

Getting Your Message **Beyond the Choir**

Many organizations start a campaign with the primary goal of getting their message out to the general public. Instead of spending valuable resources talking to a group that already shares their vision, they want to target new audiences. On the surface, this seems like a logical strategy. Social change occurs when new ideals are embraced by a large percentage of the population—not just those “in the choir.” But through years of experience with viral marketing successes like the Meatrix, Grocery Store Wars and The Story of Stuff, Free Range has a different approach: Getting your message out to the public is less about reaching out to the masses and more about developing, nurturing and “arming” the choir so they can make themselves heard and become evangelists for your message.

Communication studies indicate that we are less inclined to trust messages delivered to us by unfamiliar sources than those

delivered by our peers or family members. Inspiring and enabling your core supporters to pass your message along may be your best bet for converting the masses, especially if you don’t have a mountain of money or Oprah by your side. Simply put, if you are like most non-profits or socially responsible businesses and working within a limited budget and timeframe, **invest in your existing choir members so they become your evangelists.** This is the key to a viral hit.

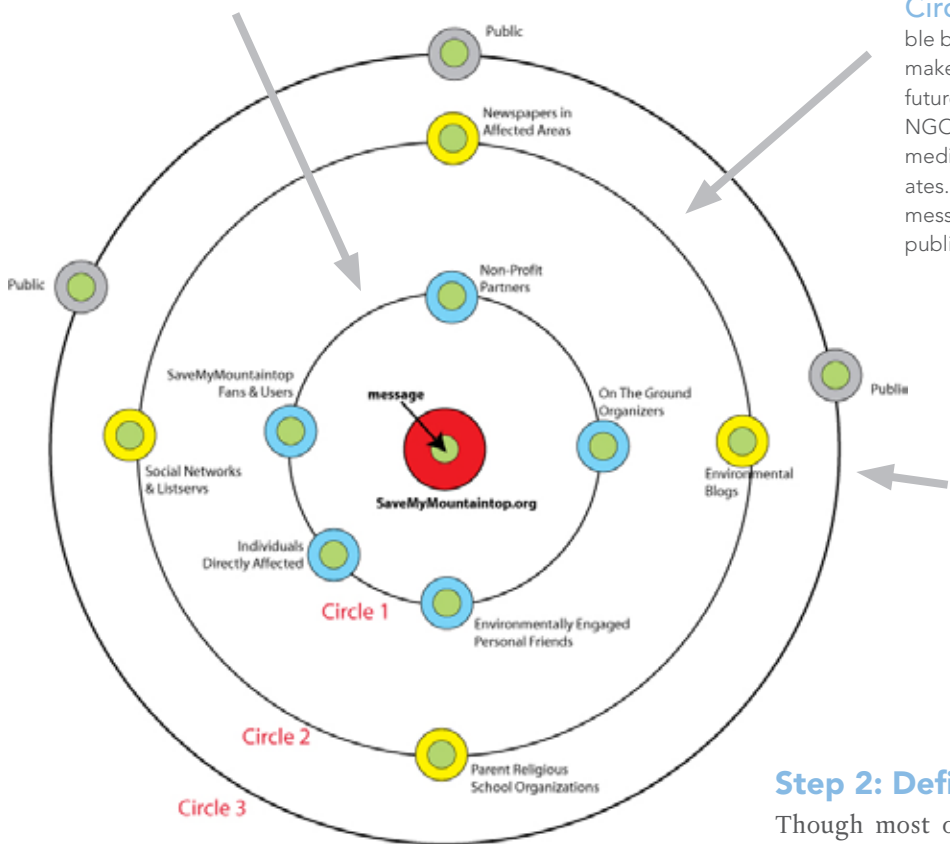
Definition: Viral Marketing and Viral Advertising refer to marketing techniques that use pre-existing social networks to produce increases in brand awareness, through self-replicating viral processes, analogous to the spread of pathological and computer viruses. It can be word-of-mouth delivered or enhanced by the network effects of the Internet. Viral marketing is a marketing phenomenon that facilitates and encourages people to pass along a marketing message voluntarily. Viral promotions may take the form of video clips, interactive Flash games, advergames, images, or even text messages. (Wikipedia)

Step 1: Map Your Audiences

The first step toward arming your choir is mapping out your target audiences and identifying the people who will be most excited about your campaign messages. Imagine these audiences as a series of concentric circles around a particular campaign message. The closer the circle, the more access you have to the people in it, but also the smaller it is. The circle furthest away represents the general public. It is the largest circle, but also the hardest to reach.

For an environmental campaign fighting mountain top removal, your diagram might look something like this:

Circle 1: These are the audiences that you have direct contact with—your membership list, coalition members, friends, peers, etc. These core supporters have the greatest potential to act as your campaign evangelists. You know how to reach them, they share your vision, and if given the right tools, they will take your messages and spread them to their friends and networks, many of which reside in Circle 2.



Circle 2: Audiences in this circle are not directly accessible but have a natural affinity for your issues and ideas that makes them likely campaign participants and potential future supporters. They may be non-profit organizations, NGOs, progressive bloggers, progressive on- and offline media, neighborhood groups, schools or religious affiliates. Getting this larger group on board to spread your message is the key to reaching the final circle, the general public.

Circle 3: The masses. You could spend millions on an ad campaign to reach the public, but absent the linkages provided by Circles 1 and 2, it will be difficult to make your message stick.

Step 2: Define your parameters

Though most organizations aspire to reach Circle 3, Free Range’s success in viral marketing has greatly been derived from helping clients cultivate Circle 1 and ultimately expand Circle 2. With an expanded and energized Circle 2, the message inevitably finds its way organically to Circle 3.

Now that you know WHO you are after, it's time to think about HOW to reach them. Current technology offers so many ways to spread information—blog advertising and outreach, social networking profiles, email blasts, viral entertainment, widgets, podcasts and more. It can be a daunting array of options, and choosing the right one for your organization, campaign, and audience is crucial. Start by asking yourself a few questions:

What online technologies does my target audience use? Identifying the places where your audiences hang out will allow you to place your campaign messages more strategically, and make it easier for them to pass those messages along. If your audience is a facebook crowd, then developing a social networking outreach strategy will help you reach deeper. However if your audience only goes online to shop and e-mail, then e-mail blasts and banner ads will be more effective.

To find out where your audiences hang out, Free Range recommends asking them. Conducting audience research will provide you with valuable communication channels to expand and distribute your message, catalyzing its effectiveness.

What assets do I have? Money? Human resources? Time? If you have no time and no money, don't start by developing social networking profiles or a viral entertainment piece. A viral movie costs money and maintaining relationships on social networking sites takes time, so start with coalition building within your personal and organizational network and an e-mail blast. With more resources at hand consider developing relationships with bloggers that care about your issues and will write about your campaign on your behalf. With more resources at hand, you can create rich media products that are likely to inspire pass along activity and then leverage it directly with traditional PR, paid advertising and on-the-ground field operations.

Step 3: Mastering the Message

“Either you're going to tell stories that spread, or you will become irrelevant.” —Seth Godin, All Marketers Are Liars

Before your message can spread, it must be crafted in a way that allows it to travel. Beyond identifying and locating

your audiences, you must take time to understand what motivates them and what messages they will feel compelled to share. Building a successful campaign means arming the choir with a compelling story that they'll want to pass on. Each person you are trying to connect with has a unique viewpoint that informs his or her choices, a personal narrative defined by values, professional and personal networks, interests, and environment. Your job is to understand the broad outlines of your audiences' narratives and speak in a way that moves them emotionally..

Warning! Though it's important your message resonates with your evangelists, remember that the goal is to move the message beyond the choir. Avoid language that is too “insiderly” or academic. In other words, respect the wisdom of the choir but bring an outsider's approach that allows the message to transcend what has been done in the past.

Develop and package your message with Circle 1 in mind. You know these people and organizations the best, and from a viral perspective they are your most important audience. A message that excites them has the best chance of making it to the next level. Think about the language they use and their points of reference.

Free Range did just this in the case of The Meatrix (www.themeatrix.com). Knowing we wanted to arm our Circle 1 factory-farming campaigners with something they could truly use, we spoke to them about what had been working for them and what had not. They felt that typical factory farm horror stories only stayed in their echo chamber and that messages about disgusting conditions for food production turned the general public off completely. Understanding their need for a more consumable piece of media, we moved the story into a cartoon world and avoided images meant to horrify and disgust. The result was an energized, appreciative choir armed with a message that would ultimately spread to millions.

Step 4: Getting the Word Out

Now you're ready to start the viral process.

Always start with Circle 1. Design a campaign that will allow the choir to become active evangelists. Your job is to make it as easy as possible for people to adopt the message as their own and pass it along. Give them Tell-A-Friend tools, badges, banner ads for their websites and blogs, images for their newsletters, and any other information and resources they may need to integrate your message into their work. Make the campaign inviting to be a part of and people will not just watch your message, they will spread it as if it were their own.

Example: When Free Range launched The Story of Stuff www.storyofstuff.com, we reached out to over 100 organizations and asked them to join The Story of Stuff campaign. To encourage participation we gave them four different ways to engage: 1. Include the website link in an e-mail blast or e-newsletter. 2. Place a button or banner ad on their homepage. 3. Create a special movie micro-site on their website. 4. Use the DVD at a conference. To make it easy for them to implement, we supplied coalition members with all the corresponding creative assets and text, and a free copy of the DVD. We also included these assets and a downloadable version of the movie on The Story of Stuff website to encourage further distribution: <http://www.storyofstuff.com/downloads.html>

Next, Circle 2. These are like-minded groups who will be receptive to the same kinds of messages as your core, if you can reach them. Find out where they are and what sources of information they trust; buy media and seek earned media in places they go; and create relationships with them whenever possible. Target them directly and reinforce the messages passed on by Circle 1 through blogger outreach, blog ads, social networking outreach, offline events, traditional PR, banner ads and listservs.

Finally, Circle 3. Though these audiences can be reached through expensive ad campaigns, we recommend reaching

them instead through the viral channels established when you effectively inspire Circles 1 and 2. If you do have the funds, you can reinforce your messengers with Google AdWords and media buys, but expect a minimal return.

Successful viral marketing is a healthy balance of art and science. This paper has given you the broad strokes of the science, but when it comes to the art, you need to enlist the right storytellers and coalition builders.

If you'd like to hear more about Free Range's Strategic Services, call 202.234.5613.

Example: The issues addressed in The Story of Stuff range from political reform to labor rights, to environmental protection to body image. To reach out to Circle 2, we made a list of all of the issues addressed in the movie, and the media outlets and organizations that would be interested in the movie. Using the list in mind we thought through all of the ways to reach them. We reached out to bloggers and gave them a sneak peak of the film; many responded positively and requested a film teaser for posting. We responded by giving them what they asked for; and also placed blog ads, entered the movie into progressive film festivals, organized a movie premiere and asked friends and coalition members to spread the movie on various social networking sites.

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