



Spread the Word through *Viral Marketing*

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"Viral marketing" (Tell-A-Friend, HTML emails, email signatures, Newsletters, tips, etc.) is an admittedly strange name for the online version of word-of-mouth advertising. The essence of it is that you empower visitors to your website to tell other people about your company and your site.

What's great about viral marketing is that it is low effort and low expense. You provide something that encourages people to spread the word, and momentum builds. The kicker is that when marketing is viral, people are telling friends, colleagues, and other people they know about your Web store — which is the most influential form of marketing.

The classic example of viral marketing is Hotmail. Emails sent using this service contain an advertisement for Hotmail at the bottom of the message. At one point, the service signed up new customers at a rate of 120,000 a day, thanks almost exclusively to this viral marketing tactic.

Plenty of large companies (and small) use viral marketing to spread the word quickly and inexpensively about their offerings. It can be just as efficient for small businesses.

Here are 4 easy ways to incorporate viral marketing into your website promotion efforts:

1. **Make it easy to spread the word.** A key element of viral marketing is to make it simple for people to convey the message you want them to send. One of the most popular methods for accomplishing this is the "email this to a friend" (a.k.a., Tell-A-Friend) feature. This functionality enables one or two-click conveyance of an article, promotion, feature, product, service, website address, or other item from your website. See it in action here: <http://www.schemaonline.com/contact/friend.html>

The easier it is for someone to spread the word, the more likely they will be *viral* for you. Ask SCHEMA Consulting about building these functions or finding a "canned" option. You should consider the "tell a friend about this site" feature on your site, which automatically sends the friend a link to the site.

2. **Include links in all outbound communications.** The Hotmail example is classic — a pitch for the service every time someone uses Hotmail — but it is not the only way to use email to encourage viral marketing. One of the easiest ways to drive site traffic is to include a pitch or company tagline as a standard element in all email messages you send. Include a link at the end of all company emails to your site (or even a product special, your newsletter sign-up form or another promotion-ready feature).
3. **Think value.** Viral marketing works even better when you provide something that people care about. Let's be honest: Few people are going to forward copies of a company press release or a purely self-serving article. They are likely to forward high-value tips, resources that help them make decisions, or provide information on a product/service. When you are designing something that you hope will encourage viral marketing, create it with your customers in mind. Give them a reason to be *viral* for you.
4. **Reward your "marketers."** Providing a payback for referrals to your store can encourage people to spread the word. For example, you can offer extended weeks or months of a subscription service in exchange for customer referrals. Businesses such as health clubs do this all the time in the offline world by adding extra months of membership to club-goers who send business their way.