

Sex won't work; humor will

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Consumers don't forward sexually suggestive commercials any more often than viral virals without sex. The same goes for viral commercials that are shocking in nature. Surprising and funny viral commercials are much more effective. These are the findings research conducted by the Radboud University in collaboration with DV&J Insights an international market research agency.

Viral commercials are a much-discussed marketing strategy, perhaps because this form of advertising seems to offer a good solution to advertisement avoidance by consumers. Previous research has shown that consumers are less likely to avoid viral commercials than television commercials. Also, consumers' appreciation of these commercials is higher and they are more likely to remember viral advertising (Adforesult # 12, 2007). However, this positive effect only occurs when consumers actually forward viral commercials. The reasons why consumers do or do not forward viral commercials have not yet been explored. The Department of Communications at the Radboud University, in collaboration with DV&J Insights, has investigated which aspects determine whether or not young people will forward viral commercials.

Consumer and marketer

While marketers increasingly turn to the internet as a medium for advertising, consumers are increasingly avoiding online advertisements. A possible explanation for this avoidance is that fewer and fewer consumers passively absorb stimuli. Instead, they actively take the role of marketer. They themselves determine when and how they share their experience of (the expression of) a brand or product with others. This creates a new form of

word-of-mouth advertising in which the consumer has even more power. Marketers try to utilize this new form of word of mouth advertising (word of mouth 2.0, if you will) by using viral marketing. But it is as yet unclear why certain virals are forwarded frequently or less frequently.

In this study, four viral commercials were shown that each represent one of the following types of content: a humorous, shocking, surprising and a sexually explicit viral commercial. The four viral commercials were taken from twelve pre-selected viral commercials, three for each type of content. Choosing four viral commercials allowed the researchers to base the intention of respondents to forward the commercials on four cases.

After seeing a viral commercial respondents indicated to what degree they experienced their viral commercial as humorous, surprising, shocking and sexually explicit. Next, respondents indicated their intention to forward the viral commercials, and they indicated their level of appreciation. Those respondents who reported their intention to forward at least one of the viral commercials were asked to answer questions about their reasons for doing so. In addition, respondents indicated how many viral commercials they receive and forward and what media are used for this.

Entertainment

More than 47 percent of respondents receive viral advertisements, often via email (68 percent) and to a lesser extent through social networks like Hyves a major social network site in the Netherlands (25 percent). Out of those consumers who receive viral advertisements, nine in ten consumers looks at the received viral. More than one in three (36 percent) also forwards the viral commercial. Again, this is done by e-mail more frequently than through social networking sites. Men do so more often than women, and about fourteen percent of the distributors forwards a viral weekly. Just eight percent of the distributors sends a viral to as many friends and acquaintances as possible, but the majority checks whether the viral suits the recipient. These distributors make an assessment of whether their acquaintances and friends will like the viral. In fact, the only reason for forwarding a viral is entertainment. Consumers forward viral commercials because they like them, find them funny and experience them as entertaining. Motives such as “involvement with the product in the viral commercial”, “relaxation”, “escape from everyday life”, “a social connection with others” and “knowing the sender of the viral commercial” play no role, though prior to

starting the research, these were expected to influence forwarding behaviour. Viral commercials that consumers experience as funny and surprising have a high chance of success.

One remarkable finding was that viral commercials that consumers experience as shocking or sexually explicit are not more likely to be forwarded. One explanation for this is that with viral marketing, consumers see themselves as the distributor of the message, and they do not want friends and acquaintances to see them as the distributor of sexual and offensive videos. This is also reflected in the appreciation of the viral commercials shown to the respondents. Appreciation for virals with sexual or shocking content is lower than for surprising and especially humorous viral commercials. The higher the assigned score, the greater the intention to forward the message. The average score of the four viral commercials is relatively low, a 5.6. But even with an average score of six or less, a percentage of the Dutch forwards the viral to acquaintances anyway (depending on the viral ad, that percentage is between two and eight percent).

Conclusion

Viral commercials are a good solution for countering advertising avoidance behavior as they utilize the behaviour of active consumers. Consumers see viral commercials primarily as a source of entertainment and forward them for that reason. Consumers have higher appreciation for humorous and surprising viral commercials and forward those most frequently. The use of sexual and shocking elements in a viral ad appears to be counter-productive. The direct association of the viral commercial with the sender seem to deter consumers.

Two things should be noted alongside the results of the study. Firstly, social desirability may have played a role in answering the question whether or not a person would forward a shocking or sexual viral. Secondly, this study focused on consumers' intention to forward viral commercials, rather than the actual forwarding behavior. Nevertheless, this study provides insight into elements that play a role in the forwarding of viral commercials. The next article discusses research being conducted into the question of whether social motives play a role in the forwarding behavior within social networking sites.

