



Can I Make My Ad Go Viral?

Though the proportion of ads that “go viral” in any meaningful way is small, it is possible to increase your odds of success. We have identified factors that influence the success rate: promotion, support in other media, and specific elements of the creative, including the use of humor, celebrities and edginess. Before implementing a viral strategy, however, you should consider carefully whether such an approach is right for your brand.

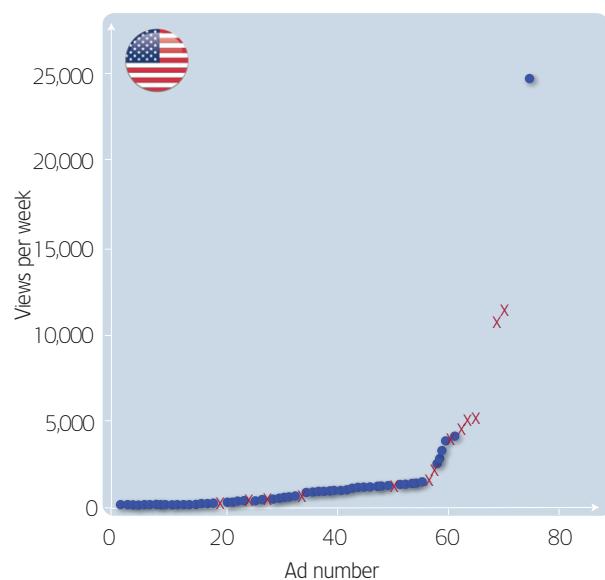
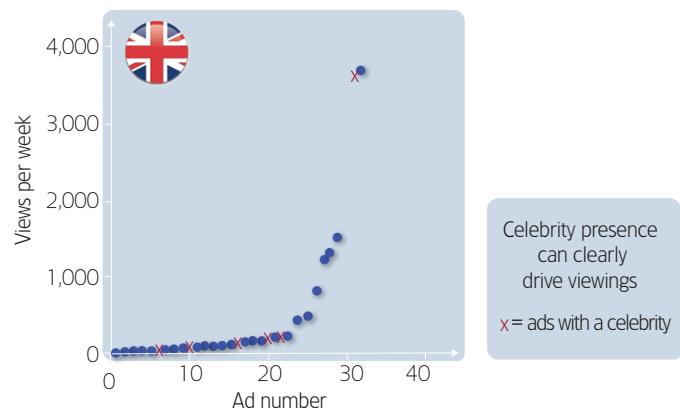
Viral potential is very limited for most ads

The reality is, the chances of achieving a major viral success are pretty low. Very few ads achieve high enough viewing levels to make substantial marketing impact. We've estimated that the average number of total YouTube views for typical ads is just 150,000 in the United States and 34,000 in the UK.

To help assess the criteria for viral success, we conducted our own research. We identified 102 ads (31 from the UK and 71 from the United States) that we had researched using our Link copy testing approach, and that were available on YouTube. We used YouTube's publicly available viewing info as our measure of viral success. The number of views (aggregated across all posted versions of the ad) was divided by the number of weeks the ad had been posted to create a “views per week” measure; this measure of viral spread ensures a fair comparison regardless of how long the ads have been on YouTube.

The following charts show all YouTube view-per-week scores across ads. Only 5 of the 31 UK ads (16%) achieved over 1,000 views per week, and only 9 out of the 71 U.S. ads (13%) achieved over 5,000 views per week.

Few ads achieve heavy viewing on – less than one in six ‘take off’





What determines whether an ad will go viral?

There are many factors that will determine an ad's viral impact.

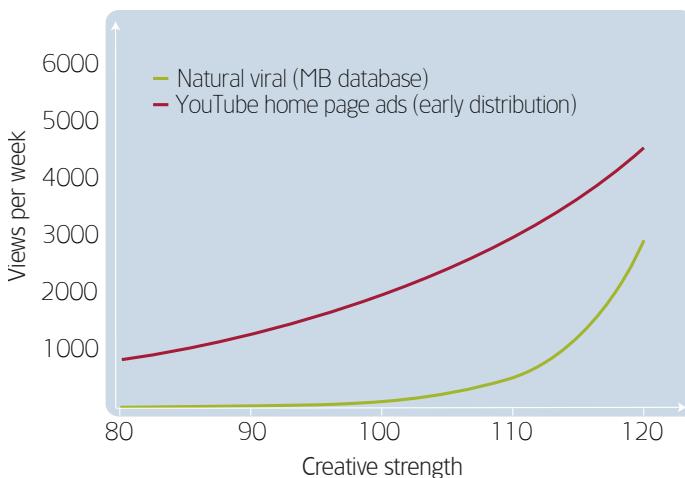
Celebrities

Celebrity presence can clearly drive viewings, especially in the United States. In the charts on page 1, ads with a celebrity are marked with red cross.

Promotion

Videos that are advertised on YouTube have very different viewing patterns to those that only get "natural" viral viewing. They get more views overall, but they also get more unpaid viral views — typically around double the number of views that would have occurred naturally without promotion. YouTube home page ads are directly or indirectly responsible for 86% of all views; they increase expected views by over 600%.

YouTube promotion ensures weaker ads achieve views – only the very best start to catch up via natural viral



Work conducted by Millward Brown for YouTube

Linked Executions

Executions that are linked by a common theme or device seem to benefit from being part of a campaign. The ongoing BlendTec campaign is a great example. Every time a new "Will it blend?" video is released, that new viral has the potential to generate additional viewings for previous virals.

Paid Media Support

Often campaigns will be supported by paid media. The video ad itself may have appeared on TV, at cinemas or in paid online video slots. Other media such as posters or print can play a supporting role. PR can have a major impact, first in seeding the ad appropriately among opinion formers, and later in "fanning the flames" to ensure wider awareness. Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty" benefited from all of these elements; viral viewing was driven by a major campaign that used TV, outdoor, online and PR.

Campaign Placement

Ads that are easy to forward are more likely to go viral. Forwarding can be facilitated by investing in a prominent home for the videos (such as a dedicated campaign microsite, a Facebook page or a branded YouTube channel).

Ad Name

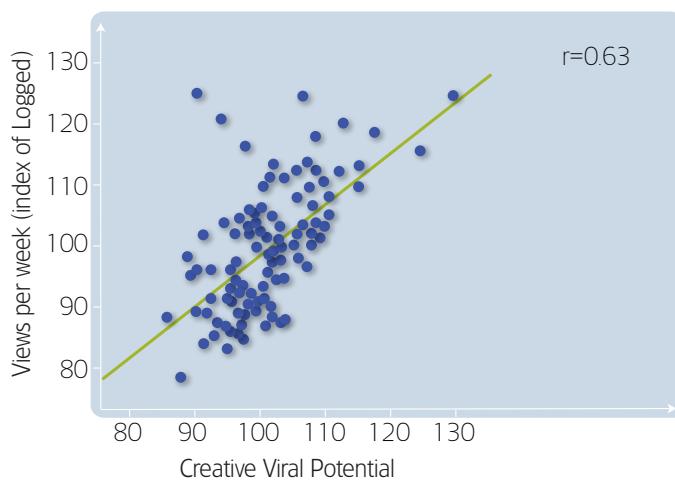
The name attached to the ad can contribute to it being easy or difficult to find. Advertisers can only control the name of the "official" versions of their videos, but they should consider the implications of how they do this. Among random surfers, an intriguing name may help drive viewing, but among searchers, a more obvious name may help increase viewings.



Creative factors

Aside from the factors listed above, the main factor that will influence whether an ad will go viral is the strength of the creative. To help predict in-market viral viewing, we have taken measures from Link to build a measure of Creative Viral Potential. The relationship shown below (based on the 102 ads identified earlier), helps us isolate and understand some of the major creative factors underlying viral success.

We have developed a Creative Viral Potential (CVP) measure which can help predict viral success



So what creative factors drive viral viewing? We identified four measures that related to views per week.

Brand-linked Memorability

Our established Awareness Index measure (our measure of ad memorability) had a strong correlation with viewings on its own.

Presence of a Celebrity

Twenty-three of the ads within the dataset contained a celebrity (or celebrity grouping). For each of those ads, we rated the status and popularity of those celebrities using online search volume as captured via the publicly available Google Insights for Search interface. Using this, we benchmarked the popularity of all the celebrities in our dataset against the popularity of Angelina Jolie, a celebrity who consistently achieves a very high search volume. (This benchmarking is necessary because the Google Insights tool provides a search volume index score, rather than an absolute search volume figure.) In general, the more popular the celebrity, the higher the ad views.

Distinctiveness

Being distinctive is very important. To succeed virally, ads need to stand out from all other ads, not just those from direct competitors. Distinctiveness has been critical to the success of some of the most notable virals, including Old Spice's "The man your man could smell like", and Coca-Cola's "Happiness Machine."

Buzz

The other factor was what we've called Buzz — the quality that makes someone want to send an ad on to someone else. To understand this area of buzz, we commissioned a quantitative research project specifically designed to examine this phenomenon. The study, conducted in the UK, involved over 3000 consumers and 29 different films. The films ranged in their origin and style; some were well-known virals, some were lesser-known virals, and some were regular TV adverts.

The findings were clear. The act of sending an ad on contains a consequential element — personal endorsement. In sending a viral on, the sender is saying that he or she thinks it's good. Sending a bad viral is rather like telling a joke that falls flat — embarrassing for all involved.



The research identified four factors which we summarized in the acronym LEGS. Or in other words, strong viral ads are...

Laugh out loud funny

The sender of the viral often needs to be sure that the recipient is going to laugh when they see it. The likelihood of this outcome will be gauged against their own reaction to the film. A wry smile won't usually motivate sufficiently for the viral to be sent on. Four of the top five films researched over-indexed in terms of being funny.

Edgy

Best described as the sort of film most people wouldn't show to their mother, edgy films operate on the edge of social acceptability. They might be viewed by some as being offensive, shocking, sick, or unpleasant. Importantly however, they combine this edginess with humor. The shock element contained within the film is felt, on the whole, to be funny as opposed to gratuitous.

Gripping

Finding a film gripping, engaging or involving isn't the same as enjoying the film. Few people would claim to "enjoy" looking at a car crash, but the majority of us rubber-neck as we pass an accident site. Very gripping films are not necessarily particularly enjoyable; similarly, very passive films can be extremely enjoyable. Importantly, both positive and negative emotions can drive a consumer to be gripped by a film. This research shows that, while a film that is gripping is not guaranteed to be forwarded on, a film that isn't gripping is unlikely to be.

Sexual content

We chose not to include any particularly sexually focused films in the research due to common decency and industry codes of conduct. That is not to say, however, that we underestimate the importance of sexual content as a motivator for the forwarding of a film — particularly among younger males.

Dangers of viral ads

The pursuit of an edgy or sexually focused viral should not be to the detriment of the brand character or proposition. An ill-advised film could be harmful to brand equity if it goes viral, because the brand will have no control over its longevity in the public eye. A semi-pornographic film for many brands would detract, rather than enhance, the brand promise and position.

There seems to be a growing trend for brand managers to suggest or request a viral campaign because "everyone else is doing it." Before embarking on a viral project, marketers need to consider the question: Would the brand air a particularly Funny, Edgy, Gripping or Sexy film on TV or in the cinema? If the film wouldn't fit with the brand on TV or in the cinema, it won't fit any better when it's watched on a PC. Media choice should be driven by the communication objective, and not the other way around.

Just as an off-strategy TV or cinema ad can harm a brand's equity, so can an ill-advised viral. The goal, then, should be appropriate distinctiveness, rather than the reckless pursuit of buzz.

Luck

Finally it should be acknowledged that, despite the analysis presented above, there is still an element of luck involved. Some campaigns will inspire mash-ups, spoof responses, re-edits and other online chatter. At this point, the marketer starts to lose control of their campaign, and things may take unexpected twists and turns, but with luck, they could be benefiting from a massive viral surge in brand interest.

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