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Viral Marketing Communication for Brand*

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Summary. In the current new economic reality, the marketing experts can and should use internet as the powerful information and communication, as well as sales channel. The article aims at providing an overview of viral marketing communication related to the brand in the internet, from the theoretical and empirical perspective. The research methodology covered literature studies, secondary research, including internet resources, case studies of viral campaigns for selected brands, and primary research by means of an online survey. Results of conducted research prove the attractiveness, effectiveness, and growing role of viral communication campaigns associated with various brands on the internet. They produce various benefits, such as creation of brand community, generating activity on-line, publicity effect, creating positive experience for stakeholders, enhanced satisfaction and closer participant-brand relationship, as well as measurable sales results.

Introduction

An important role in the effective management in the current market conditions is played by mainstreaming of circumstances such as: development of resources

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and functionalities of the internet, especially the social networks; specific customer expectations; fashionable trends related to sustainable development; social responsibility and care for social issues; technical and technological progress; and strong competition between the market players.

New economic reality creates circumstances in which marketers can and should (Roberts, Zahay, 2013; Scott, 2015; Tarczydło, Kondak, Konior, 2018): use internet as a powerful information and sales channel; collect more complete information on the markets, clients, and other stakeholders; get involved in social networks to strengthen and enhance the signals related to the brand; send advertisements, coupons, samples and information to partners; gain access to mobile clients by means of mobile marketing; produce and sell individualised goods; improve the processes of shopping, recruitment, training as well as the internal and external communication; and increase cost efficiency by smart use of opportunities created by internet. Therefore, the subject of this study is the selected area of viral communication in the internet.

In an effort to find an answer to the following question: what is the role of viral campaigns in marketing communication for today brands, the research encompassed literature studies, analysis of secondary sources of information, including online resources, selected case studies, and primary research by means of an online survey.

For the purposes of this article, it is necessary to define the basic concepts.

Basis for viral marketing communication for brand

Popular understanding of viral communication is linked with viral tools (such as short videos, postings, memes, etc.) and their spreading on the internet (Bowden, 2017; Nalty, 2010; O'Guinn, Allen, Semenik, 2012). In the online resources the term "viral advertisement" (Hackley, 2010) is used, however it raises objections since an advertisement is defined as a paid, addressed at anonymous recipient form of mass communication with the market. Quite unlike the viral communication, which is aimed at generating news to stir a spontaneous interest among internet users to a degree which makes them regard it as worth sharing with friends (a completely different mechanism).

In practice, various tools of marketing viral communication are used, the so-called news and/or virals (Nalty, 2010; Roberts, Zahay, 2013): short videos, images, games, infographics, memes, etc.

It is accepted that marketing communication (in the past called promotion) encompasses a set of activities and measures by means of which the company provides the market with information on the market object, shapes the purchasers' needs, directs the demand, and reduces its price flexibility (Taranko, 2015; Wiktor, 2013). Today's communication acts and/or processes are characterised

by bi-directionality, interactivity, digitalisation, as well as integrated and multi-media activities (Kitchen, Proctor, 2015; Stawarz, 2015).

Viral marketing communication constitutes a part of the so called holistic marketing communication for brand (Franzen, Moriarty, 2015, Keller, 2013; Pogorzelski, 2015), which includes (Jose, Romero, Consolacion, 2013; Tarczydło, 2014a): a creative concept, identifying partners, engagement of experts, knowledge of purchasers' preferences with respect to the values presented in the communications (reference to stakeholders' emotions and creation of experience), objectives, tools (appropriate, innovative, exceptional when compared to the competitors), adequate and multimedia communication channels, schedule of activities, the scale of the undertakings which guarantees maintaining the target audience attention, methodologies for estimating results, and flexibility. It is associated with inducing the human central nervous system, especially the brain, and specifically the conscious and subconscious processes (Tarczydło, 2014c). In the centre of attention it places the targeted recipient who is guided in his/her behaviour by the reason, heart, and spirit. This model incorporates various techniques, stakeholders' involvement, technical and technological progress, and development of functionalities of the internet.

The viral marketing communication essentially aims at making the internet users spread the viral message voluntarily (Finne, Grönroos, 2017). This aim is achieved by a variety of channels, such as social networks, internet fora, blogs or content aggregators (Tarczydło, 2014b). Usually the process results in a snowball effect: internet users who are infected by the message pass it over to further participants. The viral spontaneously reaches the expanding consumer groups at no additional costs to the marketer.

The procedure for conducting a viral campaign may include the following stages (Chaffey, Smith, 2017; Scott, 2015): 1) studies focused on the buyers (defining the user) and the circumstances in which they function; 2) design of the viral and making it available in the appropriate place and time; 3) involving the opinion leaders and celebrities, finding partners, if possible, to have a one covert brand; 4) monitoring the developments; 5) estimating benefits for the brand and all the partners; 6) controlling the results and undertaking further actions. As part of the campaign, cyclical actions can be implemented to maintain interest, and for this purpose new virals need to be created.

It should be stressed that viral marketing communication constitutes a part of the activities in the area of viral marketing which belongs to today's marketing measures, there are also proponents of such a scientific concept (Chaffey, Smith, 2017). Viral marketing is a set of marketing activities (such as research, buyer's behaviour, communication, analytic processes, etc.) which result in a piece of news being passed around by the internet users in a way similar to a virus. In this study, the analysis is deliberately limited to viral marketing communication

online as a part of viral marketing concept which evolved from whisper marketing consisting in spreading of word-of-mouth to create a wide media coverage for the brand, product or event.

In the economic reality, it is not always the marketer who initiates the analysed phenomena. In the era of prosumption expressed through increased activity of the internet users and their desire to get involved in marketing activities (Pogorzelski, 2015; Scott, 2015), the viral related to a brand may actually have its origin in their community. Viral marketing communication is facilitated by the fact that people enjoy being in the centre of attention, and by initiating interesting subjects for conversations they are stimulated to become active and involved (Jose, Romero, Consolacion, 2013; Tarczydło, 2014c; Tarczydło, Kondak, Konior, 2018) which is accompanied by emotions. The fact that information is passed by a person we know clearly helps in this respect. The affect towards the person is transposed to the category which is the subject of conversation. The stakeholders of the viral marketing communication are organisations, brands, ordinary internet users, celebrities, experts, and all interested parties.

Overview of reports from thematically related research

In the accessible sources of information, the following thematically related research reports are of interest: "Konsumpcja treści online a marketing" (Kolenda, 2017), "Oglądanie różnych rodzajów contentu tv/video na różnych urządzeniach" (Hupa, 2018a), "Wideo w internecie" (Interaktywnie.com, 2017a), "Content marketing" (Interaktywnie.com, 2017b), "Social Media 2016" (Niżnik, 2018), "Rynek reklamy internetowej w Polsce – kontekst i content marketing 2015/2016" (Netsprint, 2018), "Marketing szepty" (Interaktywnie.com, 2010). Their analysis provided valuable information related to viral marketing communication for brand.

Viral content is made available predominantly via internet communicators, and the most popular applications among the internet users are: WhatsApp (800 million users); Facebook Messenger (700 million); QQ Mobile (603 million); WeChat (600 million); Skype (300 million); other: Viber, LINE, Kik, BlackBerry Messenger, KakaoTalk (Kolenda, 2017).

A video containing valuable content is one of the most readily shared viral materials online, whereas social media users' preferences turn to short films on music and telediscs, sports coverage, information reported by acquaintances, content uploaded by influencers/vloggers (Hupa, 2018b).

Video materials which attract attention to the largest degree and therefore increase the chances for subsequent sharing are: surprising, moving, exhilarating, striking, appalling (Interaktywnie.com, 2017a).

Opinions published online are reliable for 75% of Poles, each internet user passes information on the content found on the internet to on average five further persons (Interaktywnie.com, 2010).

Looking from the perspective of practical aspects, the most effective forms of communication are the forms which engage the audience in a subtle way and influence their behaviour.

Almost 16% of marketers pointed out to viral communication as the top priority in the activities online (Netsprint, 2018).

Content most often shared by Facebook users in their profile is funny graphics/films (34%); charity actions/social campaigns aimed at helping others (31%); charity actions/social campaigns aimed at helping animals (31%); national/international news (29%); articles/interviews/sessions/short commentaries, etc. (22%); content from official brand fanpages (18%); blogger/vlogger publications (18%) (Niznik, 2018).

Expert assessment (ranging between 1 – unsatisfactory and 5 – very good) showed the following effectiveness of the tools applied in the framework of viral marketing: content video, i.e. video material with valuable content: 4.5; articles: 4.4; infographics: 4.2; photographs: 3.5; when the activities referred to above are incorporated in organisation management, they have an impact on the attainment of the following goals: improved image – 4.7; supporting other marketing activities – 4.4; sales activities – 3.8 (Interaktywnie.com, 2017a, [http](#)).

Analysis of available reports supports the view that the studied area is important, and revealed a research gap consisting in lack of studies on the role of viral actions/campaigns in marketing communication for brand.

Methodology and results of own research

For the purposes of this study, case studies have been conducted on viral campaigns of selected brands, as well as a survey among internet users to obtain their opinions on the phenomenon of viral communication.

Some types of content are passed around by the internet users more readily than other. The examples of campaigns and undertakings with viral element provided in Table 1 were observed during the case study research.

The presented examples provide the basis for the conclusion that viral modes of transmitting content effectively guarantee the active involvement of internet users, as well as other stakeholders (enterprises, internet portals, celebrities, bloggers, YouTubers, etc.). In the analysed cases, the viral materials were: films, textual elements, photographs, images, and infographics.

Table 1

Undertakings with viral effect for selected brands

Name of campaign or undertaking	Description of activities	Viral effects obtained
“Star Wars: Classic Stories”	Following the release by De Agostini in January 2018 of the series of cartoons, during the period of two months a cooperation was initiated with journalists and well known bloggers who were interested in the subjects related to Star Wars and cartoons, under the motif “For true Jedis only”. Twenty two personalised messages were sent with the motto and a letter to the recipient	Upon the receipt of the messages, the journalists and influencers readily published content related to the campaign, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 40 articles and short texts related to the Star Wars cartoons funny pictures in social networks, – the published content triggered the viral effect. They were shared by the readers, which resulted in the campaign reaching 630 thousand consumers. The number of views totalled 400 thousand (Wolczuk, 2018)
Promotional campaign for Vogue Polska magazine.	The first issue of the Vogue Polska took place on 14 February 2018. The premier edition featured a controversial cover by Jurgen Teller with two internationally renowned Polish models Anja Rubik and Małgorzata Bela. The project stirred emotions and received a widespread response among internet users, but also other stakeholders	The photograph on the cover echoed in the social networks, resulting in postings, commentaries, as well as Real-Time Marketing cover remakes. The access to new projects was provided by, among others: Wavelo, MyTaxi, official fanpage in the Krakow AGH Facebook site, “Polska w dużych dawkach”, CoffeeDesk, SOLGAZ, Onet Rano, Jakub Kralka, as well as ASZ Dziennik (Kuchta, 2018). According to data published in the Wirtualne Media portal (2018), the premier issue of the Vogue Polska magazine was the subject of 75 thousand entries. The content related to the magazine obtained 1.3 million likes, 60 thousand comments and 4.7 thousand shares. Moreover, a well-known YouTuber Olfaktoria made a film entitled “VOGUE POLSKA - HIT czy KIT?” (HIT or CRAP), which was viewed by over 171 thousand internet users (Goldmann, 2018). A vivid discussion developed under the screen with almost one thousand comments. The video material was also shared when using official Facebook profile

Source: own work on the basis of the conducted research.

An internet survey has been conducted for the purposes of this article and its results have been presented below.

The survey involved 235 persons, 46% women and 54% men. The majority of respondents (58%) were 21–23 years old. The age structure of the remaining participants: below 18 years (2% respondents), 18–20 years (23%), 24–30 years (3%) and 4% over 30 years. The research on the internet was conducted to increase the probability of approaching the users who came across the viral marketing communications practices. Digitalised respondents spend a significant part of their time surfing the web and communicating with others via the social networks. In particular, the attention was focussed on obtaining the respondents' views on methodological use of viral marketing communications.

The first part of the survey covered questions related to identifying the discussed phenomenon and the capability to define it. All the respondents declared they had continuous access to the internet via their mobile phone, and almost 65% indicated they were familiar with the concept of viral marketing communication as a modern marketer's tool.

The respondents were asked to list the types of virals; the following results were obtained:

- nearly 90% of the responses mentioned video films as viral tools,
- slightly fewer respondents (87%) pointed out to images,
- to 25% of the respondents such a tool can be slogan or a textual information,
- approximately 11% of the survey participants indicated computer games and audio files.

To sum up, the viral marketing communication tools which were listed most often by the respondents were video films and graphics files, e.g. postings and photos.

In the quest for information on the popularity and significance of the viral marketing communication, the respondents were asked to specify the brands which were the object of such activities. The participants most often mentioned the representatives of the mobile telephony sector. The questions concerned also the impact of the analysed activities on the recognition of the brand which served as an umbrella for the viral campaign or action.

Figure 1 shows that in the respondents' opinions actions involving viral marketing communications related to brand have a significant impact on brand recognition according to 24% of the respondents, and have a limited impact on brand recognition for 67% of the respondents. The remaining members of the surveyed group (9%) indicated that viral elements in the campaigns have no impact on brand recognition. In the authors' view the responses can be interpreted as indicating that the respondents were not aware which brand was the object of the viral marketing communications activities.

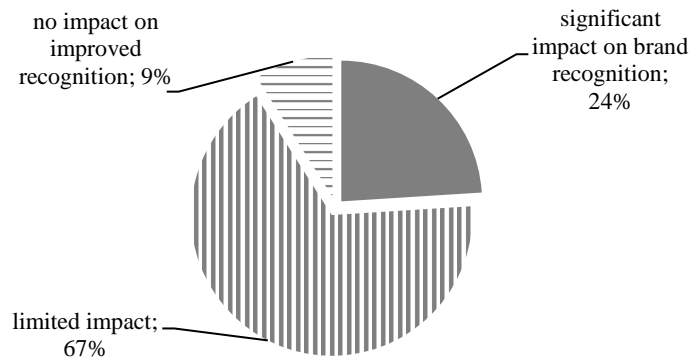


Figure 1. Use of viral marketing communications and brand recognition in the respondents' opinions

Source: own work on the basis of the conducted research.

To the question if the viral marketing communications stimulated them to use the offer (Fig. 2), the majority of the respondents (66%) answered negatively, whereas only 18% responded positively.

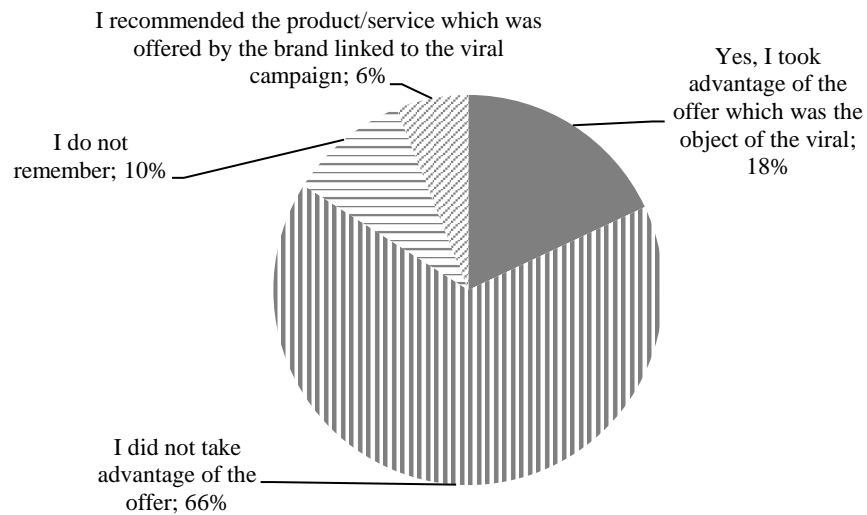


Figure 2. Viral marketing communications and use of the related products

Source: own work on the basis of the conducted research.

Only 6% of the respondents declared they had recommended the product to friends/family as a result of their involvement in/knowledge about the viral communications campaign related to the brand which served as an umbrella for the products/services.

The respondents provided their opinion on the motives for launching a brand-related viral campaigns (multiple-choice questions with a possibility to choose more than one answer):

- over 83% of the respondents think that viral communications campaigns launched for the benefit of a brand were aimed at increasing sales of the concerned products and services,
- slightly fewer, i.e. 74%, of the respondents pointed to the desire to expand the brand community,
- more than half of the survey participants (52%) expressed the opinion that the activities are aimed at stimulating the involvement of the internet users,
- 23% of the surveyed responded that viral communications campaigns are organised because of the presence and popularity of such activities in today's market environment (i.e. they are fashionable),
- over 15% of the respondents indicated the provision of entertainment and obtaining active leads as the main reasons for using the analysed campaigns.

The survey participants were also asked about the role played by the viral marketing communications in the current activities constituting methodological brand creation. Almost all of the respondents (90%) stated that viral marketing communications were a proper tool for brand creation in modern times. Only 10% of the respondents expressed their negative attitude to the analysed activities. The most often indicated risks involved in the use of viral marketing communications for brand promotion included:

- stimulating anger/irritation among people,
- the risk of reaching a wrong destination,
- poor alignment with the other elements of the campaign for brand promotion,
- the risk of losing control over the propagated viral.

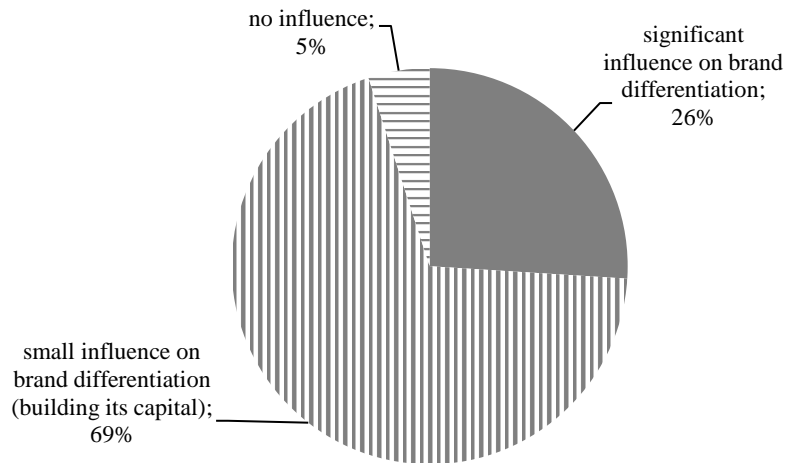


Figure 3. Viral marketing campaign as a tool which differentiates a brand from the competitors (expands its capital)

Source: own work on the basis of the conducted research.

Approximately one third (26%) of the surveyed think that the use of viral marketing communication allows for effective differentiation of the brand from the competitors. According to 5% of the respondents, viral communication has no influence on the creation of brand capital. A significant majority of participants in the survey stated that the analysed activities had a limited impact on brand differentiation, which has led to the authors' opinion that the respondents' awareness of the effects of viral marketing communication is low, which increases the attractiveness of this tool among the marketers.

The respondents pointed out the benefits and weaknesses related to the viral communication campaigns:

- a) to 85% of the surveyed viral campaigns provide a low-cost possibility to reach potential consumers;
- b) 70% of the respondents indicated that an ordinary image file can become a viral element;
- c) to 54% of the surveyed enhancing the brand value, awareness and position is of secondary importance;
- d) 43% of the respondents think that the fact of free propagation of the viral campaign constitutes an advantage;

- e) the most important weaknesses of the viral campaigns were: critical opinions and untrue rumours which damage the brand (66% of the respondents) and modifications resulting in the change of message (65% of the respondents);
- f) in the opinion of the participants, lack of control over propagation of the elements of the viral campaign, as well as stopping the viral plays a secondary role (according to 50% of respondents); of secondary importance is also the possibility that the message arrives at an undesired location (32% of respondents).

Conclusion

The results of the conducted literature studies, analysis of research performed to date, case studies of selected viral campaigns for brand, as well as the authors' primary research, lead to the conclusion that the role of a methodically implemented viral marketing communication is growing in the current market conditions. Research confirmed attractiveness and effectiveness of the analysed activities within viral marketing communication for brand. Analysed campaigns produce various benefits, such as creation of brand community, generating activity online, publicity effect, creating positive experience for stakeholders, enhanced satisfaction and closer participant-brand relationship, as well as measurable sales results. At the same time they pose a threat due to the virus mechanism and unpredictable internet users' behaviour.

The strength of the analysed activities is derived from the fact that a viral may be an ordinary image file or a film recorded by means of a mobile phone, which is highly accepted by the mobile and digitalised stakeholders who engage in the world of brand.

As a consequence of development of IT systems supporting marketing activities online, organisations are capable of indicating who should be targeted and by which effective means, and how it can be used for the benefit of the brand they own.

From the marketers' perspective, viral campaigns related to brand have proved effective in attracting and engaging internet users. This allows effective spending of the budgets allocated among other to marketing activities, distinguishing oneself from the competitors, reaching a larger audience in the most effective way, building relations by creative experiences, building a community around a brand, and generating various benefits for all the involved entities.

Undertakings in the analysed area match very well the current market tendencies. It has been observed that viral marketing communication campaigns produce above-average results with high degree of participant acceptance and attractive costs incurred by the marketers.

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Wirusowa komunikacja marketingowa na rzecz marki

Słowa kluczowe: wirusowa komunikacja marketingowa, viral, generowanie ruchu w sieci, skuteczność komunikacji marketingowej, marka

Streszczenie. Nowa rzeczywistość gospodarcza powoduje, że marketerzy mogą i powinni wykorzystać internet jako istotny kanał informacyjno-komunikacyjny i sprzedażowy. Celem artykułu było przybliżenie wirusowej komunikacji marketingowej na rzecz marki w sieci, w ujęciu teoretycznym i empirycznym. Metodyka badawcza objęła studia literaturowe, analizę wtórnych źródeł informacji, w tym zasobów internetowych, studia przypadków kampanii wirusowych dla wybranych marek oraz badania pierwotne z wykorzystaniem ankiety internetowej. Przeprowadzone badania potwierdziły atrakcyjność, skuteczność i wzrastającą rolę wirusowych kampanii komunikacyjnych wokół marek w internecie. Przynoszą one różnorodne korzyści, takie jak: budowanie społeczności marki, generowanie ruchu w sieci, efekt publicity, kreowanie pozytywnych doświadczeń interesariuszy, wzrost satysfakcji czy zacieśnianie relacji uczestnik-marka, a także wymierne wyniki sprzedażowe.

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