what they're saying. They'll also talk about it to any friends and family who they think it might help (yes, outside of social media). When something you create expands beyond the social arena into the real world, you know you've created meaningful resource. This is how a brand attracts 'true fans' or 'brand advocates', which we submit are more beneficial to your business than people who share that one funny thing that one time.

None of this is to say that 'going viral' is a negative thing. Instead, we want to focus on highlighting some truths about the anatomy of viral content. Then, we'll show you how to optimally apply these notions to your content and social media strategies to generate the best all around results.

Truth #1:

Viral Marketing Can Be Dishonest

We're looking at you, Jimmy Kimmel. In case you didn't know, Kimmel has been pranking the world with viral videos that turn out to be just a little bit dishonest. That video where the girl twerks herself on fire? Fake. It was a stuntwoman. Remember when there was a wolf loose in a Sochi hotel? Falsified. There are no wolves in Sochi. Well played, Kimmel. Well played.

During interviews, Kimmel has stated that he and his team are "[not in the business of making viral videos.](#)" While that might be true on the surface (his TV show makes more money than his YouTube channel), it's obvious that Kimmel and his team have some digital moxie. They didn't accidentally stumble into making some of the most viral videos of the last two years. Make no mistake, they knew exactly what they were doing - and they succeeded. Will everybody who watches these viral videos on the Internet tune into Kimmel's TV show? No, but you can be absolutely sure that they will convince thousands of curious people to at least give them a shot. And as marketers know, the conversion rate doesn't have to be overly high for the whole campaign to be deemed a success.

There's no doubting that Kimmel's exploits are genius. He knows how the media and the Internet swarm around a suddenly viral video and send everybody into a wild frenzy, which is exactly how he manipulated us. Dishonest? Yes. Effective (at least for the purpose of attracting new viewers)? Definitely.

There are other kinds of dishonest viral content [that aren't just intentional PR stunts.](#) These unintentional viral instances usually happen by accident or for the wrong reasons, but they are at least more natural than something that is explicitly created to go viral.

A perfect example of inadvertently dishonest viral content is the photo released during the US government shutdown in October 2013. [The photo depicts a young boy dressed in a monkey hat climbing on the gates of the National Zoo](#) (which a sign says is temporarily closed due to the shutdown). The boy's back is to the camera and his face isn't visible. There's a message there, right? A strong one. Loss of innocence. Something political, perhaps. People saw all of these things and probably much more; the photo went viral and was picked up by news outlets.

In the case of the sad boy at the zoo photo, the real story is quite contrary to the reasons it went viral. [The boy lives near the zoo and was just out for a walk with his dad.](#) He wasn't sad about the zoo; he was simply having fun climbing on something. He was smiling. All those shares, the commentary, the news stories, the supposed political agenda - much ado about nothing. And by nothing, we of course mean just a cute, lovable, monkey-hat wearing little boy being a little boy.



Viral marketing - and yes even viral content - can be tricky. Sharers beware.

KEY POINT: The Internet is a strange and wonderful place. But just because you read or watch something in the digital space, doesn't mean it's true. Not everything is at it seems. Be careful what you're sharing and why you're sharing it (especially when curating content). Share things that are worthy, not just things that scream "SHARE ME" in all the most obvious ways.

Truth #2:

'Going Viral' Isn't Easy (Or Cheap), Even For Big Brands

When you're not creating something specifically so it will go viral, the task of going viral is understandably a little more difficult. Kimmel's videos always had an end-goal of going viral, but what about branded videos that have achieved the same fate? Videos like the [Old Spice Guy](#) or the [Dollar Shave Club](#) that did just as well socially but also had more of a traditional brand-marketing feel to them. How did *they* do so well?

For starters, it definitely wasn't as easy as it looks for those videos to gain as much attention as they eventually did. Dollar Shave Club's founder [says their original video and some Google Ads](#) were the only marketing efforts it paid for, but they got 90% of the market price of their video ad due to industry connections. Additionally, 'some Google Ads' could amount to \$50 or \$50,000. Not exactly peanuts. But it'd be very easy for a brand to spend that much on Google Ads if it had the resources.

The truth is a large percentage of branded videos that eventually go viral [are supported by numerous campaigns geared toward helping it do exactly that](#). Whether it's direct support in the form of paid distribution on YouTube or indirectly building a larger community of potential seeders via Facebook and Twitter ads, there's usually a behind-the-scenes story when a branded video goes viral.

Consider that Red Bull, a company that does an incredible job with its digital presence, has over 43 million likes on Facebook and 1.5 million followers on Twitter. No wonder their content goes viral! For a small company, a couple hundred likes and a few thousand followers is a pretty big deal, but that still doesn't compare to the viral launching pads fostered by big brands and their social campaigns.

KEY POINT: Don't assume that creating viral videos is easy, even when it seems as though brands are able to do it with very little effort. It's not a simple task and, more often than not, there's a lot more to a viral video than meets the eye. Understanding this truth is the key to managing your own viral expectations.

What It Means For Your Business #1:

You Must Always Gauge Your Audience

We've talked a lot about the importance of knowing who your customers are and exactly the kinds of answers and interests they're searching for. In fact, we discussed this in [May's whitepaper](#) and suggested that creating buyer personas was the solution for getting to know your audience. That issue was on content marketing and this one is on social media - as you're beginning to understand, the two go hand in hand. It's hard to cultivate a strong social presence without good content, just like it's difficult to propel your content to viral heights without an established digital persona.

When it comes to viral content and marketing, the ability to gauge your audience is extremely important. And you'll never be able to gauge your target market if you don't *truly* know them. Their likes and dislikes, what they're prone to share and why, their hobbies, their biggest problems - all of these details are vital to developing and understanding how your audience will react to your marketing efforts.

For example, as we outlined above, Jimmy Kimmel's show duped a great number of Internet users with dishonest viral content. From an objective marketing perspective, this isn't a tactic we recommended. In most industries (including and especially ours) transparency is a very valuable and respected tenet, so tricking your audience is out of the question. Yes, even if it's a really, really awesome prank.

From a biased, informed perspective, however, we can say that Jimmy Kimmel (or his team) probably did their homework. We're talking about a late night TV show audience here, so it's not out of the realm of possibility that Kimmel concluded they'd actually respect him if he was able to trick them. He also obviously has a really good viral marketing team that put a lot of work into creating the videos, so he knew there was a pretty good chance they'd succeed. Kimmel was right on both counts and it paid off handsomely. The bottom line is that he stood very little chance of losing current viewers with his antics, so why not?

Another thing Kimmel clearly considered was the [timing and relevance](#) of his content with respect to his audience's interests. When twerking was all the rage, he concocted the GOAT (*greatest of all-time*, in geek-speak) twerk-fail in the history of the world. No brainer, genius idea. During the Olympics, media outlets went crazy with stories about all the stray dogs in Sochi - Kimmel one-upped them with a video of a wolf in an athlete's dorm. He knew his audience would be tuned into these topics, so he took advantage.

KEY POINT: At the end of the day, knowing your audience inside and out will allow you to create content that demands their attention. Whether that content is a viral prank, a simple DIY video or a data driven blog-post is entirely up to you and your audience. But choose wisely, because it can mean all the difference for those shares you so desperately covet.

What It Means For Your Business #2:

You Need to Set Realistic Goals

Seeing one of your articles, infographics or videos go viral - especially if you're a small business - would be a dream come true. But a word of caution: don't let visions of grandeur blind you from any less glamorous success you might already be having. You need to be realistic. Generating truly viral content is difficult and it honestly doesn't happen to very many companies. Shooting for the stars is all well and good, but not if it's entirely unrealistic.

The first thing you should probably ask yourself is whether going viral would even benefit you or your products and services. If the answer is no, then put it out of your mind so you're not disappointed. This doesn't mean that you don't need to create quality content and share it on social media, but you can't reasonably expect your content to be as insanely popular as a girl twerking herself up in flames. Give yourself every chance to succeed. As long as you're slowly increasing shares and readership, you're moving in the right direction.

KEY POINT: Don't try and mimic the exact results of the brands you see going viral. Chances are, you don't have the budget, reach or rabid fan base as Nike, Red Bull or Old Spice. So don't get disappointed when you can't generate millions of views in YouTube. What you *can* do is take creative and stylistic cues from any content you enjoy and use it to wow your small, industry niche. Set attainable goals that make sense for your business and your audience.

Conclusion

Viral content is contagious and the allure of viral marketing has an enormously strong pull. But before you dive headfirst down the rabbit hole in pursuit of that perfect viral concoction, ask yourself the following questions:

Will my audience enjoy, or even tolerate, a little bit of purposeful dishonesty (viral marketing)?

Am I being realistic with my goals and reasons for creating a viral campaign?

Do I have budget for behind-the-scenes support of my content?

Does viral content provide more value to my customers or am I just chasing the numbers?

If you answered yes to the majority of these questions, then maybe a concerted and sustained effort to 'go viral' is suitable for your brand. But most small and medium sized operations are going to answer *no*, and perhaps that's for the best. Focusing on creating highly valuable and useful content that caters to your audience's needs should be your main goal. And in reality, this might also be the best route for your content to go viral without actually engaging in viral marketing!

About WSI (We Simplify the Internet)

WSI is a digital marketing company with a strong international presence. Our Digital Marketing Consultants use their knowledge and expertise to make a difference for businesses all around the world. Headquartered in Toronto, Canada, we also have offices in over 80 countries. We're a powerful network of marketers who strive to discover, analyze, build and implement digital solutions that win digital marketing awards and help businesses succeed online.

Over the last 20 years, WSI has won multiple digital marketing awards for our solutions by adapting to the constantly shifting landscape of the Internet. We take pride in helping businesses make the most of the dollars they spend on digital marketing.

Ready to move ahead and discuss a project with a local Digital Marketing Consultant? Get in touch with one of our experts now by visiting www.wsiworld.com/get-in-touch-with-an-expert.