The Viral Concept: the Winning Ticket of the
Romanian Online Advertising Industry

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The connection between the steady development of the Internet in Romania in the last five years, as channel of transmitting the marketing message, and the viral concept, as method of transmitting the message, may become the winning ticket for the Romanian online advertising market. Thus, in the current socio-economic context, any company who wishes to be successful in the virtual space cannot ignore the viral marketing techniques for several reasons. Firstly, we are talking about the profile of Internet users who tend to constitute a new social group. Secondly, we are talking about the thirst for information. And, last but not least, we are talking about the appetite for online chatting, statistics showing that 62% of the Romanian Internet users consider it a very "savory" information channel.
This article tries to explain, in brief, what viral marketing is, which are its peculiarities, advantages, risks, as well as the limitations of its use, and which the strategies of a viral marketing campaign are. We will illustrate by giving successful examples from the Romanian online market.
Keywords: *viral marketing, Internet, promotion, campaign.*

Explaining the concepts. A Brief History

Viral marketing (VM) is a promotion method in which the advertising message is put across from one person to another without the direct intervention of the promoter. Basically, VM uses the pre-existing social connections (groups of friends, blogging networks, families, etc.) in order to spread the viral message. Its name comes from an analogy with the way in which computer viruses propagate. Sometimes VM is also referred to as "buzz marketing", "word-of-mouth", or "word-of-mouse" (a pun).

Viral marketing is a relatively recent term, introduced in the online advertising dictionary by Steve Jurvetson, in order to describe the marketing strategy of Hotmail, the free email service[1]. The latter was set up in 1996 by Saber Bahtia and Jack Smith, who were bothered by the fact that they couldn't send messages to their friends via the electronic mail system at their workplace. Hence, in each email sent via Hotmail, the two youngsters included the specification that the receiver may benefit from free email services at the address www.hotmail.com. Moreover, the receivers were asked to recommend the service to their friends or acquaintances.

Actually, by using the Hotmail email, every person became, involuntarily, its sales agent. In less than two years Hotmail gained 100 million subscribers, much faster than any other company in the history of media. It cost them half a million dollars, comparatively less than the millions of dollars spent by the rival services. Currently, one out of four Internet users has a Hotmail account. Its success determined Microsoft to buy the company for 400 million dollars. And, very importantly, Hotmail became the main email services provider in countries like Sweden and India, where it hadn't been advertised at all.

Methods of transmitting the viral message

VM may occur *spontaneously* (communication, which is generally isolated, is initiated by some individuals, free from the influence of a company), or in an *organized manner* (in which case groups of individuals participate

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[1] Although its official birth year is 1994 (in "Media Virus", the book by the media critic Douglas Rushkoff), it was only brought to the public's attention two years later, when it was introduced in the Netscape newsletter (Steve Jurvetson, "What is Viral Marketing", 1st of May 2000, www.dfj.com)

voluntarily to promote or attack a brand, for example).

There are many VM techniques, but the most widespread are:

a) *Site recommendations*. By including a button on a site, either a new window is opened, or a form appears which must contain the email address of the receiver (or receivers) and that of the sender. This method of viral promotion is met especially when recommending articles on sites with editorial content. We may also include here recommendations for products or services directly on the sites that market them.

In order to optimize the box of recommendation, it is advisable to place it in a visible spot on the site, and in the appropriate context (for example, in the case of articles, the link is placed at the bottom). Furthermore, it is compulsory to include the name of the sender and of the receiver of the viral message, as well as a box for writing a short message which helps to personalize the email. When recommending products, besides the link to a site, an image may be attached. Optimization implies confirmation that the recommendation was sent, perhaps by showing a pop-up window on the site.

b) *Recommendations by means of games and competitions*. The principle is simple. We are talking about encouraging the participant to send an invitation to his group of friends to take part in a competition or a game.

c) *Participating in online polls*. Internet users are asked to take part in web-surveys on the site or via email (if they have subscriptions to newsletters). In exchange for giving their email address, incentives such as signing in to competitions, raffles, or various discounts are offered.

d) *Electronic mail* is the most popular means of viral promotion. More than half of recommendations are done in this way. Inserting a recommendation box in the email has at least three advantages: it encourages the action, gives the possibility of measurement and control of the recommendation. The viral email is similar to the text "click here" from a banner, and it varies according

to the nature of the offer. It is best suited to letters, invitations, and social campaigns. Moreover, including the signature in the viral message leads to an increase in the number of emails, because dissemination is accompanied by credibility.

e) *Forums* are preferred by companies because clients tend to trust a community of influential and persuasive people, who should tell them exactly what products are worthy and must be bought. VM is unconventional, and it relies on opinion trendsetters. In order to create an "advertising buzz", marketers should choose carefully the "social trendsetters". They should be very influential and persuasive, and should be able to spread the word about the product, service, or event which is promoted (Kotler & Armstrong, 2004). Therefore, the fight to be won will be with community leaders because they are the first ones who must be convinced to use the new instruments.

f) *Micro sites*. They are web spaces created by companies for entertainment (sometimes they make a parody of events more or less connected to the brand). Information consumers are tempted to recommend the site to their friends because it is highly attractive and interactive.

g) *Links on Instant Messaging Services*. This is one of the most widespread ways of transmitting a viral message.

h) Other means of viral promotion are *videos, free online games, PowerPoint slide shows, blogs and social networks* (which exploit the need of the present user to socialize and be informed), or mobile phone networks (*viral mobile marketing*).

Advantages and Limitations
Viral marketing has good and bad parts. Its main advantages are:
▪ It is much *cheaper* than traditional advertising.
▪ It is *catching*, because users are the ones who send the message.
▪ It is *easy to send and to reproduce*: via email, on the site, by downloading software, electronic books, videos, etc. The digital format renders copying very simple.

▪ VM instruments are *easy to develop*. With Web 2.0, creating an electronic book or a video clip is relatively easy, without requiring special knowledge.

▪ It *involves people* in activities they do with pleasure (consumers feel the need to forward them).

The VM campaign www.bererece.ro took place between April 21st and June 21st, 2005. Users had to post on the site amusing or imaginary situations (text and photos), in which they'd show the yellow or red card.

A highly appreciated VM campaign in the Romanian virtual space was the one meant to promote the beer Bergenbier by means of a game on the micro site www.prieteniistiudece.ro. Initially, the game "Codul nescris al mersului la pisoar" (The Unwritten Code of Taking a Leak) was addressed to a strictly male audience, while female users were directed to the partner site Ele.ro.

▪ It attracts *a huge audience*, in a very short period of time- it increases exponentially the visibility of a business (pyramidal system).

▪ It inspires *instant credibility*, and thus a sale is made much more easily.

▪ It transforms the Internet user in an *ambassador of the product*. According to Opinion Research Corporation International, a typical Internet user tells 12 other persons about his online shopping experiences. The same source mentions that an average consumer recommends a favorite film to 8 persons from his entourage, and a good restaurant only to 6 people.

▪ It is a good *complement* to the other types of marketing, such as email marketing, or affiliated programs. In addition, more and more advertising agencies notice that, nowadays, their clients ask for viral marketing campaigns via Internet to complement radio or TV advertisements.

VM is, however, a very powerful communication tool. It must be used cautiously, due to its **risks and limitations**, which may lead to failures.

▪ Viral marketing *does not work for any product*. It is efficient for products which are in fashion or which are luxurious. It also works on markets with low competition, or

when the well-known rivals can't come up with a similar viral program.

▪ Without a specialized software, *it is quite difficult to track the data* for measuring the success of a viral campaign (the receivers of the emails, the number of people who forward the messages, or if the respondents fit in the targeted segment).

▪ By sending them via Internet, *messages can be distorted*, in comparison to media messages. Whether or not the message is altered involuntarily (some users modify, distort, or deviate messages, out of ill will or simply for entertainment), it can have disastrous effects (such as harming the image of those who initiated the viral campaign). That's what happened with the fake email from Ericsson, in which the company "promised" to give the latest phone to the one who made the recommendation and forwarded the message to 10 valid addresses. Although Ericsson took a stand almost immediately, the company's image was quite damaged after the incident. The message disseminated with unbelievable speed to an impressive number of Internet users.

▪ It can *annoy clients*, by making them receive against their will excessive quantities of spam. Sometimes, the reverse effect may

be obtained.
- Another risk is represented by the possibility that a viral promoter could *lure in* a great number of consumers to what will turn out to be a low quality product.
- VM can be used *to boycott famous brands*. But advertisements "by word of mouth" can harm, just as they can greatly help. According to Kotler and Armstrong, good news travels fast, but bad news travels even faster! For instance, almost every year, before the beginning of summer a message meant to discredit Coca-Cola products circulates via email (in 2006, for example, Coca-Cola was mixed with Mentos candies). Obviously it is worth to ask ourselves how many of these pieces of information are real. However, the problem is that, considering the speed with which the information travels on the Internet, and the tendency of users to forward these messages to all their friends and acquaintances, these emails spread very rapidly to a very large number of people, the companies being thus exposed to a considerable pressure from the general public.
- There's the risk that the initiator of the viral campaign may be labeled as *spammer* (it happened in Romania with the "million lei page", www.paginadeunmiliondelei.ro).
- *Excessive success* can turn into a risk, with disastrous consequences, especially in the case of VM campaigns which have attractive offers (an invitation, a coupon, a sample, etc.). Too many requests could threaten the company's position. A solution could be to specify that the offer is limited, or that it is honored under certain conditions.

Other **obstacles** that could impede the viral effect:
- *The size of the message*. Sending the message, as well as its impact, are essential. If the viral content is a large size video, potential respondents might not open it.
- *The media format*. For young users, familiar to the latest technologies, this is not a problem, but one should be careful that the viral message is distributed in a standard format, available to most users.
- *Attachments*. Even though there shouldn't be any restrictive factors, there are compa-

nies which don't allow the download of attached files, by installing filters to block the messages.
- *Technology*. If the company's server cannot cope with the message traffic, the whole VM campaign is compromised.
- If s*hock techniques* are used without an explicit warning, they can harm the brand (for example, not all Web users enjoy the explosion of a human brain, or "hair implant" on a model).
- *Legal and deontological constraints*. All viral operations must respect the legal framework regarding advertising and direct marketing. Any infringement may be legally punished. Moreover, after a viral campaign, at least two email addresses are gathered: that of the sender of the viral message and that of the receiver. That does not mean that the latter offers the permission of sending promotional messages.

VM Campaigns

A VM campaign starts by sending a marketing message to a certain group of persons. The marketing representative must establish the objective beforehand (gathering email addresses, increasing the traffic on the site, increasing the fame of the brand without selling anything in particular, simple messages, games, funny videos, meant to disseminate a positive or negative experience, etc.).
Generally, a VM campaign can be carried out in two ways:
- By promoting a high quality product. It is absolutely necessary to analyze things from the consumer's point of view: one should never recommend a product if it wasn't tested or if one is not convinced it is of the highest quality.
- By offering a direct advantage. Some companies reward those who are involved in the dissemination of the message (shopping coupons, fidelity points, gift coupons, discounts, and, rarely, financial rewards).
These two motivations shouldn't necessarily be combined. There are cases in which the popularity of a product simply exploded because of its quality. If a state of enthusiasm is created around the product which is pre-

sented, no reward is necessary. Here we shall mention the example of the book *Romanul românesc pervers* (The Perverted Romanian Novel), published by Polirom Publishing House, in the spring of 2005. The novel was written by Kiki Vasilescu, after "Crai de Curte veche", by Mateiu Caragiale. The book became a best seller because of the debates on forums (which took place before the actual printing), and also due to the advertising among friends and acquaintances via emails.

source: email

www.RomanulRomanescPervers.ro

Some of the main **factors** which lead to the success of a viral marketing campaign are:

▪ Firstly, the information which should be forwarded must be *worthwhile*. The more valuable the information, the greater the possibility of it being forwarded. Each sent email must include the company's Web site address, or the address of a micro site which offers more details.

▪ Secondly, VM relies on the *word* FREE. The great majority of VM programs offers small rewards to draw attention (free email services, free software, samples of the product, offering a free electronic book which must include the site's address, games, electronic greeting cards, screen savers or screen mates downloaded straight from the site, etc.). Even if "cheap" may be somewhat interesting, "free" is the watchword.

▪ *Closing partnerships with sites* which offer complementary products or services to the ones being promoted. For instance, if X company sells hardware components, whilst Y company is focused on software, X and Y can promote their links reciprocally. A user who needs high performance software is directed to the X site to improve his system's effectiveness, and conversely, someone who bought a piece of hardware from the X site is guided to the Y site in order to buy appropriate software.

▪ *Making use of humor*. People always forward jokes to friends and family. Even if the funny content of the email has nothing to do with the business, the site's address must be included at the end.

A particular case is represented by the use of black humor in viral advertisements. Although many users enjoy it, black humor should be used cautiously, because not all Internet users accept controversial, shocking, or even illegal commercials. In addition, there's the risk that the agencies which designed the advertisements, or even the ones who finance the campaigns could be involved in scandals. In 2004 alone, the VM industry was confronted with two big scandals in which the companies Ford and Volkswagen were involved. In 2005, three commercials circulated via email. Two were for Ford Ka (in which two sacrificial acts were presented- a pigeon was squashed on the hood, and a cat was beheaded on the car's trap door), and one was for VW Polo (its topic was terrorism). Viral advertisements have had an unexpected effect, around the world. But reactions from the people, who were indignant, from the press, and from animal rights' protection organizations, have

dragged the two companies in long-term scandals. Although the car manufacturers stated publicly that these were just experiments (Ford), or that they had nothing to do with the real authors of the spot (VW), the results were spectacular: the two manufacturers benefited from exceptional free media coverage. However, some genuine anonymous viral anti-advertisements, elaborate and clearly meant to harm the competition, may appear.

▪ Creating a *virtual prize* for sites from the category to which our business belongs: a graphic folder with the text "Best site, awarded by…" An email is then sent to the winning site's webmaster, inviting him / her to "collect their prize" and to post it in a visible spot on the site.

▪ *Using the existing social networks* (such as MySpace, Hi5, Linkedin, Orkut, YouTube etc.). Most people are sociable. Researchers from the field of social sciences tell us that every person develops constant relations with 8 to 12 persons (friends, family, business partners, etc.). Increasing the number of contacts depends on the social status. The social position is decisive for a network of tens, or even hundreds of relations. On the Internet, this means that people gather email addresses or favorite sites. Marketers use these relationship networks to their advantage, so that they can quickly deliver their message. Exploiting these networks is achieved mainly by continuously encouraging members to forward the information they consider relevant or useful.

▪ One can *create advantages by using other people's resources*, either by affiliated programs, which allow placing links or images on member sites, or by encouraging webmasters to post on their sites for free some articles which observe copyright terms, or to send press releases, which announce the launching of a free product or service, to online media editors, etc. Very soon, these advantages will repay the marketers' efforts with exponential answers.

▪ *Using viral engineering*. Viral engineering, a key concept for the effectiveness of a VM campaign, refers to making recommendations "flow", and, in some cases, to adding a playful dimension which helps to increase the number of recommendations. By means of viral engineering, we can measure viral efficiency, which allows us to take corrective actions in due time. For example, in the case of sites with editorial content, we can evaluate which articles are the most recommended. We shouldn't ignore the fact that there is a certain number of recommendations which cannot be counted, namely if email users apply the copy-paste method.

▪ *The "fertility" of cyberspace* refers to the power which the first receivers of the viral message have, both online and offline, to recommend. It can be evaluated on collective level (in the case of virtual communities), but also on individual level (forum moderators, persons in charge of associations, webmasters).

▪ *Contextualizing*. A viral application has more chances to succeed if it is contextualized according to the interests or profession of the Internet user. Contextualizing is important especially for viral campaigns connected to B2B environments (e.g. arcade type games), where the professional universe and culture are essential.

▪ *Personalizing applications*. VM proves effective only if its creative component is so good that it inevitably becomes viral. Moreover, in order to be successful, any viral application should allow personalizing. In most cases, the sender starts to individualize (his / her name is the simplest characteristic that can be added). Usually, personalizing is modular, according to the receiver's character.

Successful Romanian Examples of Viral Marketing Campaigns
a) What drives women crazy? (*Ce le înnebuneşte pe femei?*, rom.) In Romania, the first real online viral marketing campaign took place in March 2004. It was carried out by Headadvertising and Ogily PR and it was called "What drives women crazy?" The campaign was made of short clips, filmed by amateurs, and placed on various portals or sent via email

(www.celeinnebunestepefemei.ro). The campaign continued in September 2005 by launching the site Axe.ro, under the slogan "What drives men crazy?"

b) Batman and Teletech TV sets. The best known viral advertisement from the .ro space (summer 2005), is the one created by the Leo Burnett agency, for Teletech TV sets. "Batman Teletech" is a clip which lasts a few seconds and which shows two men throwing from the steeple a man dressed as a priest. After a grievous moan follows a loud thump, and one of the two men says: "You fool, I told you he was a priest! But you insisted… It's Batman, Batman!"

The advertisement, although shocking from many points of view (the simple fact of lynching a priest in a commercial for TVs is stupefying), was extremely controversial when it was launched, and subject for many heated discussions on Internet forums. But only few people know that Batman Teletech is a viral commercial created especially for the Internet and for being sent via email. The people from Leo Burnett used black humor and stupefaction to have the necessary impact among Internet users. The truth is that the advertisement circulated rapidly via email, and only few Internet users didn't receive this spot. The result was quite a heavy impact on the Romanian public who was not used to this kind of advertising. Furthermore, different comments were posted on forums, ranging from: the spot was banned by the Censorship Commission, it was going to be released on TV but it was still being tested, it's an old joke from the early 90s, which featured ninja, not Batman, etc. Not to mention the great number of people who imitated the character.

www.celeinebunestepefemei.ro

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eAraees0LY

c) The shortest VM campaign is **"Hacking Acasa.ro"**, which only lasted for four hours. It was designed to simulate hacking the site www.acasa.ro, but the campaign aroused indignation and disputes among the loyal users of the portal.

d) Launching the new Seat Leon (www.seatleon.ro) consisted of a teasing campaign. The news that some episodes from a cartoon were released was sent via email and Instant Messaging services (www.episodul1.ro, www.episodul2.ro, etc.)

e) Another campaign with a marked effect, not only in Romania, but also abroad, was the one meant to promote **Ursus beer: A World Without Romania** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSoruzRkj7g&NR). Although no statistics were carried out, few Internet users haven't seen this video clip. It started as a link sent via Instant Messaging services, and it spread instantaneously because it was in English.

f) However, the most spectacular Romanian Internet campaign, which used the VM concept to the fullest was "**Să trăiți bine**!" (Live well!). This was a dynamic, incisive campaign, which Traian Basescu used as a candidate to the presidency of Romania. The

"Digital Guerilla", the most efficient and spectacular element of the campaign, was based entirely on the email (especially between the two polls). The strategies were based on "folk energy", but focused also on social communication. Moreover, people's wish to find a place to express themselves was satisfied on this site.
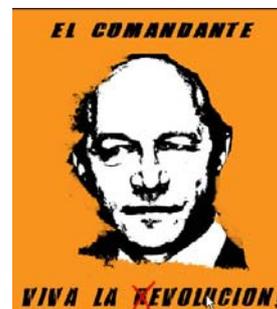
www.basescu.ro

Thus, a page was created on the site Basescu.ro, on which Internet users were asked to post their own campaign creations (some of the images were even "spicy"). Anyone could forward these images to friends or acquaintances (so practically the pyramidal system was used in order to avoid spam). Furthermore, a movement which was impossible to control was created, because all users were receiving and forwarding via email or mobile phone the designs they had posted on the page.

g) Although it isn't produced by a Romanian, I shall mention the video **Numa Numa** (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=60og9gwKh1o), because it is connected to Romania. The clip was designed by a 19-year old American, Gary Broslma, who filmed himself while singing Ozone's song, "Dragostea din tei". Numa Numa, spread via email, is the second most watched viral video of 2006, with 700 million views.

Conclusion
So, is the viral concept on the Internet the winning ticket of the Romanian online advertising industry? The above-mentioned experiments, which benefited from spectacular media coverage among Internet users, allow me to draw the conclusion that, although so far there are not very many Romanian VM campaigns, the Romanian companies will know how to use viral commercials as a successful recipe of online advertising.

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