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CATCHING A VIRUS

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Much like the flu virus's ability to disseminate across populations, viral marketing can be described as the contagious rate at which marketing messages are able to spread as they are unleashed onto the Internet.

The appealing feature of a viral marketing strategy is that it can transform the consumer into an endorser, turning him/her into a persuasive influencer among peers. Since the source of the marketing message—a forwarded e-mail with a link to a particular website or a posted comment on a blog—stems from the consumer, it instantly becomes a more credible endorsement; a recommendation other consumers are more willing to listen to and believe. Why? Because the consumer never lies.

The Internet allows the consumer to speak candidly about feelings toward specific products, services and brands. If honed, this uncensored forum offers a plethora of insight for marketers into the true sentiments of their target market. And as viral marketing grows, so does the need to measure its impact.

One of the challenges for researchers when conducting studies is that they must draw from a pool of consumers that opt-in to participate and discuss their attitudes toward a particular product, service or brand. Due to increasing lifestyle demands, consumers are either becoming too busy and less willing to participate in traditional focus groups and telephone surveys, or are only willing to participate if there is an incentive. This leaves researchers with a smaller number of consumers to draw from, making it more difficult to control the quality of data.

While online surveys and focus groups have alleviated some of these issues, making the process more accessible to consumers and more efficient for marketing professionals, there still remains the issue of extrapolating unbiased impressions and opinions.

In the research industry there is a race to provide methods which will allow companies to act as a fly on the wall and listen as consumers converse about their products, services and brands. As a result, new research methodologies have emerged offering marketers tools to measure and forecast consumer feedback found in online communities in real time, a function not available with traditional research methods.

The new methodology entails analysing speech attributes and then separating positive comments from negative ones. It identifies popular opinions—who is saying what (demographic breakdown), when (real-time access), and where (geographic distribution). This allows marketers to mine the expanding online community, listen to and forecast the uncompromised sentiments of consumers as they relate to such subjects as ad campaigns and new product launches.

The advantage of this emerging methodology is the ability to acquire unsolicited comments made on a variety of products and services in real time. This, in turn, means that firms can react to consumers immediately and keep abreast of new trends. It also increases the quality of research and adds a more insightful dimension to market and trend analyses.

The challenge of measuring viral marketing is the ability to exclude “spam blogs”—which are designed to instigate positive opinions about specific products, services and brands—from the mining and analysis process.

What should marketers look for in viral marketing measurement tools? While tools such as e-mail embedded programs will track the effectiveness of viral marketing campaigns and basic data mining software will comb through blogs and message boards, they only provide the number of product mentions and they do not identify whether those mentions are positive or negative. As a result, your data may be skewed due to the inclusion of spam blogs.

The most effective and sophisticated methodologies available for measuring viral marketing should include:

- 24-hour real time access offering the ability to track and trend;
- Trend analysis over various increments of time (days, months, years);
- Sentiment measurements and analysis;
- Demographic and geographic analysis; and
- The ability to develop and customize detailed reports.

While the Internet has given every consumer a voice, it also allows marketers to get closer to them while making sure they hear exactly what that voice is saying.