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CONTENTS AT A GLANCE

PART 1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
<i>Minty-Fresh Explosive Marketing.....</i>	4
<i>Monitoring the Blogosphere for Viral Eruptions.....</i>	5
<i>Creating a World Wide Rave.....</i>	7
<i>Viral Buzz for Fun and Profit.....</i>	9
<i>When You Have Explosive News, Make It Go Viral.....</i>	11
PART 2. BUILDING YOUR VIRAL MARKETING PLAN.....	15
<i>What Are Your Organization's Goals?.....</i>	16
<i>Buyer Personas and Your Organization.....</i>	17
<i>The Buyer Persona Profile.....</i>	18
<i>Reaching Senior Executives.....</i>	21
<i>The Importance of Buyer Personas in Web Marketing.....</i>	22
<i>In Your Buyers' Own Words.....</i>	22
<i>What Do You Want Your Buyers to Believe?.....</i>	23
<i>Developing Content to Reach Buyers.....</i>	24
<i>Obama for America.....</i>	26
<i>Stick to Your Plan.....</i>	29
PART 3. BRANDING YOUR ORGANIZATION AS A TRUSTED RESOURCE.....	31
<i>Developing Thought Leadership Content.....</i>	31
<i>Forms of Thought Leadership Content.....</i>	32
<i>How to Create Thoughtful Content.....</i>	34
PART 4. HOW TO WRITE FOR YOUR BUYERS.....	36
<i>Poor Writing: How Did We Get Here?.....</i>	36
<i>Effective Writing for Viral Marketing.....</i>	37
PART 5. HOW WEB CONTENT INFLUENCES THE BUYING PROCESS.....	40
<i>Segmenting Your Buyers.....</i>	41
<i>Elements of a Buyer-Centric Web Site.....</i>	42
<i>Link Content Directly into the Sales Cycle.....</i>	45
<i>A Friendly Nudge.....</i>	46
<i>Close the Sale and Continue the Conversation.....</i>	47
PART 6. SOCIAL NETWORKING TIPS.....	48
<i>Facebook: Not Just for Students.....</i>	48
<i>Check Me Out on MySpace.....</i>	50
<i>Tweet Your Thoughts to the World.....</i>	50
<i>Social Networking and Personal Branding.....</i>	52
<i>Which Social Networking Site Is Right for You?.....</i>	54
<i>You Can't Go to Every Party, So Why Even Try?.....</i>	55
<i>Optimizing Social Networking Pages.....</i>	56
<i>Start a Movement.....</i>	57
PART 7. BLOGGING TO REACH YOUR BUYERS.....	59
<i>What Should You Blog About?.....</i>	59
<i>Blogging Ethics and Employee Blogging Guidelines.....</i>	60
<i>Blogging Basics.....</i>	61
<i>Pimp Out Your Blog.....</i>	64
<i>Building an Audience for Your New Blog.....</i>	64
<i>Tag, and Your Buyer Is It.....</i>	65
<i>What Are You Waiting For?.....</i>	66
PART 8. VIDEO AND PODCASTING.....	67
<i>Video and Your Buyers.....</i>	67
<i>A Flip Video Camera in Every Pocket.....</i>	67

<i>Getting Started With Video</i>	68
<i>Podcasting 101</i>	69
PART 9. USING NEWS RELEASES TO REACH BUYERS DIRECTLY	72
<i>Developing Your News Release Strategy</i>	73
<i>Publishing News Releases through a Distribution Service</i>	73
<i>Reaching Even More Interested Buyers with RSS Feeds</i>	74
<i>Simultaneously Publishing Your News Releases to Your Web Site</i>	75
<i>The Importance of Links in Your News Releases</i>	75
<i>Focus on the Keywords and Phrases Your Buyers Use</i>	76
<i>Include Appropriate Social Media Tags</i>	76
<i>If It's Important Enough to Tell the Media, Tell Your Clients and Prospects, Too!</i>	76
PART 10. THE ONLINE MEDIA ROOM	78
<i>Best Practices for Online Media Rooms</i>	78
<i>The Importance of RSS Feeds in Your Online Media Room</i>	83
PART 11. REACHING THE MEDIA	85
<i>Nontargeted, Broadcast Pitches Are Spam</i>	85
<i>How to Pitch the Media</i>	87
PART 12. FINAL WORDS	89

1. Introduction

Amazingly, if you toss a Mentos candy into a bottle of Diet Coke, you get a marketing explosion. More tangibly, the mint/cola reaction triggers a geyser that sprays 10 feet or more. This phenomenon was popularized in video experiments produced by Fritz Grobe and Stephen Voltes on their epybird site. After their initial success, Grobe and Voltz made a video of an extreme experiment to answer the following question: "What happens when you combine 200 liters of Diet Coke and over 500 Mentos mints?" Web audiences were mesmerized by the result—its insane—and caused a classic viral phenomenon. In only three weeks, four million people viewed the video. Hundreds of bloggers had written about it. Then mainstream media jumped in, with Grobe and Voltz appearing on Late Night with David Letterman and The Today Show.

Imagine the excitement in Mentos marketing offices when the videos took off online—millions of Mentos exposures at no cost. The price tag to get results like that from traditional marketing might have totaled tens, if not hundreds, of millions of dollars.

Minty-Fresh Explosive Marketing

For marketers, one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off, it can propel a brand or company to fame and fortune for free. Whatever you call it—viral, buzz, or "word-of-mouth" marketing—having other people tell your story drives action. Many viral phenomena start innocently. Somebody creates something—a funny video clip, a cartoon, or a story—to amuse friends, and one person sends it to another and that person sends it to yet another, on and on. Perhaps the creator might have expected to reach at most a few dozen friends. One of the first examples I remember was the "dancing baby" from the mid-1990s. It was grainy and low-tech, but it was cool and it spread like crazy. Instead of reaching a few hundred friends and colleagues, dancing baby struck a nerve and reached millions.

The challenge for marketers is to harness the amazing power of viral. There are people who will tell you that it is possible to create a viral campaign, and there are even agencies that specialize in the area. But when organizations set out to go viral, the vast majority of

campaigns fail. Worse, some companies set up fake viral campaigns where people who are employed by the company or in some way compensated write about a product. The Web is hyper efficient at collective investigative reporting and smoking out trickery, so these campaigns rarely succeed and may even cause great harm to reputations. Often a corporate approach is some gimmicky game or contest that just feels forced and advertisement-like. I think it is virtually impossible to create a Web marketing program that is guaranteed to go viral. A huge amount of luck and timing are necessary. A sort of homemade feel seems to work, while slick and polished doesn't. For example, the NumaNuma Dance that was so popular several years ago was about as homemade as you can get—just a guy with a Web camera on his computer—and it helped to popularize the song and sell a bunch of downloads.

Of course, its not just crazy dancing that goes viral. The formula is a combination of some great (and free) Web content (a video, a blog entry, or an e-book) that is groundbreaking or amazing or hilarious or involves a celebrity, plus a network of people to light the fire, and all with links that make it very easy to share. While many organizations plan viral marketing campaigns to spread the word about their products or services, don't forget that something may go viral that you didn't start (like Mentos and Diet Coke), and it may show you or your products in either a positive or negative light. You need to be monitoring the Web for your organization and brand names so you are alerted quickly about what people are talking about. And if a positive viral explosion that you didn't initiate begins, don't just hang on for the ride—push it along!

Monitoring the Blogosphere for Viral Eruptions

Every day, on blogs, podcasts, video, and Twitter, people promote and pan products. Consumers tell good and bad tales in which products and services play a starring role. Sadly, most companies are clueless about what's going on in the blogosphere. At a minimum, marketing professionals need to know immediately when their brand names or executives are mentioned in a blog. Beyond mention-counting, analysis is important. What are the significant trends in words and phrases currently popular in the blogosphere, as they relate to your organization, product, and industry? On the day that the Diet Coke and Mentos experiments went viral, there was a tenfold spike in the number of blog posts mentioning Mentos. If you follow the word "Mentos," you'd want to know what was going on, so you could either

respond to the crisis or leverage the positive development. At the least, you should learn the reason for the spike and alert company managers; when the Wall Street Journal calls for comment, "Huh?" is not the savviest response.

Over at Alexa, a service that measures the reach and popularity of web sites, the comparisons between the viral eepybird site created by Grobe and Voltz to showcase their videos and the official Mentos site are remarkable. Marketers use Alexa to figure out what sites are hot and use that information to make their own sites better. The three-month average web site ranking among all sites on the Web after the release of the video was 282,677 for the official Mentos site, while eepybird was 8,877.

"The whole Mentos geyser phenomenon seems to bubble up every few years," says Pete Healy, vice president of marketing for Perfetti Van Melle USA, makers of Mentos. "But this was the first time it came around that there was an infrastructure where people could post videos online. We contacted the two guys at eepybird and said that we really liked the way the Mentos brand was represented. We had recently conducted a meeting about our brand personality, and we decided that if our brand was a person, it would be like Adam Sandler—quirk)*, tongue-in-cheek, and fun. Because the eepybird video had those qualities, we were delighted."

Healy recognized that he had an opportunity and worked to push the viral excitement forward. First, he linked to the video from the official Mentos site. Then he offered Grobe and Voltz the company's support. "When they appeared on Late Night with David Letterman and The Today Show, we were there with our "Mentos ride, a classic convertible with Mentos branding, giving away samples on the street to add support." Soon after, Healy decided that there might be others who would want to create their own video, so the company launched a Mentos geyser video contest. The top prize was 1,000 iTunes downloads and a year's supply of Mentos, 320 rolls, and according to Healy, over 100 videos were submitted and posted to the site, which was viewed nearly a million times. (Incidentally, note the wisdom of choosing iTunes downloads as a prize; the folks at Mentos reasonably suspected that the kinds of media-savvy people who would submit entry videos are likely to be the kinds of people who would be more interested in free music downloads than in traditional prizes like shopping sprees or free trips. This contributes to the authentic feel of Mentos's attempts to further spread this viral phenomenon.)

"The power to influence what a brand means to others is something that poses a dilemma, but also an opportunity, for the owners of a brand," says Healy. "It has always been true that what a brand means is determined by a consumer, the end user. Now there is a feedback loop that didn't exist before. The Internet is like the town plaza or the town square. For any company that is marketing a brand, the first thing is to be genuine in communicating what the brand is about, the personality of the brand. If we had pretended that the Mentos brand is more than it is, then we would have gotten shot down."

Interestingly, while Healy supported and helped drive the viral aspects of the videos, marketers at Coca-Cola tried to distance the Diet Coke brand from the phenomenon. "When the Mentos and Diet Coke video became big, Coca-Cola took a few shots from the market, because they felt that the eepybird site didn't fit the Diet Coke brand. They took hits from bloggers." Healy says. "As long as we keep in mind that we are just a candy manufacturer, creators of a small pleasure, we can work with interesting things that might happen to our brands on the Web."

Healy did an excellent job pushing the Mentos and Diet Coke buzz without getting in the way by being too much of a corporate nanny. Too often, corporate communications people at large companies distance themselves from what's going on in the real world of blogs, YouTube, Twitter, and chat rooms. But its even worse when they try to control the messages in ways that the marketplace sees as inauthentic.

Creating a World Wide Rave

A World Wide Rave is when people around the world are talking about you, your company, and your products—whether you're located in San Francisco, Dubai, or Reykjavik, its when global communities eagerly link to your stuff on the Web. Its when online buzz drives buyers to your virtual doorstep. And its when tons of fans visit your web site and your blog because they genuinely want to be there.

You can trigger a World Wide Rave, too—just create something valuable that people want to share, and make it easy for them to do so.

The World Wide Rave is one of the most exciting and powerful ways to reach your audience. Anyone with thoughtful ideas to share—and clever ways to create interest in them—can become famous and find success on the Web. The challenge for marketers is to harness the amazing power of the World Wide Rave. The process is actually quite simple; anyone can do it, including you. However, if you're already an experienced marketer, you need to know that achieving success requires a far different approach than what you're likely doing now. Many of the easy techniques for triggering a World Wide Rave are the exact opposite of what you've learned on the job or have been taught in school. Similarly, if you're a CEO, business owner, or entrepreneur, you should know that these ideas are likely precisely what your agency partners and marketing staff tell you not to do.

Of course, it's obvious as hell that in order for thousands or even millions of people to share your ideas and stories on the Web, you must make something worth sharing. But how do you do that? Here are the essential components.

- Nobody cares about your products (except you). Yes, you read that right. What people do care about are themselves and ways to solve their problems. People also like to be entertained and to share in something remarkable. In order to have people talk about you and your ideas, you must resist the urge to hype your products and services. Create something interesting that will be talked about online. But don't worry—because when you're famous on the Web, people will line up to learn more and to buy what you offer!
- No coercion required. For decades, organizations of all kinds have spent buckets of money on advertising designed to coerce people into buying products. Free shipping! This week only, 20 percent off! New and improved! Faster than the other guys! This product-centric advertising is not how you get people talking about you. When you've got something worth sharing, people will share it—no coercion required.
- Lose control. Here's a component that scares most people silly. You've got to lose control of your "messages"; you need to make your valuable online content totally free (and freely sharable); and you must understand that a World Wide Rave is not about

generating "sales leads." Yes, you can measure success, but not through business-school Return On Investment (ROI) calculators.

- Put down roots. If you want your ideas to spread, you need to be involved in the online communities of people who actively share.
- Create triggers that encourage people to share. When a product or service solves someone's problem or is very valuable, interesting, funny, or just plain outrageous, it's ready to be shared. To elevate your online content to the status of a World Wide Rave, you need a trigger to get people talking.
- Point the world to your (virtual) doorstep. People will talk about you. And when they do, they'll generate all sorts of online buzz that will be indexed by the search engines, all relating to what your organization is up to. Forget about data-driven search engine technologies. The better approach to drive people to your stuff via the search engines is to create a World Wide Rave. As a result, your organization's web sites will quickly rise to prominence in the rankings on Google, Yahoo!, and the other search engines.

That's it. Simple, right?

Sure, generating a World Wide Rave is as simple as can be. You should be thinking of how you can create an initiative that will get people to spread your ideas and share your stories. When people are talking about you, then you're reaching many more people than you would otherwise. Let's take a look at an example.

Viral Buzz for Fun and Profit

It can be difficult to purposely create viral marketing buzz. I think the way to create viral programs is a lot like the way that venture capitalists invest in startup companies and that studios create films. A typical venture capitalist has a formula that states that most ventures will fail, a few might do okay, and 1 out of 20 or so will take off and become a large enterprise that will pay back investors many times the initial investment. Record companies and movie studios follow the same principles, expecting that most of the projects that they

green-light will have meager sales but that the one hit will more than pay back the cost of a bunch of flops. The problem is that nobody knows with certainty which movie or venture-backed company in the portfolio will succeed, so it requires a numbers game of investing in many prospects. The same goes for viral efforts. Create a number of campaigns and see what hits, then nurture the winners along.

The Virgin Mary Grilled Cheese Sandwich and Jerry Garcia's Toilet

Consider GoldenPalace.com. the Internet casino that has cornered the market on eccentric eBay purchases for viral promotional purposes. The online casino is the proud owner of dozens of offbeat knickknacks such as Pete Rose's corked baseball bat, William Shatner's kidney stone, Jerry Garcia's toilet, and the famous Virgin Mary grilled cheese sandwich. The marketers at GoldenPalace.com also grab unusual advertising space sold on eBay, such oddities as a woman's cleavage, the opportunity to tattoo a logo on someone's forehead, and billboard space on the back of a person's wheelchair. Some of this stuff, all purchased on eBay, generates significant viral marketing buzz for GoldenPalace.com. For example, when Shatner's kidney stone was nabbed, it seemed like every TV station, newspaper, and online outlet reported on the sale: "Shatner Passes Kidney Stone to GoldenPalace.com." the headline ran. "Ha-ha-ha," the reporters and bloggers went, dismissing the money spent as foolish. But each story referenced GoldenPalace.com! At a mere \$25,000, this foray into a place where no man has gone before was the viral marketing and advertising bargain of the century. And kudos, too, to Shatner, who got his name plastered all over the place (and donated the cash to Habitat for Humanity).

The professional eBay bidders at GoldenPalace.com know that not every one of the hundreds of quirky purchases they make will be a hit with bloggers and the media. But they can count on some of them, maybe 1 out of 20, hitting the mark in just the right way.

Clip This Coupon for \$1 Million Off Ft. Myers, FL Home

When there is a glut of luxury homes on the market, what can a homeowner do to make his property stand out? Get people talking about it, of course! Homeowner Rich Ricciani decided to offer potential buyers a coupon good for \$1 million off the price of his \$7 million Ft. Myers, FL, home. He created a site for the coupon and placed it in newspapers in lieu of

atypical real estate advertisement. This creative approach sure beat simply reducing the price of the home on the real estate Multiple Listing Service database.

Ricciani worked with Lani Belisle of VIP Realtors to list the home and book the advertising space for the coupon, which initially ran in the Sunday edition of the Ft. Myers News-Press. Then it was time for Tina Haisman Public Relations to get the word out. Haisman used PRWeb to send a well written, search engine optimized press release complete with photos, an imbedded YouTube video, and links to the coupon and the home's web site. "I also used PR MatchPoint to compile a list of real estate writers in the south and northeastern U.S., and I personally targeted the big news outlets such as CNN, FOX, NBC, and more," Haisman says. In Southwest Florida, the story appeared on the front pages of both the Fort Myers News-Press and in the Naples Daily News, and it aired on WTNK-TV and local radio stations. "Florida Weekly named The Million Dollar Coupon the Best Marketing Stunt of 2009!" Haisman says. "Within four days of its release, the Million Dollar Coupon story went viral on real estate blogs nationwide, creating a world wide buzz.

As a result, it aired on television stations in major cities around the country, and the homeowner even did a live interview on Neal Cavuto's Your World show on FOXNews. Major papers, including the Los Angeles Times, covered it, and the idea also appeared in the Huffington Post. The team then ran the coupon in the Sunday New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Boston Globe. Hove the selection of the Globe, chosen because Ft. Myers, FL, is the home of the Boston Red Sox spring training facility—an excellent example of buyer persona profiling. Bloggers talked about it and many people were buzzing about it on Twitter.

Some may call this strategy a gimmick. Nonsense. When people are talking about you, your product stands out in a crowded market. And guess what? This kind of marketing is fun! If you're a realtor, it sure beats pounding wooden signs into front yards. The Million Dollar Coupon web site registered more than 2,500 unique visitors in just a few weeks. While as of this writing the home has not yet sold, it certainly stands out from the crowd.

When You Have Explosive News, Make It Go Viral

Although I've said that I think it is difficult to dream up campaigns that will definitely go viral and become a World Wide Rave, there are times that an organization possesses news that is so important to the target market they serve that they just know the news has significant viral potential. The hiring of a famous CEO away from another company, a merger or acquisition announcement, or a huge celebrity endorsement deal might be just the thing that lights up the blogs in your marketplace. If that's the case, it is important to get that news out in order to create the maximum effect. (Of course there is the opposite example—bad news—which also goes viral, and which you would prefer to contain or minimize. But in this chapter, let's just focus on the kind of good news that you want to get out to as wide an audience as possible.) If you want to push news along to maximum effect, it's critical to have a plan and a detailed timeline of whom you will tell the news to and when.

When Outsell, Inc., a research and advisory firm for the information industry, had just completed but not yet released a report, titled "Click Fraud Reaches \$1.3 Billion, Dictates End of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' Era," that was the first to quantify, in real dollars and advertiser sentiment, the click-fraud problems that plague advertisers on search engines, they knew they were sitting on big news. The Outsell report, based on a study of 407 advertisers responsible for about \$1 billion in ad spending, told the explosive story of a problem threatening the core business model of search engines like Google. The analysts at Outsell revealed the scope of the problem of fraudulent clicks on Web advertisements that appear as part of search results, clicks that companies doing the advertising were paying for. Outsell analysts knew that they had a story with viral potential.

"At first we hinted at the report in our client newsletter," says Chuck Richard, vice president and lead analyst at Outsell and the author of the report. "We always make certain that the paying clients get access to reports before they hit the media. But internally and with our PR firm, Warner Communications, we thought it was going to be big." Outsell had a logistical problem in that the report was to be released to clients over the U.S. Independence Day holiday weekend. The PR firm sent a media advisory, headlined "Outsell, Inc. Pegs Click Fraud as \$1.3 Billion Problem that Threatens Business Models of Google, Others; Study Shows 27% of Advertisers Slowing or Stopping Pay-Per-Click Ads Due to Fraudulent Billings," to selected media. The advisory offered an early look at the report to approved media under an embargo period—stories could not appear until Wednesday, July 5 at the earliest. Verne Kopytoff of the San Francisco Chronicle spent the holiday weekend researching

the problem identified by Outsell, interviewing Richard, and reaching out for comment from spokespeople at the search engines. His story, "Click Fraud a Huge Problem: Study Finds Practice Widespread; Many Cut Back Online Ads," was the first to break.

"The viral aspect came from bloggers and built over the course of a week or so," Richard says. Within just five days, over 100 bloggers had picked up the story, including heavy hitters such as John Batelle's Searchblog, Jeff Jarvis's BuzzMachine, ClickZ News Blog, Danny Sullivan at Search Engine Watch, and paidContent.org. After the story broke, Richard was busy doing interview after interview for mainstream media, resulting in a wave of nearly 100 stories in just the first week. Outlets including NPR, MSNBC, Barron's, the Financial Times, AdAge, eWeek, the Boston Globe, the Los Angeles Times, ABC News, ZDNet, BusinessWeek Online, and TheStreet.com all ran stories online, in print, and via broadcast media.

In the following weeks, Richard, now seen in the market as an expert in click fraud, received many press requests based on an existing Arkansas click-fraud class-action settlement that Google was proposing. Within a week, Google announced it would start providing statistics on the fraudulent clicks it intercepted, one of the key changes called for in the Outsell study; many media referenced this development in follow-up stories. Richard believes that the online buzz has prompted the paid search business to finally accept that it can't escape having its own click-fraud tracking, auditing, and certification processes. "This is great news for users, publishers, and advertisers," Richard says.

"For a small company to have access to this kind of reach of journalists and bloggers is remarkable," Richard says. "It couldn't have happened this way even a few years ago. The exposure has made a fundamental difference in [people's] awareness of the firm. Many of our clients have contacted us to say 'congratulations, that they were happy to see us be more visible. And I've gotten on the prime source lists of many reporters who cover the space, and they proactively call me for comment on stories now.'" Indeed, BusinessWeek wrote a cover story, "Click Fraud: The Dark Side of Online Advertising," and quoted the Outsell report.

But Richard is also aware of how a significant news item or report can influence a company, or even an entire industry. "It's given us a reminder of our responsibility," he says. "If something like this can affect a company's share price or performance or investor inquiries on earnings calls, we need to be confident on our opinions."

The Outsell example clearly illustrates that a piece of news, properly delivered to the market, can go viral. But with careful nurturing over the news cycle and an awareness of traditional news media's and bloggers roles in promoting ideas, the story can reach much larger audiences and help a smart organization to reach its goals.

Viral marketing—creating a World Wide Rave by having others tell your story for you—is one of the most exciting and powerful ways to reach your audiences. Its not easy to harness the power, but with careful preparation when you are sitting on news and with clever ideas for what has the potential to create interest, any organization has the power to become famous on the Web.

2. Building Your Viral Marketing Plan

Does your company sell great products? Or, if you don't work in a traditional company, does your organization (church, nonprofit, consulting company, school) offer great services? Well, get over it! Marketing is not only about your products! The most important thing to remember as you develop a viral marketing plan is to put your products and services to the side for just a little while and focus your complete attention on the buyers of your products (or those who will donate, subscribe, join, or apply). Devoting attention to buyers and away from products is difficult for many people, but it always pays off in the form of bringing you closer to achieving your goals.

Think Starbucks for a moment. Is the product great? Yeah, I guess the three-dollar cup of coffee I get from Starbucks tastes pretty good. And most marketers, if given the opportunity to market Starbucks, would focus on the coffee itself—the product. But is that really what people are buying at Starbucks, or does Starbucks help solve other buyer problems? Maybe Starbucks is really selling a place to hang out for a while. Or, for that matter, isn't Starbucks a convenient place for people to meet? Or do people use Starbucks for the free wireless Internet connections? Maybe Starbucks saves 10 minutes in your day because you don't have to grind beans, pour water into a coffee maker, wait, and clean up later. For some of us, Starbucks just represents a little splurge because, well, we're worth it. I'd argue that Starbucks does all those things. Starbucks appeals to many different buyer personas, and it sells lots of things besides just coffee. If you were marketing Starbucks, it would be your job to segment buyers and appeal to them based on their needs, not just to talk about your product.

The approach of thinking about buyers and the problems our organizations solve for them can be difficult for many marketers, since we've constantly been told how important a great product or service is to the marketing mix. In fact, standard marketing education still talks about the four Ps of marketing—product, place, price, and promotion—as being the most important things. That's nonsense. In order to succeed on the Web, you need to consider your organizational goals and then focus on your buyers first. Only when you understand buyers should you begin to create compelling Web content to reach them. Yes, marketers often argue with me on this.

But I strongly believe that the product or service you sell is secondary when you market your organization on the Web.

So, I will ask you to put aside your products and services as you begin the task for this chapter: building a viral marketing plan. While the most important thing to focus on during this process is buyers, we will do that in the context of your organizational goals. Trust me—this will be like no marketing and PR plan you've created before.

What Are Your Organization's Goals?

Marketing and PR people have a collective difficulty getting our departmental goals in sync with the rest of the company. And our management teams go along with this dysfunction. Think about the goals that most marketers have. They usually take the form of an epic to-do list: "Let's see; we should do a few trade shows, buy Yellow-Pages ads, maybe create a new logo, get press clips, produce some T-shirts, increase web site traffic, and, oh yeah, generate some leads for the salespeople." Well, guess what? Those aren't the goals of your company! I've never seen leads* or "clips" or "T-shirts" on a balance sheet. With typical marketing department goals, we constantly focus on the flare-up du jour and thus always focus on the wrong thing. This also gives the marketing profession a bad rap in many companies as a bunch of flaky slackers. No wonder marketing is called the "branding police" in some organizations and is often the place where failed salespeople end up.

Many marketers and PR people also focus on the wrong measures of success. With web sites, people will often tell me things like, "We want to have ten thousand unique visitors per month to our site." And PR measurement is often similarly irrelevant: "We want ten mentions in the trade press and three national magazine hits each month." Unless your site makes money through advertising so that raw traffic adds revenue, traffic is the wrong measure. And simple press clips just don't matter. What matters is leading your site's visitors and your constituent audiences to where they help you reach your real goals, such as building revenue, soliciting donations, gaining new members, and the like.

This lack of clear goals and real measurement reminds me of seven-year-olds playing soccer. If you've ever seen little children on the soccer field, you know that they operate as one huge

organism packed together, chasing the ball around the field. On the sidelines are helpful coaches yelling, "Pass!" or "Go to the goal!" Yet as the coaches and parents know, this effort is futile: No matter what the coach says or how many times the kids practice, they still focus on the wrong thing—the ball—instead of the goal.

What we need to do is align marketing and PR objectives with those of the organization. For most corporations, the most important goal is profitable revenue growth. In newer companies and those built around emerging technologies, this usually means generating new customers, but in mature businesses, the management team may need to be more focused on keeping the customers that they already have. Of course, nonprofits have the goal of raising money; politicians, to get out the vote; rock bands to get people to buy CDs, iTunes downloads, and tickets to live shows; and universities, to get student applications and alumni donations.

So your first step is to get with the leaders of your organization—your management team or your associates in your church or nonprofit or your spouse if you run a small business—and determine your business goals. If you run a nonprofit, school, church, or political campaign, consider your goals for donations, applications, new members, or votes. Write them down in detail. The important things you write down might be "grow revenue in Europe by 20 percent" or "increase new-member signups to one hundred per month in the fourth quarter" or "generate a million dollars in Web donations next quarter" or "generate five paid speaking engagements in the upcoming year."

Now that you have the viral marketing plan focused on the right goals (i.e., those of your organization), the next step is to learn as much as you can about your buyers and to segment them into groups so you can reach them through your Web publishing efforts.

Buyer Personas and Your Organization

Successful online viral marketing efforts work because they start by identifying one or more buyer personas to target, so you need to make buyer personas a part of your planning process. A buyer persona is essentially a representative of a type of buyer that you have identified as having a specific interest in your organization or product or having a market problem that your product or service solves. Building buyer personas is the first step and probably the

single most important thing that you will do in creating your viral marketing plan. Consider the U.S. presidential elections of 2004. Marketers for the two major candidates segmented buyers (voters) into dozens of distinct buyer personas. Some of the names of the buyer personas (sometimes called "microtargets" in the political world) became well known as the media began to write about them, while many other persona labels remained internal to the candidates. Some of the better-known buyer personas of the 2004 presidential election were "NASCAR Dads" (rural working-class males, many of whom are XASCARfans) and "Security Moms" (mothers who were worried about terrorism and concerned about security)-By segmenting millions of voters into distinct buyer personas, the candidates built marketing campaigns and PR programs that appealed specifically to each. Contrast this approach with a one-size-fits-all campaign that targets everybody but appeals to nobody.

Another example I quite like for illustrating the point of buyer personas is the market for tricycles. The user of the most common tricycle is a preschool child. Yet a preschooler doesn't buy her own tricycle. The most common buyer personas for children's tricycles are parents and grandparents. So what problem does the tricycle solve? Well, for parents, it might be that the child has been asking for one and the purchase quiets the child down. Parents also know that the child is growing quickly and will want a two-wheeler with training wheels soon enough, so a basic trike is typically enough in their eyes. However, grandparents buy tricycles to solve the problem of providing an extravagant gift, so they often buy the expensive models to show their love to the child and his or her parents. When you think about tricycles from the perspective of buyer personas, you can see how the marketing might be different for parents and grandparents.

The Buyer Persona Profile

After identifying their goals, the marketing people at the college should build a buyer persona profile, essentially a kind of biography, for each group they'll target to achieve those goals. The college might create one buyer persona for prospective students (targeting high school students looking for schools) and another for parents of high school students (who are part of the decision process and often pay the bills). If the school targets a specific type of applicant, say student athletes, they might build a specific buyer persona profile for the high school student who participates in varsity sports. To effectively target the alumni for donations, the

school might decide to build a buyer persona for younger alumni, perhaps those who have graduated in the past 10 years.

For each buyer persona profile, we want to know as much as we can about this group of people. What are their goals and aspirations? What are their problems? What media do they rely on for answers to problems? How can we reach them? We want to know, in detail, the things that are important for each buyer persona. What words and phrases do the buyers use? What sorts of images and multimedia appeal to each? Are short and snappy sentences better than long, verbose ones? I encourage you to write these things down based on your understanding of each buyer persona. You should also read the publications and web sites that your buyers read to gain an understanding of the way they think. For example, college marketing people should read the US News and World Report issue that ranks America's Best Colleges as well as the guidebooks that prospective students read. Reading what your buyer personas read will get you thinking like them. By doing some basic research on your buyers, you can learn a great deal, and your marketing will be much more effective.

The best way to learn about buyers and develop buyer persona profiles is to interview people. I have no doubt that representatives of the two presidential candidates interviewed many NASCAR Dads and Security Moms to build profiles for these and many other buyer personas they identified. Similarly, the marketing person at our hypothetical college must interview people who fit the personas the school identified. The college marketing people might learn a great deal if they turned the traditional in-person college admissions interview around by asking prospective students questions such as the following: When did you first start researching schools? Who influenced your research? How did you learn about this school? How many schools are you applying to? What web sites, blogs, or pod-casts do you read or subscribe to? Once you know this first-hand information, you should subscribe to, read, and listen to the media that influence your target buyer. When you read what your buyers read, pay attention to the exact words and phrases that are used. If students frequent Facebook or other social-network sites, so should you, and you should pay attention to the lingo students use. By triangulating the information gathered directly from several dozen prospective students plus information from the media that these students pay attention to, you easily build a buyer persona for a high school student ready to apply to a college like yours.

"A buyer persona profile is a short biography of the typical customer, not just a job description but a person description," says Adele Revella, who has been using buyer personas to market technology products for more than 20 years. "The buyer persona profile gives you a chance to truly empathize with target buyers, to step out of your role as someone who wants to promote a product and see, through your buyers' eyes, the circumstances that drive their decision process. The buyer persona profile includes information on the typical buyer's background, daily activities, and current solutions for their problems. The more experience you have in your market, the more obvious the personas become."

This may sound a bit wacky, but I think you should go so far as to name your persona the way that the campaigns did with NASCAR Dads and Security Moms. You might even cut out a representative photo from a magazine to help you visualize him or her. This should be an internal name only that helps you and your colleagues to develop sympathy with and a deep understanding of the real people to whom you market. Rather than a nameless, faceless "prospect," your buyer persona will come to life.

For example, a buyer persona for a male high school student who is a varsity athlete and whom you want to target might be named "Sam the Athlete" and his persona might read something like this: "Sam the Athlete began thinking about colleges and the upcoming application process way back when he was a freshman in high school. His coach and parents recognized his athletic talent and suggested that it will help him get into a good college or even secure a scholarship. Sam knows that he's good, but not good enough to play on a Division 1 school. Sam first started poking around on college web sites as a freshman and enjoyed checking out the athletic pages for the colleges in his home state and some nearby ones. He even attended some of these colleges games when he could. Sam has good grades, but he is not at the top of his class because his sports commitments mean he can't study as much as his peers. He has close friends and likes to hangout with them on weekends, but he is not heavily into the party scene and avoids alcohol and drugs. Sam frequents Facebook, has his own Facebook page, and has a group of online friends that he frequently Instant Messages with. He is hip to online nuance, language, and etiquette. Sam also reads Sports Illustrated Magazine. Now that he is a junior, he knows it is time to get serious about college applications, and he doesn't really know where to start. But to learn, he's paying more attention to the applications pages than the athletic pages on college web sites."

Okay, so you're nodding your head and agreeing with this buyer persona profiling thing. "But," you ask, "how many buyer personas do I need?" You might want to think about your buyer personas based on what factors differentiate them. How can you slice the demographics? For example, some organizations will have a different profile for buyers in the United States versus Europe. Or maybe your company sells to buyers in the automobile industry and in the government sector, and those buyers are different. The important thing is that you will use this buyer persona information to create specific viral marketing programs to reach each buyer persona, and therefore you need to have the segmentation in fine enough detail that when they encounter your Web content, your buyers will say: "Yes, that's me. This organization understands me and my problems and will therefore have products that fit my needs."

Marketers and PR pros are often amazed at the transformation of their materials and programs as a result of buyer persona profiling. "When you really know how your buyers think and what matters to them, you eliminate the agony of guessing about what to say or where and how to communicate with buyers," says Revella. "Marketers tell me that they don't have time to build buyer personas, but these same people are wasting countless hours in meetings debating about whether the message is right. And of course, they're wasting budgets building programs and tools that don't resonate with anyone. Itsjustsomuch easier and more effective to listen before you talk."

Reaching Senior Executives

Forbes Insights, in association with Google, recently released a new study called *The Rise of the Digital C-Suite: How Executives Locate and Filter Business Information*.[^]The findings clearly show that the Web is considered by executives to be their most valuable resource for gathering business information, outstripping at-work contacts, personal networks, trade publications, and so on. In fact, 74 percent of respondents rated the Internet as very valuable (5 on a 5-point scale).

"The common perception is that top executives at the largest companies do not use the Internet, but the reality is just the opposite," says Stuart Feil, editorial director of Forbes Insights. "These findings show that C-level executives are more involved online than their

counterparts, and younger generations of executives—those whose work careers have coincided with the growth of the PC and the Internet—are bringing profound organizational change to these companies."

The Importance of Buyer Personas in Web Marketing

One of the simplest ways to build an effective web site or to create great marketing programs using online content is to target the specific buyer personas that you have created. Yet most web sites are big brochures that do not offer specific information for different buyers. Think about it—the typical web site is one-size-fits-all, with the content organized by the company's products or services, not by categories corresponding to buyer personas and their associated problems.

The same thing is true about other online marketing programs. Without a focus on the buyer, the typical press release and media relations program is built on what the organization wants to say rather than what the buyer wants to hear. There is a huge difference. Companies that are successful with direct-to-consumer news release strategies write for their buyers. The blogs that are best at reaching an organizational goal are not about companies or products but rather customers and their problems.

Now that you've set quantifiable organizational goals and identified the buyer personas that you want to reach, your job as you develop your viral marketing plan is to identify the best ways to reach buyers and develop compelling information that you will use in your Web marketing programs. If you've conducted interviews with buyers and developed a buyer persona profile, then you know the buyer problems that your product or service solves, and you know the media that buyers turn to for answers. Do they go first to a search engine? If so, what words and phrases do they enter? Which blogs, chat rooms, forums, and online news sites do they read? Are they open to audio or video? You need to answer these questions before you continue.

In Your Buyers' Own Words

An effective Web marketing plan requires an understanding of the ways your buyers speak and the real words and phrases they use. This is important not only for building a positive online relationship with your buyers, but also for planning effective search engine marketing strategies. After all, if you are not using the phrases your buyers search on, how can you possibly reach them?

Figuring out the phrases for your market requires that you buckle down and do some research. Although interviewing buyers about their market problems and listening to the words and phrases they use is best, you can also learn a great deal by reading the publications that they read. Check out any blogs in your buyers' space (if you haven't already), and study the agendas and topic descriptions for the conferences and seminars that your buyers frequent. When you have a list of the phrases that are important to your buyers, use those phrases not only to appeal to them specifically, but also to make your pages appear in the search engine results when your buyers search for what you have to offer.

What Do You Want Your Buyers to Believe?

Now that you have identified organizational goals, built a set of one or more buyer personas, and researched the words and phrases your buyers use to talk about and search for your product, you should think about what you want each of your buyer personas to believe about your organization. What are the messages that you will use for each buyer persona? Think back again to the 2004 U.S. presidential election. Once they had identified buyer personas such as NASCAR Dads and Security Moms, the campaigns had to create a set of messages, web sites, TV ads, direct mail campaigns, and talking points that the candidates would use in speeches to these groups. For example, George W. Bush appealed to Security Moms with speeches and advertising that claimed that families would be safer from the threats of terrorism with his "stay the course" approach if he were reelected rather than if John Kerry were elected.

In the 2008 election, Barack Obama focused on his buyer personas and identified as crucially important the concept of "change." Everywhere you saw the Obama campaign, you saw nods to this theme: on the podium where the candidate was speaking, on T-shirts and buttons, on posters, and of course on the Web. The Obama campaign shrewdly understood that, when

primary voters pulled the lever to vote for Obama, they were buying into the idea of the need for change. They were choosing an idea, not just a man. The Obama campaign clearly understood, and articulated, what they wanted their buyer personas to believe that the candidate would bring.

You must do the same thing with your buyer personas. What do you want each group to believe about your organization? What messages will you use to reach them on the Web? Remember, the best messages are not just about your product. What is each buyer persona really buying from you? Is it great customer service? The "safe choice"? Luxury? For example, Volvo doesn't just sell a car; it sells safety.

And don't forget that different buyer personas buy different things from your organization. Think about Gatorade for a moment. For competitive athletes, Gatorade has been the drink of choice for decades. I found some interesting messages on the Gatorade web site, including "If you want to win, you've got to replace what you lose," and "For some athletes, significant dehydration can occur within the initial 30 minutes of exercise." These are interesting messages, because they target the buyer persona of the competitive athlete and focus on how Gatorade can help those athletes win.

Now I'm not an expert on Gatorade's buyer personas, but it seems to me that they could further refine their buyer personas based on the sports athletes play or on whether they are professionals or amateurs. If tennis players see themselves as very different from football players, then Gatorade may need to create buyer persona profiles and messages to target both sports separately. Or maybe women athletes make up a different buyer persona for Gatorade than men.

Of course, the point is that different buyer personas have different problems for your organization to solve. And there's no doubt that your online viral marketing programs will do better if you develop messages for each buyer persona, instead of simply relying on a generic site that uses one set of broad messages for everyone.

Developing Content to Reach Buyers

You must now think like a publisher. You should develop an editorial plan to reach your buyers with focused content in the media that they prefer. Your first action might be to create a content-rich web site with pages organized by buyer persona. This does not mean you need to redesign the entire existing web site, nor does it necessitate a change in the site architecture. You can start by just creating some new individual pages, each with specialized content customized for a particular buyer persona, creating appropriate links to these pages, and leaving the rest of the site alone. For example, our hypothetical college might create content for each of the buyer personas they identified. Sam the Athlete (the high school student who is a varsity athlete and a candidate for admission) should have specific content written for him that describes what it is like to be a student athlete at the college and also gives tips for the admission process. The college could include profiles of current student athletes or even a blog by one of the coaches. In addition, appropriate links on the homepage and the admissions pages should be created for Sam. An appropriate homepage link such as "high school athletes start here" or "special information for student athletes" would attract Sam's attention.

At the same time, the college should develop pages for parents of high school students who are considering applying for admission. The parents have very different problems from those of the students, and the site content designed for parents would deal with things like financial aid and safety on campus.

As you keep your publisher's hat on, consider what other media your organization can publish on the Web to reach the buyers that you have identified. A technology company might want to consider a white paper detailing solutions to a known buyer problem. Perhaps you have enough information to create an e-book on a subject that would be of interest to one or more of your buyer personas. You may want to develop a series of a dozen direct-to-consumer news releases focusing on a series of issues that you know your buyer is interested in. Or it might be time to start a blog, a podcast, or online video channel to reach your buyers.

Consider creating an editorial plan for each buyer persona. You might do this in the form of a calendar for the upcoming year that includes web site content, an e-book or white paper, a blog, and some news releases. Notice as you build an editorial plan and an editorial calendar for the next year that you're now focused on creating the compelling content that your buyers are interested in. Unlike the way you might have done it in the past (and the way your

competitors are marketing today), you are not just creating a big brochure about your organization. You're writing for your buyers, not your own ego.

Obama for America

I want you to stop, take a deep breath, and let me close this chapter on building your viral marketing plan by making a few observations about why Barack Obama was elected to be the 44th president of the United States. Of course, this is a guide about viral marketing, not a guide about presidential politics. These are not political observations but, rather, thoughts about the amazing success Obama and his campaign team had in embracing voters using viral marketing. If you are an American citizen, it doesn't matter who you (or I) supported or voted for during the 2008 U.S. presidential election. Everyone (those who work in companies large and small, nonprofits, independent consultants, job seekers, musicians ... well, everyone) can learn from Obamas victory.

After all, who would have predicted in 2006 that a young, skinny, half-black man with a strange name—Barack Hussein Obama—and funny ears, who had served less than one term in the U.S. Senate, could be elected to the most powerful position in the world, despite facing more than 20 other candidates, many of them better known and better funded?

Barack Obama is the most successful "new marketer" in history. Study his campaign so that you can adapt the ideas for your business.

"Voters in 2008 were not just passive followers of the political process," says Aaron Smith, research specialist at the Pew Internet & American Life Project and author of the projects April 2009 report *The Internets Role in Campaign 2008*. "They used a wide range of digital tools and technologies to get involved in the race, to harness their creativity in support of their chosen candidate, and to join forces with others who shared their same political goals."

Smiths findings indicate the widespread use of the Web to research candidates and support campaigns. The 2008 election was the first in which more than half the voting-age population used the Internet for political purposes. Some 55 percent of all adults—and 74 percent of all Internet users—said they went online for news and information about the election or to

communicate with others about the race. The research found that social media platforms such as blogs, social networking sites, and video-sharing sites played a key role in 2008, as voters went online to share their views with others and try to mobilize them to their cause.

As you read these remarkable statistics from Smith's report, please be aware that the numbers are likely very similar as they relate to your own business. It is clear that the Web and social media are now a mainstream way for people to do research. Are people finding you, your company, and its products and services the way they found Barack Obama?

- 45 percent of wired Americans watched videos online related to politics or the election. Young adults led the way in their online video consumption, as nearly half of all 18- to 29-year-olds watched online political videos this election cycle.
- 33 percent of Internet users shared digital political content with others—whether by forwarding political writing or multimedia content over email, or by sharing information with others through other online mechanisms.
- 52 percent of those with a social networking profile used their social network site for political purposes.

So, why did Obama win the election? Here are the reasons presented as tips so you can apply them to your own business:

Focus on buyer personas. There was specific focus on getting out each and every one of the Obama "base" of supporters to vote as well as a strong focus on undecided voters.

Don't underestimate the importance of social media and viral marketing. The other campaigns seemed to be fighting using the play-books of past campaigns, the old rules of marketing and PR. Hillary Clinton was relying on what worked to elect Bill Clinton. John McCain was relying on what worked to elect George W. Bush. The Obama campaign realized that for him to become president, he had to deliver information online primarily, not as an afterthought. The number of people the campaign reached on the Web is staggering: According to *The Nation*, 13 million people signed up for the Obama campaign email list, more than 5 million "friended" Obama on Facebook, 2 million joined MyBO (an online organizing site where

people could sign up to support the campaign as a volunteer), and more than 1 million people subscribed to campaign text messages on mobile phones.

Embrace citizen journalists. The Obama campaign understood that citizen journalists (bloggers, podcasters, video bloggers) have immense power.

Clearly and simply articulate what you want people to believe. From the beginning, Obama was about "change." The word "change" was everywhere in his campaign, so much so that the entire world knew what Obama stood for. What did the following candidates stand for? John McCain, John Edwards, Hillary Clinton, Mitt Romney, or any others. Hard to say, isn't it?

Remember that people don't care about products and services; instead, they care about themselves and about solving their problems. The Obama campaign understood that his job was to solve the problems facing voters. He also knew that voters were buying into solutions, not just an individual. Did you notice in speeches how often Obama referred to his audience compared to how often he referred to himself? For example, in his inauguration address, new President Obama used what I call inclusive language (such as "our," "we," and "us") a total of 142 times in 20 minutes, while he used what I call internal language ("me," "I," and "my") just 3 times. (Yes, I counted.) The other candidates talked about themselves a hell of a lot more than Obama did.

Don't obsess over the competition. Obama rarely talked about his competition. Once in a while he would, but mainly he talked about the problems facing voters. McCain talked a lot about Obama. Interestingly, Clinton and McCain both tried to associate themselves with the "change" word (the competition's word), but both failed because people already associated it with Obama.

Put your fans first. Obama used many techniques to craft an inclusive campaign and alert fans about developments first. For example, I found out on Obama's Twitter feed that Joe Biden was to be Obama's running mate. It was stunning to me that Obama told his fans before mainstream media. (Of course, smart reporters were following his Twitter feed and learned at the same time as Obama supporters.)

Don't interrupt your buyers. Do you like getting phone calls from telemarketers at dinnertime? McCain supporters seemed to think so, since they unleashed a barrage of so called robocalls, which seemed to have backfired.

Negativity doesn't sell. Obama's theme of hope and the idea that life can be better with change was uplifting to many people. The campaigns based on fear didn't work.

Get your customers to talk about you. Obama tapped over 3 million donors who together provided \$640 million to the campaign. The majority contributed small amounts online. Once someone donates money, he or she has a vested interest in the candidate and will tend to talk about them on social networking sites and in person. So to get the word out—lots of small donors are better than a few fat cats.

Take time for your family. (Yes, this really is a marketing observation, because it has to do with positioning and what a candidate stands for.)

Obama frequently took time to be with his wife and daughters when he could have done another rally somewhere. He took several days at the end of the race to spend time with his ailing grandmother. While he was pulled away from "work," I think people respected his devotion to family and they saw something they liked in this attitude.

Marketers can learn a great deal from political campaigns. I encourage you to take a look at these lessons from the Obama campaign and apply them to your business. As you are developing your own marketing plan using the viral rules, think back to the inspirational viral marketing unleashed by Obama's team during the U.S. presidential election of 2008.

Stick to Your Plan

Many people who adhere to the old rules of marketing will fight you on your strategy. If you are a marketing professional who wants to reach your buyers directly, you will likely encounter resistance from corporate communications people. PR folks will get resistance from their agencies. They'll say the old rules are still in play. They'll say you have to focus on "the four Ps." They'll say you need to talk only about your products. They'll say that using the

media is the only way to tell your story and that you can use press releases only to reach journalists, not your buyers directly. They'll say that bloggers are geeks in pajamas who don't matter.

They are wrong.

The old rules are old news. Millions of people are online right now looking for answers to their problems. Will they find your organization? And if so, what will they find?

Remember, on the Web, you are what you publish.

3. Branding Your Organization as a Trusted Resource

An effective online content strategy, artfully executed, drives action. Organizations that use online content well have a clearly defined goal—to sell products, generate leads, secure contributions, or get people to join—and deploy a content strategy that directly contributes to reaching that goal. While the technologies for each form of online content are a little different, the one common aspect is that through all of these media, your organization can exercise thought leadership rather than simple advertising and product promotion; a well-crafted white paper, e-book, or Webinar contributes to an organization's positive reputation by setting it apart in the marketplace of ideas. This form of content brands a company, a consultant, or a nonprofit as an expert and as a trusted resource.

Developing Thought Leadership Content

What is thought leadership, and how do you do it?

The first thing you need to do is put away your company hat for a moment and—you guessed it—think like one of your buyer personas. The content that you create will be a solution to those people's problems and will not mention your company or products at all! Imagine for a moment that you are a marketer at an automobile tire manufacturer. Rather than just peddling your tires, you might write an e-book or shoot a video about how to drive safely in the snow, and then promote it on your site and offer it for free to other companies (such as automobile clubs and driver's education schools) to put on their sites. Or imagine that you run a local catering company and you have a blog or a web site. You might have a set of Web pages or podcasts available on your site. The topics could include "Plan the Perfect Wedding Reception" and "What You Need to Know for the Ideal Dinner Party for Twelve." A caterer with a podcast series like this educates visitors about their problems (planning a wedding or a dinner party) but does not sell the catering services directly. Instead, the idea here is that people who learn through the caterer's information are more likely to hire that caterer when the time comes.

Forms of Thought Leadership Content

Here are some of the common forms of thought leadership content (of course, there may be others in your niche market).

White Papers

Although white papers take their roots in governmental policy, they have become a common tool used to introduce technology innovations and products. A typical search engine query on "white paper" will return millions of results, with many focused on technology-related issues. White papers are powerful marketing tools used to help key decision makers and influencers justify implementing solutions. The best white papers are not product brochures. A good white paper is written for a business audience, defines a problem, and offers a solution, but it does not pitch a particular product or company. White papers are usually free and often have a registration requirement. Many companies syndicate white papers to business web sites through services such as TechTarget and Knowledge Storm.

E-Books

Marketers are using e-books more and more as a fun and thoughtful way to get useful information to buyers. For the purposes of marketing using Web content, I define an e-book as a PDF-formatted document that solves a problem for one of your buyer personas. E-books come with a bit of intrigue—they're like a hip younger sibling to the nerdy white paper. I recommend that e-books be presented in a landscape format, rather than the white paper's portrait format. Well executed e-books have lots of white space and copy that is typically written in a lighter style than the denser white paper. In my view, e-books (as marketing tools) should always be free, and I strongly suggest that there be no registration requirement.

Email Newsletters

Email newsletters have been around as long as email but still have tremendous value as a way to deliver thought leadership content in small, regular doses. However, the vast majority of email newsletters that I see serve mostly as another advertising venue for a company's products and services. You know the type I'm talking about—each month you get some lame

product pitch and a 10-percent-off coupon. Consider using a different type of email newsletter, one that focuses not on your company's products and services, but simply on solving buyers' problems once per month. Lets consider the hypothetical tire manufacturer or caterer that we discussed above. Imagine the tire manufacturer doing a monthly newsletter about safe driving or the caterer writing one on party planning.

Webinars

Webinars are online seminars that may include audio, video, or graphics (typically in the form of PowerPoint slides) and are often used by companies as a primer about a specific problem that the company's services can solve. However, the best Webinars are true thought leadership—like the traditional seminars from which they get their name. Often, Webinars feature guests who do not work for the company sponsoring the Webinar.

Wikis

Wilds as thought leadership content are started by organizations that want to be seen as important players in distinct marketplaces. "You can use wilds to reach the people you want to reach and help them to organize content," says Ramit Sethi, co-founder and vice president of marketing for Pbworks, a company that provides wild software tools. "So if you're in a company, you can use a wiki to allow your users to add their own Frequently Asked Questions, and other people can supply answers, which helps everyone. People love being a part of the community, and they really like that a wiki gives them a way to discuss their interests." Sethi says that the personality and culture of an organization play an important role in the decision to start a company-sponsored wild. "Companies that are a little bit fearless about letting people write their opinions make the best candidates for a wiki," he says. "But the most important thing is that you need to build something that is worth talking about, and you need to make it really easy. People don't want to install all kinds of software; they just want to get typing."

Research and Survey Reports

Research and survey reports are used by many companies. By publishing results for free, organizations offer valuable content and get a chance to show off the kind of work they do.

This can be an effective approach as long as your research or survey is legitimate and its statistically significant results are interesting to your buyers.

Photos, Images, Graphs, and Charts

Don't underestimate the value of an image to tell a story. If your product has visual appeal (sporting goods and real estate come to mind), you can create interesting content based on images. If your expertise lends itself to "how-to" instruction (example: "Learn how to surf"), photos can be particularly useful. Expertise that can be depicted as a chart, also stands to be especially useful to your buyers.

Blogs

A blog is a personal web site written by someone who is passionate about a subject and wants the world to know about it. The benefits rub off on the company that he or she works for. Writing a blog is the easiest and simplest way to get your thought leadership ideas out and into the market.

Audio and Video

Podcasts (ongoing series of audio downloads available by subscription) are very popular as thought leadership content in some markets. Some people prefer just audio, and if your buyers do, then a podcast of your own might be the thing for you. Video content, vodcasts, video blogs, and vlogs (lots of names, one medium) are regularly updated videos that offer a powerful opportunity to demonstrate your thought leadership, since most people are familiar with the video medium and are used to the idea of watching a video or television program to learn something. An easy and fun way to create audio and video content is to host an interview show with guests who have something interesting to say. The intelligence of the guests rubs off on you as you interview them. Consider interviewing customers, analysts who cover your marketplace, and authors of books in your field.

How to Create Thoughtful Content

While each technique for getting your thought leadership content into the marketplace of ideas is different, they share some common considerations:

- Do not write about your company and your products. Thought leadership content is designed to solve buyer problems or answer questions and to show that you and your organization are smart and worth doing business with. This type of marketing and PR technique is not a brochure or sales pitch. Thought leadership is not advertising.
- Define your organizational goals first . Do you want to drive revenue? Get people to donate money to your organization? Encourage people to buy something?
- Based on your goals, decide whether you want to provide the content for free and without any registration (you will get many more people to use the content, but you won't know who they are), or you want to include some kind of registration mechanism (much lower response rates, but you build a contact list).
- Think like a publisher by understanding your audience. Consider what market problems your buyer personas are faced with and develop topics that appeal to them.
- Write for your audience. Use examples and stories. Make it interesting.
- Choose a great title that grabs attention. Use subtitles to describe what the content will deliver.
- Promote the effort like crazy. Offer the content on your site with easy-to-find links. Add a link to employees' email signatures, and get partners to offer links as well.
- To drive the viral marketing effects, alert appropriate reporters, bloggers, and analysts that the content is available and send them a download link.

4. How to Write for Your Buyers

Your buyers (and the media that cover your company) want to know what specific problems your product solves, and they want proof that it works—in plain language. Your viral marketing is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers and to drive action (such as generating sales leads), which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want to hear this in their own words. Every time you write—yes, even in news releases—you have an opportunity to communicate. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials will help your buyers understand how you, specifically, will help them.

Whenever you set out to write something, you should be writing specifically for one or more of the buyer personas that you developed as part of your viral marketing plan. You should avoid jargon-laden phrases that are overused in your industry, unless this is the language the persona actually uses. In the technology business, words like groundbreaking, industry-standard, and cutting-edge are what we call gobbledygook. The worst gobbledygook offenders seem to be business-to-business technology companies. For some reason, marketing people at technology companies have a particularly tough time explaining how products solve customer problems. Because these writers don't understand how their products solve customer problems, or are too lazy to write for buyers, they cover by explaining myriad nuances of how the product works and pepper this blather with industry jargon that sounds vaguely impressive. What ends up in marketing materials and news releases is a bunch of talk about "industry-leading" solutions that purport to help companies "streamline business process/" "achieve business objectives," or "conserve organizational resources." Huh?

Poor Writing: How Did We Get Here?

When I see words like flexible, scalable, groundbreaking, industry standard, or cutting-edge, my eyes glaze over. What, I ask myself, is this supposed to mean? Just saying your widget is "industry standard" means nothing unless some aspect of that standardization is important to your buyers. In the next sentence, I want to know what you mean by "industry standard," and I also want you to tell me why that standard matters and give me some proof that what you say is indeed true.

Here's how the usual dysfunctional process works and why these phrases are so overused: Marketers don't understand buyers, the problems buyers face, or how their product helps solve these problems. That's where the gobbledygook happens. First the marketing person bugs the product managers and others in the organization to provide a set of the products features. Then the marketing person reverse-engineers the language that they think the buyer wants to hear based not on buyer input but on what the product does. A favorite trick these ineffective marketers use is to take the language that the product manager provides, go into Microsoft Word's find-and-replace mode, substitute the word solution for product, and then slather the whole thing with superlative-laden, jargon-sprinkled hype. By just decreeing, through an electronic word substitution, that "our product" is "your solution," these companies effectively deprive themselves of the opportunity to convince people that this is the case.

Another major drawback of the generic gobbledygook approach is that it doesn't make your company stand out from the crowd. Here's a test: Take the language that the marketers at your company dreamed up and substitute the name of a competitor and the competitor's product for your own. Does it still make sense to you? Marketing language that can be substituted for another company's isn't effective in explaining to a buyer why your company is the right choice.

I'll admit that these gobbledygook phrases are mainly used by technology companies operating in the business-to-business space. If you are writing for a company that sells different kinds of products (shoes, perhaps), then you would probably not be tempted to use many of the above phrases. The same thing is true for nonprofits, churches, rock bands, and other organizations—you're also unlikely to use these sorts of phrases. But the lessons are the same. Avoid the insular jargon of your company and your industry. Instead, write for your buyers.

"Hold on," you might say. "The technology industry may be dysfunctional, but I don't write that way." The fact is that there is equivalent nonsense going on in all industries.

Effective Writing for Viral Marketing

Your viral marketing is meant to be the beginning of a relationship with buyers (and journalists). This begins when you work at understanding your target audience and figure out how they should be sliced into distinct buying segments or buyer personas. Once this exercise is complete, identify the situations each target audience may find themselves in. What are their problems? business issues? needs? Only then are you ready to communicate your expertise to the market. Here's the rule: When you write, start with your buyers, not with your product.

Consider the entertainment company blurb above. The marketing and PR folks at Disney should be thinking about what customers want from an entertainment company, rather than just thinking up fancy words for what they think they already provide. Why not start by defining the problem? "Many television and cinema fans today are frustrated with the state of the American entertainment industry. They believe today's films and shows are too derivative and that entertainment companies don't respect their viewers intelligence."

Next, successful marketers will use real-world language to convince their customers that they can solve their problem. Be careful to avoid corporate jargon, but you don't want to sound like you're trying too hard, either—that always comes across as phony. Talk to your audience as you might talk to a relative you don't see too often—be friendly and familiar but also respectful: "Like our audience, we care about and enjoy movies and TV shows—that's why we're in this business in the first place. As such, we pledge to always" Now I have no connection with Disney and don't know about the Disney business. But I have purchased a lot of Disney products: movies, TV shows, videos, and visits to theme parks. It might seem strange to people at Disney to actually write something like I suggest. It might feel strange for the PR and marketing people at Disney to use a phrase like "movies and TV shows" rather than "quality creative content," but its absolutely essential to establishing a relationship with customers.

Your online and offline marketing content is meant to drive action, which requires a focus on buyer problems. Your buyers want this in their own words, and then they want proof. Every time you write, you have an opportunity to communicate and to convince. At each stage of the sales process, well-written materials combined with effective marketing programs will lead your buyers to understand how your company can help them. Good viral marketing is rare

indeed, but a focus on doing it right will most certainly pay off with increased sales, higher retention rates, and more ink from journalists.

5. How Web Content Influences the Buying Process

Today when people want to buy something, the Web is almost always the first stop on their shopping trip. In any market category, potential customers head online to do initial research. The moment of truth is when they reach your site: Will you draw them into your sales process or let them click away?

When buyers use search engines and directories to reach your site, link to it through another site, or respond to a marketing campaign, you have an opportunity to deliver targeted information at the precise moment when they are looking for what you have to offer. Yet marketers often fail to realize the potential of their web sites, which must hook buyers in from the start and hang on to them until the sale is complete. Individuals don't go to the Web looking for advertising; they are on a quest for content. By providing information when they need it, you can begin a long and profitable relationship with them. Editors and publishers obsess over readership, and so should you.

To best leverage the power of content, you first need to help your site's visitors find what they need on your site. When someone visits a site for the first time, the site communicates messages to the buyer: Does this organization care about me? Does it focus on the problems I face? Or does the site only include information describing what the company has to offer from its own narrow perspective? You need to start with a site navigation that is designed and organized with your buyers in mind. Don't simply mimic the way your company or group is organized (e.g., by product, geography, or governmental structure), because the way your audience uses web sites rarely coincides with your company's internal priorities. Organizing based on your needs leaves site visitors confused about how to find what they really need.

You should learn as much as possible about the buying process, focusing on issues such as how people find your site or the length of a typical purchase cycle. Consider what happens offline in parallel with online interactions so that the processes complement each other. For example, if you have an e-commerce site and a printed catalog, coordinate the content and messages so that both efforts support and reinforce the buying process (i.e., include URLs for your online buying guide in the catalog and use the same product descriptions so people don't get confused). In the B2B world, trade shows should work with Internet initiatives (by

collecting email addresses at the booth, for example, then sending a follow-up email with a show-specific landing page at your site). Understanding the buying process in detail, both online and offline, allows you to create Web content that influences the buying decision.

Segmenting Your Buyers

The online relationship begins the second a potential customer hits your homepage. The first thing he needs to see is a reflection of himself. That's why you must organize your site with content for each of your distinct buyer personas. How do your potential customers self-select? Is it based on their job function, or on geography, or on the industry they work in? It's important to create a set of appropriate links based on a clear understanding of your buyers so that you can quickly move them from your homepage to pages built specifically for them.

For example, the New York Public Library (NYPL), an institution that has 50.6 million items in its collections housed at 89 locations and overseen by 3,200 staff members, has a web site that must serve many varied visitors. The NYPL site appeals to a very diverse set of buyer personas (people who use the libraries services both online and offline), who download materials directly from the site. Here are just a few of the buyer personas that the NYPL site serves:

- Academic researchers from around the globe who need access to the NYPL digital information collections.
- People who live in the Bronx and speak Spanish as a first language. (The library offers introductory classes, conducted in Spanish at the NYPL's Bronx location, on how to use a computer.)
- Tourists to New York City who want to take a tour of the beautiful main library building on Fifth Avenue.
- Film studios, TV producers, and photographers who use the famous NYPL setting. (Breakfast at Tiffany's, Ghostbusters, and Spiderman are just a few of the movies that have been partially filmed there.)

- Individuals, foundations, and corporations that help support the library with donations.

The NYPL site includes detailed content throughout to reach each of these buyer personas (as well as others). The front page of the NYPL web site is broken into several main sections, including "Find Books & Do Research" (information on what is in the library's catalogs for people who need a particular book), "Libraries" (branch information for those who live in New York City), "Digital Library" (information that anybody in the world can download), "News," "NYPL Live!" (events), and "Support the Library" (membership and giving information for people who want to donate money or time to the NYPL). Each landing page has additional information to make browsing this huge web site easy.

One way many organizations approach navigation is to link to landing pages based on the problems your product or service solves. Start by identifying the situations in which each target audience may find itself. If you are in the supply chain management business, you might have a drop-down menu on the homepage with links that say, "I need to get product to customers faster" or "I want to move products internationally." Each path leads to landing pages built for buyer segments, with content targeted to their problems. Once the prospects reach those pages, you have the opportunity to communicate your expertise in solving these problems—building some empathy in the process—and to move customers further along the buying cycle.

Elements of a Buyer-Centric Web Site

As you build a site that focuses on your buyers and their purchasing process, here are a few other things to consider:

Develop a Site Personality

It is important to create a distinct, consistent, and memorable site, and an important component of that goal is the tone or voice of the content. As visitors interact with the content on your site, they should develop a clear picture of your organization. Is the personality fun and playful? Or is it solid and conservative? For example, on the Google homepage, when

people search they can click "I'm Feeling Lucky," which is a fun and playful way to get you directly to the top listing in the search results. That one little phrase, "I'm Feeling Lucky," says a lot about Google. And there's much more. For example, in the collection of more than 100 languages that Google supports, from Afrikaans to Zulu, there is also Google in the language of Elmer Fudd, with everything translated into what Elmer Fudd would say, such as "I'm Feewing Wucky." This is cool, but it wouldn't work for a more conservative company—it would just seem strange and out of place. Contrast that with Accenture's homepage.⁵ At the time of this writing, just under the Accenture logo was the phrase "High Performance. Delivered." There is a photo of Tiger Woods and a message ("We know what it takes to be a Tiger.") with an offer ("See findings from our research and experience with over 500 high performers."). Both of these home pages work because the site personality works with the company personality. Whatever your personality, the way to achieve consistency is to make certain that all the written material and other content on the site conform to a defined tone that you've established from the start. A strong focus on site personality and character pays off. As visitors come to rely on the content they find on your site, they will develop an emotional and personal relationship with your organization. A web site can evoke a familiar and trusted voice, just like that of a friend on the other end of an email exchange.

Photos and Images Tell Your Story

Content is not limited to words; smart marketers make use of nontext content—including photos, audio feeds, video clips, cartoons, charts, and graphs—to inform and entertain site visitors. Photographs in particular play an important role for many sites. Photos are powerful content when page visitors see that the images are an integrated component of the web site. However, generic "stock" photographs (happy and good-looking multicultural models in a fake company meeting room) may actually have a negative effect. People will know instantly that the photo is not of real people in your organization. Neither you nor your users are generic. On a technical note, while photos, charts, graphs, and other nontext content make great additions to any site, be wary of very large image sizes and of using distracting multimedia content like Flash Video. Visitors want to access content quickly, they want sites that load fast, and they don't want to be distracted.

Include Interactive Content Tools

Anything that gets people involved with the content of a site provides a great way to engage visitors, build their interest, and move them through your sales cycle. Examples of interactive tools include such things as the stock quoting and charting applications found on financial sites and "email your congressman" tools on political advocacy sites. Interactive content provides visitors with a chance to immerse themselves in site content, which makes them more likely to progress through the sales consideration cycle to the point where they are ready to spend money.

Make Feedback Loops Available

Providing a way for users to interact with your organization is a hallmark of a great site. Easy to find "contact us" information is a must, and direct feedback mechanisms like "rate this" buttons, online forums, viewer reviews, and opportunities to post comments provide valuable information by and for site visitors.

Provide Ways for Your Customers to Interact with Each Other

A forum or wild where customers can share with one another and help each other works well for many organizations as away to show potential customers that there is a vibrant community of people using their products or services. In other words, an existing set of customers interacting with each other on your site is great marketing!

Create Content with Pass-Along Value that Could Go Viral

Web content provides terrific fodder for viral marketing—the phenomenon where people pass on information about your site to their friends and colleagues or link to your content in their blogs. When content proves interesting or useful, visitors tend to tell friends, usually by sending them a link. Creating buzz around a site to encourage people to talk it up isn't easy. Creating content that has a pass-along value is never a certain process, because it happens more organically. There are a few things you can do to help the process, though. When creating site content, think carefully about what content users might want to pass along and then make that content easy to find and link to. Make the actual URLs permanent so that no one finds dead links when visiting months (or years) later. To be successful with viral marketing is to say something interesting and valuable and to make it easy to find and share.

Using RSS to Deliver Your Web Content to Targeted Niches

It is so easy for those of us in the media and analyst community to get information via RSS (Really Simple Syndication) that I can't stress its importance enough as a component of a Web marketing strategy; it's my preferred method in my work tracking markets, companies, and ideas. Once information is in RSS format, an RSS-aware browser such as Firefox checks the feed for changes and displays them on a Web page. Having the information come to me is just so much easier than in the days when I had to go looking for it myself. RSS and news aggregation software is easy to use, usually free, and provides a way to get information from any device. I particularly like that RSS provides a powerful information-management tool that bypasses the increasingly crowded and annoying email channel. Having my favorite web sites, media outlets, and blogs feeding RSS is my own custom compilation of exactly what I want to see.

Surprisingly, only a small percentage of organizations deploy RSS for syndicating news and content to the outside world. Even fewer understand how RSS feeds are a preferred way to market to niche customers who have very specific needs. Learn from the way that most major news sites such as the BBC, the New York Times, the Washington Post, and thousands more deploy RSS. Almost any content that can be broken down into discrete items (such as news releases, blog postings, product updates, or SEC filings) can be syndicated via RSS.

Link Content Directly into the Sales Cycle

Marketers with the most successful sites specifically design content to draw buyers into the sales cycle. People considering a purchase always go through a certain thought process. In the case of something simple and low-cost, say deciding to download a song from iTunes, the process is likely very straightforward and may only take seconds. But for a major decision such as buying a new car, sending your child to college, or accepting a job offer, the process may take weeks or months. For many business-to-business sales, the cycle may involve many steps and multiple buyer personas (a business buyer and an IT buyer, perhaps) and may take months or even years to complete.

Effective Web marketers take web site visitors' buying cycle into account when writing content and organizing it on the site. People in the early stages of the sales cycle need basic information about their problems and the ways that your organization solves them. Those further along in the process want to compare products and services, so they need detailed information about the benefits of your offerings. And when buyers are ready to whip out their credit cards, they need easy-to-use mechanisms linked directly from the content so they can quickly finish the purchase (or donation, subscription, and so on).

A focus on understanding buyers and the sales cycle and developing appropriate content that links visitors through the cycle to the point of purchase is essential for a great site. Based on my years of research, the vast majority of sites are little more than online brochures or vast one-way advertising vehicles. These sites are almost wholly ineffective. The Web offers significant opportunities to those marketers who understand that content is at the forefront of the best sites.

A Friendly Nudge

After you've demonstrated expertise in the market category and knowledge about solving potential customers' problems, you can introduce your product or service. When creating content about your offerings, remain focused on the buyer and her problems, rather than elaborating distinctions between products. As people interact with your content at this middle stage in the buying process, it is appropriate to suggest subscriptions to related content—perhaps an email newsletter, Webinar (Web-based seminar), or podcast. But remember, if you're asking for someone's email address (or other contact details), you must provide something equally valuable in return.

Prospects want to poke, prod, and test your company to learn what sort of organization you are. They also have questions. That's why well-designed sites include a mechanism for people to inquire about products or services. Be flexible but also consistent; offer them a variety of ways to interact with your company, and make contact information readily available from any page on the site (one click away is best). Also keep in mind that, particularly with expensive products, buyers will test you to see how responsive you are, so you must make responding to these inquiries a priority. At this stage, you want people to think: "This is an organization I

can do business with. They have happy customers, and they are responsive to me and my needs."

Close the Sale and Continue the Conversation

As the customer approaches the end of the buying process, you must provide tools that facilitate the sale. Buyers may be unsure which of your products is appropriate for them—so you may need to provide online demonstrations or a tool that allows them to enter specific details about their requirements and then suggests the appropriate product.

Once the deal is closed, there's one more step. You must continue the online dialog with your new customer. Add her to your customer email newsletter or customer-only community site where she can interact with experts in your organization and other like-minded customers. You should also provide ample opportunities for customers to give you feedback on how to make the products (and sales process) better.

6. Social Networking Tips

The popularity of social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Bebo is phenomenal. Social networking sites make it easy for people to create a profile about themselves and use it to form a virtual network combining their offline friends and new online friends. According to data released by comScore, the social networking category of web sites had nearly 140 million visitors in the U.S. in early 2009. That's nearly three-quarters of U.S. Internet users! My Space Sites led the category with 71 million visitors, followed by Facebook.com with 67.5 million visitors, and Twitter, com, now the third-ranked social networking site, with 17 million visitors. And it's not just the United States; social networking is extremely popular all over the world. For instance, in Europe, Facebook has seen a 314 percent increase in one year to nearly 100 million visitors. Of course, not all visitors to these sites create their own profiles, but there are millions and millions of people who do—to share their photos, journals, videos, music, and interests with a network of friends.

While these huge numbers are impressive, we can easily lose track of what this means to us as viral marketers. When we consider the reach of influential people on social networking sites, we should rethink our notions about who can best spread our ideas and tell our stories. Many people want to get quoted in important publications like the Wall Street Journal or have their products mentioned on television networks like the BBC or on shows like Oprah. These media hits are seen as the holy grail of marketers. But while mainstream media is certainly important (and who wouldn't want to be on the BBC), is that really the best thing for your business?

Facebook: Not Just for Students

The most important thing to remember about marketing on Facebook (and other social networking sites) is that it is not about generating hype. The best approaches to Facebook marketing involve three useful ways to deliver information and ideas to a network of people who are interested in you and your products and services: friend-to-friend communication, groups, and applications. The first is generally the easiest and really just requires that you describe yourself via your personal profile.

A great way for organizations of all kinds to keep interested people informed is to gather them into a Facebook group. All users can create groups, and their membership can be closed (invitation only) or open (anyone may join). There's also a similar place where people can meet called a Facebook fan page, which is a page of information that anybody can see (compared to groups where you must register first). Facebook Groups are typically for more in-depth communications around a subject (such as a product launch), while Facebook fan pages are typically for a loose but longer-term presence. I know this sounds complicated, but it should be further incentive to join some groups and become a fan of a few companies to see what people are doing.

Starting a Facebook group is very straightforward. It takes just a few minutes to set one up, and the process includes a built-in tool for sending invitations to your Facebook friends (and, as appropriate, the friends of your colleagues). You should also mention the group on your organization's regular web site or blog.

People join Facebook groups because they want to stay informed, and they want to do it on their own time. Just as with blogs, the best way to maintain a Facebook group is simply to make valuable information available. Unlike intrusive email updates, which arrive only when the sender chooses, Facebook groups can be visited at the member's convenience. "You are not spamming people with information that they are forced to read," Robertson says.

The informal, two-way nature of Facebook's group dynamics is an important aspect for marketers. You can recommend Facebook groups and applications to friends in a much easier and more casual way than you can with e-mail. And people can post information to the group themselves, to actively take part in the brand.

The final feature is the ability to make applications, which are a great way to build your brand on Facebook. As an open platform, Facebook allows anybody to create applications that allow friends to share information on the service in different ways. There are many thousands of applications available on Facebook, and the more popular ones are used regularly by hundreds of thousands of people each day—not bad for a marketing tool that costs nothing to launch and is easy to create.

In short, Facebook is emerging as a primary means for folks to keep in touch with the people and the organizations that are important to them, and it follows that it has become an important marketing tool for many companies. As with other social networking media, success on Facebook comes from being a thought leader and developing information that people want to absorb.

Check Me Out on MySpace

Marketing on social networking sites can be tricky because their online communities disdain overt commercial messages. Acceptable marketing and promotion on these sites frequently involves offline brands or personalities creating pages to build and expand an online following rather than directly advertise products. For instance, it is common for members of rock bands to have a MySpace page.

Yet another tactic that some smart nonprofit organizations use is to encourage employees to establish a personal page, with details of the cause they support, as a way to spread the word. Supporters of political candidates (as well as some candidates themselves) create pages on social networking sites too. As with all good marketing, it is important to create content that is right for the people you want to reach, and that starts with the choice of which social networking site (or sites) to post your profile.

As you consider a strategy to get yourself out there and onto a social networking site for viral marketing purposes, just remember that authenticity and transparency are critical. Don't try to fool the community into thinking that the page is something that it is not. Frequent eruptions within these communities happen when members uncover a fraud of some kind, such as an advertising agency creating fake profiles of people applauding products.

Tweet Your Thoughts to the World

We really should have seen Twitter coming. After all, one of the most popular elements of the instant messaging craze is the "away message," which gives users the opportunity to tell people what they are doing (a bit like a text version of a telephone voicemail greeting). As blogs (a more long-winded means of answering that question—among others) became more

popular, it was probably only a matter of time before blog posts started to look more like away messages. Thus was microblogging born, with Twitter being the most popular service. And popularity is important because of the social nature of Twitter, a service for friends, family, and coworkers to communicate through the exchange of quick, short messages (with a maximum of 140 characters).

People use Twitter to keep their "followers" (people who subscribe to their Twitter feed) updated on their life. For instance, you might "tweet" about who you're having lunch with or the project you're engrossed in, or you might ask your network a question. Users can choose to follow the Twitter updates of anyone they want to hear from: family members, colleagues, or friends. Because of the severe constraint on the length of tweets, people use Twitter to post information that is important to update their network about but is much more concise than a blog post and more casual than an email. You can update your Twitter feed from a Web browser, a mobile phone, or an instant messaging service, so Twitter is always on. As with other forms of social networking, it takes time to build a following. In particular, the best way to get people to pay attention to you is to participate by following others and responding to them, just like you should do in the blogosphere.

Every viral marketing person should be aware of Twitter and understand how people use it. As a first step, you should immediately high-tail it over to the Twitter search engine to see what people are saying about you, your organization, your products and services, and perhaps your competitors and the category of product you sell. If you've never done this, please do it right now, because it can be an eye-opening experience to see what (if anything) people are saying.

When you're ready to set up your own Twitter profile and begin to tweet, the most important aspect from the viral marketing perspective is—as I say time and again—don't use this service as an advertising channel to talk up your products and services. If that's your intention, you need to be very careful.

Some companies use Twitter to alert customers to special deals. Because of the broadcast-like nature of microblogging, thousands of potential buyers can receive this information instantaneously.

But as with all new media, it is important to learn the unwritten etiquette of Twitter before using it.

With all this online conversation going on, some people think that Facebook, Twitter, and other social networking tools can replace a face-to-face approach to business. I actually think strong social networking ties lead to stronger personal relationships because it is easy to facilitate face-to-face meetings that never would have occurred otherwise.

Social Networking and Personal Branding

An important thing to consider is how your online actions are a reflection of your personal branding (the image that you project to the world). As you already know, people use Twitter to keep others updated on what they find interesting at that moment.

What Does Your Twitter Page Look Like?

Most Twitter pages don't say enough and most have crappy design. While that's fine if you're just communicating with friends, if you care about your personal brand, you need to do better. Much better. And it is so easy! When you first set up your Twitter account, you have choices. And after you've setup the account, you can make these changes to any aspect of your profile at anytime (except your Twitter ID) under the "Settings" tab in Twitter.

Twitter ID: Choose an appropriate ID. Something like Mr Silly Guy is probably not a good idea for most people. However, a silly ID might fit your personal brand, say, if you're a comedian.

Name: Use your real name. Don't just default to your user ID which so many people seem to do. And don't just use a nickname like "Pookie." You can put your nickname in quotes inside of your real name if you want to. If you really care about your personal brand, you'll want people to know who you really are.

Location: Use the town or nearest city that makes sense for you. Saying something cute like "earth" or "somewhere in Canada" turns people off who don't know you. Besides, the location is a good way to make local contacts.

Web: If you have a blog or site, put the URL here. Or maybe your profile on a company web site makes sense for you. This should be somewhere people can go to learn more about you. If you don't have a blog or site, I recommend that you create a Google profile and link to that. You can also leave the "Web" link blank if you want, but that says to people that you don't want to be contacted or to have people learn more about you.

Bio: This is where you say something about yourself. You only get 160 characters. As a component of personal branding, this is a critical section. Don't leave it blank. And don't make a mini-resume from a laundry list of attributes like this: "father, brother, surfer, economics major, world traveler, marketer, and rockstar wannabe." I see this sort of thing all the time and it is not good for personal branding because you don't really focus on your particular expertise. Try to be descriptive. And try to be specific.

Photo: Your photo is very important! Don't default to the placeholder that Twitter provides for those with no photo. And don't use something clever as a stand in (like your cat). If you care about your personal brand, you should use a photo of you and not a pet or image of your car. Photos appear very tiny on Twitter—like a postage stamp—so use a close-up shot. If you use a full view of yourself, then you will appear like a stick figure. Remember that your photo conveys a very important first impression when people see your profile for the first time. Are you wearing a hat? Is it a casual shot of you taken while on holiday with a beer in your hand? Or have you chosen a formal head-and-shoulders shot with business attire taken by a professional photographer? Is your son or daughter in the photo with you? There is no real right or wrong, but do keep in mind that each of these choices says a great deal about you.

Background image: The background image of your Twitter page is a place where you can really show off. The default blue background is like when you first open PowerPoint—its a default. Twitter has some choices, but many people use them, so you will not be unique. Shoot a custom photo in order to really shine.

These choices are really easy to set up, but they're very important for your personal brand. If you are on Twitter, take the time to make some changes today. Again, the same ideas apply on other social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn, so don't forget to carefully consider your personal branding on those sites as well.

Which Social Networking Site Is Right for You?

While some people might be tempted to create a page on lots of different social networking sites, this may not be necessary (or even useful), since each one appeals to different users. "While the top social networking sites are typically viewed as directly competing with one another, our analysis demonstrates that each site occupies a slightly different niche," says Jack Flanagan, executive vice president of comScore. "There is a misconception that social networking is the exclusive domain of teenagers, but [our] analysis confirms that the appeal of social networking sites is far broader." In fact, Facebook says that more than two-thirds of its users are out of college and that the fastest growing demographic is those 35 years old and older.

So think about the right social networking sites for you and your business. Besides Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter, here are a few other popular ones to check out.

LinkedIn: The LinkedIn site says: "Professionals use LinkedIn to exchange information, ideas and opportunities. When you join, you create a profile that summarizes your professional accomplishments. Your profile helps you find and be found by former colleagues, clients, and partners. You can add more connections by inviting trusted contacts to join LinkedIn and connect to you." The LinkedIn About page provides a laundry list of things you can do on the site, such as find potential clients, search for jobs, land deals, and get introductions. LinkedIn is an excellent tool if your buyer personas work in businesses.

Squidoo: Unlike other social networking sites that are based on personal profiles of individuals, Squidoo is based on people's expertise in a niche subject. Squidoo is another way for marketers to build an online presence easily and for free. Squidoo is built around online lenses, which are a way to filter a person's expertise on a subject onto a single page. Interested people check out a lens on a topic and quickly get pointed to useful web sites. A person who

makes a lens is a lensmaster, and he or she uses a lens to provide context. "Everyone is an expert," the Squidoo site says, and Squidoo helps everyone share that expertise with the world.

SecondLife: An online world entirely built and owned by its residents, Second Lifers is a place where people interact in three virtual dimensions. But this is not a game (there is no goal and nobody is keeping score); rather, it is a world with millions of residents and an economy built on the Linden dollar in which millions of U.S. dollars (at the current exchange rate) change hands each month. The Second Life world is teeming with people who use a self-created, in-world avatar to interact with others by buying, selling, and trading things with other residents (and just milling about and chatting). You can purchase land, build a store or business, and make money. Not surprisingly, there is even a sleazy underworld as well. But you don't have to be into commerce; you can just walk around and hang out. Quite a few of the companies that have jumped into Second Life seem to have done so just to be part of a new phenomenon, and many have since closed down their presence there. As with all social networking sites, it is important to consider if your buyer personas are active before jumping in. I hear that many software developers frequent Second Life, so its no surprise that smart companies like IBM and HP have set up shop there.

You Can't Go to Every Party, So Why Even Try?

You can't go to every party thrown in your city. There are literally thousands of social networking sites out there, and it is simply impossible to be active in all of them. And once you choose a few parties to attend, you can't meet and have a conversation with each and every person there. You know there are tons of great conversations going on all around you, and you know that you can't be a part of them all.

What do you do at a party? Some people constantly look over the shoulder of the person they are talking to, always on the lookout for a better conversation. Some flit from one person to another every few minutes all night, having many short, superficial conversations. What I like to do at parties is have a few great conversations and be happy that I'm at a wonderful event. I know I can't be with everyone, so I have fun with the people I'm with. What more could I want?

If you're following my analogy here, you should apply the same thing to your participation in social media. For most people and organizations, its better to be active in a few social networking sites instead of creating profiles on dozens of them and being too busy to spend much time in any one. Since you can't go to every party, you need to pick and choose. Where do you want to be? Where you can be most helpful? Where are the members of your buyer personas?

Optimizing Social Networking Pages

Although social networking sites aren't advertising, you can still use the sites to lead people into your buying process.

Here are some ideas to get the most out of using social networking sites for marketing:

- Target a specific audience. Create a page that reaches an audience important to your organization. It is usually better to target a small niche market (e.g., people who want to do their own car repairs but don't know how to diagnose what's wrong).
- Be a thought leader. Provide valuable and interesting information that people want to checkout. It is better to show your expertise in a market or at solving a buyer's problems than to blather on about your product.
- Be authentic and transparent. Don't try to impersonate someone else. Its a sleazy practice, and if you get caught you can do irreparable harm to your company's reputation. If your mother would say its wrong, it probably is.
- Create lots of links. Link to your own sites and blog, and those of others in your industry and network. Everybody loves links—they make the Web what it is. You should certainly link to your own stuff from a social networking site, but its important to expand your horizons a bit.

- Encourage people to contact you. Make it easy for others to reach you online, and be sure to follow up personally on your fan mail.
- Participate. Create groups and participate in online discussions. Become an online leader and organizer.
- Make it easy to find you. Tag your page and add it to subject directories. Encourage others to bookmark your page with del.icio.us and DIGG.
- Experiment. These sites are great because you can try new things. If it isn't working, tweak it. Or abandon the effort and try something new. There is no such thing as an expert in social networking—were all learning as we go!

Start a Movement

Clearly, one of the most interesting aspects of social media is that people talk about you, your company, and its products and services. Most of the time, these discussions happen away from your influence. However, it is certainly possible to guide the discussion if you're a bit creative. For example, Ford Motor Company is helping to lead discussions with its Fiesta Movement, a social networking platform built around the new global vehicle of the same name. Ford provided 100 social media "agents" with personalized Fiestas that they can drive for six months and then relate their experiences through a variety of social media sites.

"This is a Euro-spec vehicle that is not yet available in the United States," says Ford's Scott Monty. "We're using this as a combination of test marketing and buzz generation. The agents are creating content all over the Web, and people are talking about the Ford Fiesta on Facebook. Twitter, their blogs, and posting videos and photos on sites like YouTube and Flickr. Ford came on with an approach to social media that showed that we are different. We came at social media from a different perspective, a more personal one, and I think that has made all the difference for us."

Ford's strategy is betting on the continued rise in social media's popularity, and its online numbers reflect the buzz. Agent postings have garnered significant numbers on social media

sites through the first quarter of the Fiesta Movement—more than 1.8 million YouTube views, more than 270,000 Flickr views and more than 1.8 million Twitter impressions, resulting in more than 13.2 million interactions.

Social media take the pervasiveness of the Internet one step farther. And while we don't know where they're heading, what is certain is that viral marketing on the Web will continue to evolve—quickly. Success comes from experimentation. With a service like Twitter or a site like Facebook (or whatever the next new thing is), nobody knows the rules at first. Smart marketers succeed just by trying. Reuters, for example, generated a ton of stories in the mainstream media and on blogs when it opened the first virtual news bureau in Second Life. They got a huge amount of buzz simply by trying something. Similarly, JetBlue and Dell have created huge folio wings on Twitter because they were early adopters. The trick to benefiting from any new medium is this: Participate in it; don't just try to take advantage of it. Be a genuine part of the action! Whatever your social networking site of choice, don't hesitate to jump in and see what you can do.

7. Blogging to Reach Your Buyers

Blogs are now a mainstream vehicle for organizations to get their ideas into the marketplace. The readers of blogs view the information shared by smart bloggers as one of the few forms of real, authentic communication. Audiences consume advertising with skepticism and consider pronouncements by CEOs to be out of touch with reality. But a good blog written by someone within a large or small company, a nonprofit, a church, or a political campaign commands attention.

At the same time, blogs have seen a lot of hype in recent years. Business magazines regularly include breathless enthusiasm about how blogs and blogging hold the power to transform your business. While I absolutely agree that blogs can change your business and your life, there is still some mystery to blogging if you haven't done it before. This chapter will set out the basics of how to establish your own blog. But I recommend that, before you begin to write, you first monitor blogs in your market space and that you step into the blogosphere by commenting on a few blogs before you write your own.

As you begin to comment on other people's blogs, you'll develop your own blogging voice and get a sense of what you like to discuss online. That's great! You're experimenting on someone else's blog real estate. If you're like many people, soon you'll be itching to write your own blog. But if commenting is a painful chore for you, maybe you're not cut out to be a blogger. That's okay—there are many more blog readers than blog writers. This forum isn't for everybody. It's impossible to tell you everything you need to know about blogging in this one chapter.

What Should You Blog About?

People often struggle to decide what to blog about. This is particularly true for marketing and PR professionals, because they have been taught to be slaves to the notion of flogging our products and services with "on message" advertising and press releases; for most organizations, that's exactly the wrong way to blog. The first thing to ask yourself is "Whom do I want to reach?" For many people, the answer is a combination of buyers, existing customers, and influencers such as analysts and the media. You need to find a topic that you

are passionate about. If you aren't excited about the topic or if it feels painful to write, you're unlikely to sustain the effort; and if you do manage to keep going, the writing is likely to be forced.

Most first-time bloggers try to cover too much. It is better to start with a narrow subject and leave room to expand. Be authentic. People read blogs because they want to find an honest voice speaking passionately about a subject. You do not have to be harsh or controversial if that is not your style. If you are interesting and provide valuable information, your readership will grow.

In its "State of the Blogosphere" 2008 report, blog search engine Technorati claimed that it tracked more than 112 million blogs in 81 languages and that about 100,000 new blogs are created every day, which means that, on average, a new blog is created every second of every day. That's a heck of a lot of competition, and you might ask yourself if it is worth the effort. If you write a niche blog, then you're not competing with 112 million other blogs. You're writing in a space where there are few (if any) other blogs, and you will no doubt find readers who are interested in what you're saying. If you have a small niche, you may interest only a few hundred readers. But you'll reach the right readers—those people who are interested in what you and your organization have to say.

Blogging Ethics and Employee Blogging Guidelines

Lets talk about ethics for a moment. All sorts of unethical practices go on in the blogosphere, and you must be certain to hold yourself and your organization accountable for your actions as a blogger. Some organizations have gotten caught using unethical practices on their blogs and have done great harm to their corporate reputations. I've included some of the issues you need to pay attention to, as well as an example of each unethical practice. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but rather a starting point for you to think about ethics.

- **Transparency:** You should never pretend to be someone you are not. For example, don't use another name to submit a comment on any blog (your own or somebody else's), and don't create a blog that talks about your company without disclosing that someone from your company is behind it.

- Privacy: Unless you've been given permission, don't blog about something that was disclosed to you. For example, don't post material from an email someone sent you unless you have permission.
- Disclosure: It is important to disclose anything that people might consider a conflict of interest in a blog post.
- Truthfulness: Don't lie. For example, never makeup a customer story just because it makes good blog content.

Again, this is not a complete list. The Word of Mouth Marketing Association has created an Ethics Codecs I recommend that you read and follow the guidelines. But you should also follow your gut. If sending a post feels funny to you for some reason or makes you uncomfortable, it may be unethical. What would your mother say about that post? If she would tell you it is wrong, it probably is, so don't send it. Please do the right thing.

Blogging Basics

Unlike web sites, which require design and HTML skills to produce, blogs are quick and easy to set up using off-the-shelf software with easy-to-use features. With just a little basic know-how, you can quickly and easily establish and promote your blog. Here are some specific tips to keep in mind:

- Before you begin, think carefully about the name of your blog and its tagline, which will be indexed by the search engines. It is very difficult to go back and change this information once you have established it.
- Easy-to-use blogging software is available from TypePad, WordPress, and others. Some of the services are free and others require a small subscription fee. Research the services and choose wisely based on your needs, because it is difficult to switch to a different service without losing all the content you have already created. And once

your blog has been indexed by search engines, and people have subscribed to your RSS feed or bookmarked your URL, a change to different software is really tough.

- You will need to choose a URL for your blog. The blogging services all offer customizable URLs (such as yourblog.typepad.com) You can also map your blog to your company's domain (www.yourcompany.com/yourblog) or to a custom domain (www.yourblog.com).
- Blogging software makes it easy to choose color, design, and font, and to create a simple text-based masthead. You might consider using a custom graphical image as your masthead—these are easy to design and will make your blog more attractive to readers.
- As you begin your blog, tweak your design, and tentatively try a few posts. I recommend you use password protection for the first few weeks or so. That way you can share your blog with a few friends and colleagues first and make changes before opening it up to the world.
- The look and feel of the blog could be complementary to your corporate design guidelines, but it should not be identical. For many blogs, it is better to be a bit different from the corporate look to signal to readers that the blog is an independent voice, not corporate-speak.
- Blogging software usually allows you to turn on a comments feature so your visitors can respond to your posts. There are several options for you to consider. Some people prefer their blogs to have no comments from readers at all, and that might be the right choice for you. However, one of the most exciting things about blogging is when your readers comment on what you've written. Depending on your blogging software, you may opt for open comments (where people can write comments that are not subject to your approval) or for a system where you need to approve each comment before it appears on your blog. Many bloggers use the approval feature to watch for inappropriate comments. But I encourage you to allow any comments from people who disagree with you—debate is one of the best indications of a well-read blog.

Unfortunately, the blogosphere is plagued by the problem of comment spam, so to prevent automated comment robots from vandalizing your blog, some comment systems require people to answer a simple question called a "captcha" before their comments go live.

- Most blogs also have a feature to allow trackbacks, which are messages that another blogger sends to you when she has posted something on her blog that references a post you wrote first. A trackback says to your blog readers, "Hey, if you're reading this original post, you might also be interested in a related post on another blog, so click here." Thus, a trackback is similar to a comment. However, instead of leaving a comment on your blog, the other blogger writes a post on her blog and sends you a trackback so your readers know her post is there. Again, because of spam, I recommend you set up your blog so that you must approve trackbacks before they get posted there.
- Pay close attention to the categories you choose for your blog, and add social media tags for services like Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us to each post.
- RSS (Really Simple Syndication) is a standard delivery format for many of your readers. Make certain that your new blog has RSS capability. Most blogging software services have RSS feeds as a standard feature.
- Include an "About" page that includes your photo, biography, affiliations, and information about your blog. Often when people visit a blog for the first time, they want to know about the blogger, so it is important to provide background.
- Encourage people to contact you, make it easy for them to reach you online, and be sure to follow up personally on your fan mail. You'll get a bunch of inquiries, questions, praise, and an occasional detractor if you make it easy for people to contact you. Because of the huge problem with spam, many people don't want to publish email addresses. But the biggest problem is with automated robots that harvest email addresses, so to thwart them, write your email address so humans can read it but the machines cannot.

- Don't write excessively about your company and its products and services. You must resist this urge to blog about what your company offers. Instead blog about a subject of interest to the people you are trying to reach. What problems do your buyers have that you can write about? How can you create content that informs and educates and entertains?
- Involve other blogs and bloggers by becoming a true participant in the online community. Link to and leave comments on other blogs. Let someone else's post serve as the starting point for a conversation that you continue on your own blog. You'll generate much more interest in what you're doing if you are inclusive and integrative.

Pimp Out Your Blog

A pimped-out blog shows the bloggers personality. In TypePad, if your blog is 800 pixels wide in total, you just have someone design an image that's 770 pixels wide by 100 or 150 pixels high and drop it in—TypePad automatically adds a border and replaces the rather plain-looking text masthead with the new design. Other blog software tools also support graphical mastheads, although the specific requirements and implementation methods will be different.

Pimping out your blog is easy. If you devote a few hours to it, you can make a very cool-looking blog. Sure, the standard templates offered by the blog software providers are great to get started, but once you are fully committed to blogging, it is important to make your blog personality shine through with links, images, a masthead, photos, and other add-ons.

Building an Audience for Your New Blog

When you send your first few blog posts, you are likely to hear a deafening silence. You'll be waiting for comments, but none will come. You'll check your site statistics and be disappointed by the tiny number of visitors. Don't get discouraged—that's normal! It takes time to build an audience for your blog. When you're just getting started, make sure people know it is there and can find it! Create links to your blog from your homepage, product pages,

or online media room. Mention your blog in your email or offline newsletters, and create links to your blog as part of your email signature and those of other people in your organization.

Commenting on other peoples blogs (and including a link to your blog) is a good way to build an audience. If you comment (and track back to) blogs in the same space as yours, you might be surprised at how quickly you will get visitors to your new blog. A curious thing about blogging etiquette is that bloggers who are competitive for business offline are usually very cooperative online, with links back and forth from their blogs. Its a bit like all the auto dealers in town congregating on the same street—proximity is good for everyone, so people work together.

Your customers, potential customers, investors, employees, and the media are all reading blogs, and there is no doubt that blogs are a terrific way for marketers to tell authentic stories to their buyers. But building an audience for a blog takes time. Most blog services provide tools for measuring traffic. Use this data to learn which posts are attracting the most attention. You can also learn what sites people are coming from when they visit your blog and what search terms they used to find you. Use this information to continually improve your blog. Once again, think like a publisher.

Tag, and Your Buyer Is It

With the total number of existing blogs now in the tens of millions and with the availability of niche blogs on virtually any topic, it is easy to get lost in the blogosphere. The simple truth is that it isn't always easy for people to find a blog post on subjects of interest. Recently, a friend of mine needed new tires for his car. Instead of just heading to the local retailer to be at the mercy of a salesperson, or poking around tire manufacturer web sites, he went to one of the blog search engines to see what people were writing about tires. He entered the keyword "tires," and sure enough, within a few clicks he reached several blogs that had useful information about purchasing tires. But he also faced a heck of a lot of useless noise with the word tires in the results—things like analysis of tires used in a recent NASCAR race, rants about the garbage on the sides of freeways (which includes discarded tires), and even posts about... ahem... "spare tires" on middle-aged men.

It is precisely this problem—the false hits in word-and-phrase searches, not middle-aged men's lack of exercise—that led blog search engine Technorati to develop a tagging feature that lets bloggers categorize what their posts are about. To use this feature, a blogger simply creates a set of meta-tags for each blog post. So, if someone is looking for a blog post about tires, she can go to Technorati and search on the tag for tires rather than on the keyword. This gets readers much closer to what they are looking for than a simple word search.

From the bloggers perspective, the benefits of adding tags to create increased precision about the posts content, whereby each post reaches more people, are worth the extra effort.

What Are You Waiting For?

You should follow a bunch of blogs in your industry first. What things do you like about those blogs? What's annoying? What would you do differently? Then before you jump into the water by creating your own blog, you can stick your toe in by leaving comments on other people's blogs. Test out your blog voice. Finally, when it feels right, start your own blog.

8. Video and Podcasting

Creating audio and video content for viral marketing purposes requires the same attention to appropriate topics as other techniques outlined in this guide. It requires targeting individual buyer personas with thoughtful information that addresses some aspect of their life or a problem they face. By doing so, you brand your organization as smart and worthy of doing business with. However, unlike text-based content such as blogs or news releases, audio and video require a modest investment in additional hardware such as microphones and video cameras, as well as software, and, depending on the level of quality you want to achieve, may also necessitate time-consuming editing of the files. Although the actual procedures for podcasting and video are a bit more convoluted than, say, starting a blog, they are still not all that difficult.

Video and Your Buyers

Organizations that deliver products or services that naturally lend themselves to video have been among the first to actively use the medium to market and deliver information about their offerings. For example, many churches routinely shoot video of weekly services and offer it online for anyone to watch, drawing more people into the congregation. Many amateur and professional sports teams, musicians, and theater groups also use video as a viral marketing tool.

The idea of companies using video for Web marketing is still relatively new. Video follows both blogs and podcasting on the adoption curve at organizations that don't have a service that naturally lends itself to video. Some companies are certainly experimenting, typically by embedding video (hosted at YouTube or another video site) into their existing blogs and online media rooms.

A Flip Video Camera in Every Pocket

One development that is helping change the relative scarcity of corporate marketing video is the popularity of the Flip video camera. The Flip video camera is quickly becoming an essential tool for marketers to carry at all times. It allows you to always be ready to interview customers, employees, and industry analysts and to quickly post the video on your site or blog. It can also help you shoot short clips showing how your products are made or used. No professionals required.

The thing couldn't be easier to use. There's a big red button on the camera to start and stop filming, and if you want to get fancy, there is also a zoom. That's about it. Even a technology-challenged person I can use it. The "flip" name comes from the USB drive built into the camera that flips out, making it simple to upload videos to a connected device and then onto YouTube, Vimeo, or other video-sharing sites. Really, its that easy.

Getting Started With Video

Whether they're new to the game or have been offering Web video for years, organizations get their video content onto the computer screens (and video iPods) of buyers in several different ways:

- Posting to video-sharing sites: YouTube is the most popular video-sharing site on the Web, although there are others, such as Vimeo. Organizations post video content on YouTube and send people a link to the content (or hope that it goes viral). You can also imbed a YouTube video into your site, your blog, or even your news release. Creating a simple video is easy—all you need is a YouTube account and a digital video camera (in case you don't have your Flip yet, note that your mobile phone may have video capability). There are all sorts of enhancements and editing techniques you can use to make the video more professional. IBM has experimented with "mockumentaries," including a hysterical six-part series called "The Art of the Sale," which is like a cross between The Office and a sales training video. And the viral components of these corporate videos clearly work, because here I am sharing them with you.

- Developing an online video channel: Companies that take online video programming seriously develop their own channel, often with a unique URL.
- Attempting stealth insertions to YouTube: Some companies try to sneak corporate-sponsored video onto YouTube in a way that makes it seem like it was consumer-generated. The YouTube community is remarkably skilled at ratting out inauthentic video, so this approach is fraught with danger.
- Vlogging: Short for "video blogging," this term refers to video content embedded in a blog. The text part of the blog adds context to each video and aids with search engine marketing.
- Vodcasting: A vodcast is like a podcast but with video—a video series tied to a syndication component with iTunes and RSS feeds. For example, BMWi offers a weekly vodcast series of two-to-three-minute videos about what's going on at BMW. The company uses the vodcasts to publicize the cool things its doing around the world.
- Inviting your customer communities to submit video: This technique is how some companies try to generate viral marketing interest. These companies sponsor contests where customers submit short videos. The best are usually showcased on the company site, and the winners often get prizes. In some cases, the winning videos are also played on TV as "real" commercials.

Podcasting 101

A podcast is a piece of audio content tied to a subscription component so people can receive regular updates. The simplest way to think of podcasting is that its like a radio show except that you listen to each episode at your convenience by downloading it either to your computer or to a mobile device like an iPod. The equipment you need to start podcasting will range in cost from a few hundred dollars at the low end to a bit over a thousand dollars for professional-level sound. Plus, you'll probably want to host your audio files on an external server requiring a monthly fee.

- Show preparation includes gathering ideas for the show and creating a script. Think about your buyer personas and what you can discuss that interests them. If you plan to interview guests, make sure you know how to pronounce their names (don't laugh, this is a frequent mistake) and you have their titles, affiliations, and other information correct. It's common practice to plug a guest's business, so know ahead of time what URL or product you will mention.
- Recording when you are near your computer is done with a microphone (many options to choose from) that delivers the audio into your computer. You'll need podcasting software such as StudioRack as an interface to create and publish your podcast.
- Mobile recording gear is required if you are going to do the roving-reporter thing and interview people at events or perhaps your employees around the world. Mobile recording gear is made by several companies including Marantz.
- Phone interviews require a way to record both sides of a conversation. A good way to go is to use Skype through your computer and then record on a digital recorder (again, try Marantz).
- Editing your audio files is optional; you can always just upload the files as you recorded them. If you choose to clean them up, you can edit at the micro-scale (removing um, uh, and other audible pauses) or at the macro-scale (e.g., removing the last five minutes of an interview). Many podcasters edit segments that they recorded at different times, putting them together to create a show. Audacity and Apple's GarageBand are two software packages that include many of the audio capabilities of a professional radio station and make editing simple.
- Postproduction editing sometimes includes running a noise-reduction program (to get rid of that annoying air-conditioner noise in the background) and sound compression (to even out the volume of sections that have been recorded at different times and places). The Levelator is a free application that can be used for both purposes.

- Tagging the audio is an important step that some people overlook or perform without taking due care. This step involves adding text-based information about the audio to make it easier for people to find. This information is what appears in the search engines and audio distribution sites such as iTunes. Your tags also display on listeners' iPod displays, so don't ignore or gloss over this step.
- Hosting and distribution are necessary to ensure that people can easily obtain your podcasts. Services such as Liberated Syndication host the (sometimes very large) audio files and syndicate them to the distribution networks such as iTunes.
- Promotion is essential to make sure that people find out about your podcasts. If you do interview shows (which are an easy way to get started and provide excellent content), make sure that you provide links to the show to all of the guests. Many people will help you promote a show that they have been featured on. You will also want to network with other podcasters in your space, because very short on-air plugs cross-promoting other podcasts are common and a good way for people to build audiences. Don't forget to put links to your podcast on your web site, in your email signature, and on your offline materials including business cards and brochures. Also, send out a news release alerting people to important shows.
- A companion blog is a key component used by nearly all pod-casters to discuss the content of each show. An important reason for having a companion blog is that its text will be indexed by the search engines, driving more people to sign up for the podcast feed. A blog also allows the shows host to write a few paragraphs about the content of that particular show and to provide links to the blogs and web sites of guests who will be appearing (so people can get a sense of a shows content prior to listening). Most organizations that use podcasting as a marketing tool also use the podcast blog as a place to move people into the sales process by providing links to the company site or to demonstrations or trial offers.

9. Using News Releases to Reach Buyers Directly

Buyers now read your news releases on Google, Yahoo!, and other search engines, on vertical market portals, and with RSS readers. Thus, smart viral marketing professionals craft news releases to reach buyers directly, driving more Web traffic, securing more donations, and selling more products. Again, this is not to suggest that mainstream media and media relations programs are no longer important. In most markets, mainstream media and the trade press remain vital. But your primary audience is no longer just a handful of journalists. Your audience is millions of people with Internet connections and access to search engines and RSS readers. So, how do you get started with a direct-to-buyer news release program?

- Don't just send news releases when big news is happening; find good reasons to send them all the time.
- Instead of just targeting a handful of journalists, create news releases that appeal directly to your buyers.
- Write releases that are replete with keyword-rich copy.
- Include offers that compel consumers to respond to your release in some way.
- Place links in releases to deliver potential customers to landing pages on your web site.
- Optimize news release delivery for searching and browsing.
- Add social media tags for Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us so your release will be found.
- Drive people into the sales process with news releases.

Developing Your News Release Strategy

The most important thing to think about as you begin a news release program is, once again, the need to write for your buyers. You should consider what you learned through the buyer persona research part of your viral marketing plan and develop an editorial calendar for news releases based on what buyers need to know. Implementing a news release strategy to reach buyers directly is like publishing an online news service—you are providing your buyers with information that they need in order to find your organization online and then learn more about you.

As you make this fundamental change in how you do news releases, you will probably find yourself wondering, at first, what to write about. The rule of thumb is: Big news is great, but don't wait. Write about pretty much anything that your organization is doing.

- Have a new take on an old problem? Write a release.
- Serve a unique marketplace? Write a release.
- Have interesting information to share? Write a release.
- CEO speaking at a conference? Write a release.
- Win an award? Write a release.
- Add a product feature? Write a release.
- Win a new customer? Write a release.
- Publish a white paper? Write a release.
- Get out of bed this morning? Okay, maybe not... but now you're thinking the right way!

Publishing News Releases through a Distribution Service

The best way to publish news releases so they are seen by your buyers is to simultaneously post a release to your own web site and send it to one of the news release wires. The benefit of using a news release distribution service is that your release will be sent to the online news services, including Yahoo!, Google, Bing, and many others. Many news release distribution services reach trade and industry web sites as well. In fact, you can often reach hundreds of web sites with a single news release. The significant benefit of this approach is that your

release will be indexed by the news search engines and vertical market sites, and then when somebody does a search for a word or phrase contained in your release, presto, that potential customer finds you. As an added bonus, people who have requested alerts about your industry from sites that index news releases will get an alert that something important—your news release—is available.

A Selection of the Larger U.S. News Release Distribution Services:

- Business Wire
- GlobeNewswire
- Marketwire
- Prime News wire
- PR News wire
- PRWeb

In order to get your news releases to appear on the online news services, including Google News, you just have to purchase a basic news release coverage area offered by a news release distribution service. Coverage is based on geographical distribution of your release to reporters. The services also have many value-added options for you to consider, such as national distribution. But what is important to know is that most news release distribution services include distribution to online media such as Google News in any geographical distribution. So, as you make your choice, remember that when your purpose for sending news releases is to reach buyers via search engines and vertical sites, maximizing the newsroom and geographical reach offered by a service is less important than ensuring that your releases are included on major online news sites.

Reaching Even More Interested Buyers with RSS Feeds

Many news release distribution services also offer RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds of their news releases, which they make available to other sites, blogs, journalists, and individuals. This means that each time you publish a news release with the service, the news release is seen by thousands of people who have subscribed to the RSS content feeds in your market category (as offered by the distribution service). So if you tag your release as being

important for the automotive industry, your news release will be delivered to anyone (or any site) that has subscribed to the news release distribution service's automotive RSS feed. And online news services such as Google News have RSS feed capability, too, allowing people to receive feeds based on keywords and phrases. Each time your release includes a word or phrase of importance to someone who has saved it as part of their alerts, a link to your news releases will appear via email or RSS feed in near real time in the future.

Simultaneously Publishing Your News Releases to Your Web Site

Post your news releases to an appropriate and readily findable section of your website. Many organizations have a media room or press section of their web site, which is ideal. You should keep the news release live for as long as the content is appropriate, perhaps for years. This is very important because most of the online news sites do not maintain archives of news for more than a few months. If potential customers look for the content of your news release the week after it is distributed via a service, they will certainly find it on Google News and the others. But they won't find it if they do the search next year unless the release is on your own site as a permanent link so that it is indexed by Google.

The Importance of Links in Your News Releases

Particularly because your releases may be delivered by feeds or on news services and various sites other than your own, creating links from your news releases to content on your web site is very important. These links, which might point to a specific offer or to a landing page with more information, allow your buyers to move from the news release to specific content on your web site that will then drive them into the sales process, as we saw in the previous chapter.

However, there is another enormous benefit to including links in news releases. Each time your news release is posted on another site, such as an online news site, the inbound link from the online news site to your web site helps to increase the search engine ranking of your site, because the search engines use inbound links as one of the important criteria for their page-ranking algorithms. So when your news release has a link to your site and it is indexed somewhere on the Web, you actually increase the ranking of the pages on your site! Said

another way, when your news release appears on a web site somewhere and there is a link in your news release that points to a URL on your site, the search engines will increase the rankings of the page where the URL is pointing. Sending a news release that includes links increases your own website's search engine rankings.

Focus on the Keywords and Phrases Your Buyers Use

One thing successful publishers do that Web marketers should emulate is to understand the audience first and then set about to satisfy their informational needs. A great way to start thinking like a publisher and to create news releases that drive action is to focus on your customers' problems and then create and deliver news releases accordingly. Use the words and phrases that your buyers use. Think about how the people you want to reach are searching, and develop news release content that includes those words and phrases. You can get the information you need to do so by thinking back to your buyer personas. Don't be egotistical and write only about your organization. What are your buyers problems? What do they want to know? What words and phrases do they use to describe these problems?

As you craft your own phrases to use in your news releases, don't get trapped by your own jargon; think, speak, and write like your customers do. Though you may have a well-developed lexicon for your products and services, these words don't necessarily mean much to your potential customers. As you write news releases (or any other form of Web content), focus on the words and phrases that your buyers use. As a search engine marketing tool, news releases are only as valuable as the keywords and phrases that are contained in them.

Include Appropriate Social Media Tags

Many (but not all) news release distribution services provide a way to include social media tags to make the news releases easy to find on services like Technorati, DIGG, and del.icio.us. Use them! Social media tags make your releases much easier to find.

If It's Important Enough to Tell the Media, Tell Your Clients and Prospects, Too!

Many companies devote extensive resources to their PR and media relations programs. Often, the results of these efforts are buried in a difficult-to-find news section of the company web site. Consider rewriting your news releases in an easy-to-read paragraph or two and make it a section of your email newsletter for clients and prospects. Or establish RSS feeds to deliver your news to anyone who's interested. And don't forget your employees—if they know about your news, they can be your greatest evangelists.

One of the most cost-effective ways to reach buyers is to look for ways to leverage the work you're already doing by repurposing content for other audiences. Too often, organizations spend tons of money on, say, a PR program that targets a handful of journalists but fails to communicate the same information to other constituents. Or a company's advertising program designed to generate new sales may drive people to a web site that doesn't match the message of the ads, resulting in lost interest. Sadly, the failure to integrate sales, marketing, and communications—both online and offline—will always result in lost opportunities. Happily, the Web makes it a relatively simple task to integrate your news release program into your larger online strategy.

Here's one more thing that you may never have considered: Having a regular editorial calendar that includes a series of news releases also means your company is busy. When people go to your online media room and find a lack of news releases, they often assume that you are not moving forward or that you have nothing to contribute to the industry. In the new world of marketing, consistent, high-quality news release content brands a company or a nonprofit as a busy market player, an active expert in the industry, and a trusted resource to turn to.

10. The Online Media Room

The online media room (sometimes called a press room or press page) is the part of your organization's web site that you create specifically for the media. In some organizations this page is simply a list of news releases with contact information for the organization's PR person. But many companies and nonprofits have elaborate online media rooms with a great deal of information available in many different formats: audio, video, photos, news releases, background information, financial data, and much more.

Before I give you ideas on how to create a valuable online media room of your own, I want you to consider something that is vitally important: All kinds of people visit your online media room, not just journalists. Stop and really let that soak in for a moment. Your buyers are snooping around your organization by visiting the media pages on your web site. Your current customers, partners, investors, suppliers, and employees all visit those pages.

Visitors expect that the main pages of a web site are basically static (i.e., they are not updated often), but they also expect that the news releases and media-targeted pages on a site will reveal the very latest about a company. For many companies, the news release section is one of the most frequently visited parts of the web site. Check out your own web site statistics; you may be amazed at how many visitors are already reading your news releases and other media pages online.

Best Practices for Online Media Rooms

An online media room is an important part of any organization's web site and a critical aspect of an effective media relations strategy. When done well, an online media room will turn journalists who are just browsing into interested writers who will highlight your organization positively in their stories. And more importantly, an online media room can move your buyers into and through the sales process, resulting in more business for your organization and contributing to meeting your organization's real goals of revenue and customer retention. The following sections give you useful tips that will help your online media room work as effectively as possible.

You Control the Content

One important consideration that many marketing people overlook when considering the benefits of an online media room is that you control the content, not your IT department, Webmaster, or anyone else. The best practice idea here is for you to design your online media room as a tool to reach buyers and journalists, and you don't need to take into consideration the rules for posting content that the rest of the organization's site may require. If you build this part of your site using a specialized online media room content-management application such as the one offered by The Fuel Tea or the MediaRoom is product from PR News wire, you will control a corner of your organization's web site that you can update whenever you like using simple tools, and you won't need to request help from anyone in other departments or locations. So start with your needs and the needs of your buyers and journalists, not the needs of those who own the other parts of your organization's web site.

Start with a Needs Analysis

When designing anew online media room (or planning an extensive redesign), start with a needs analysis. Before you just jump right into site aesthetics and the organization of news releases, take time to analyze how the site fits into your larger marketing, PR, and media relations strategy. Consider the buyer persona profiles you built as part of your viral marketing plan. Talk with friendly journalists so you can understand what they need. Who are the potential users of the online media room and what content will be valuable to them? When you have collected some information, build buyers' and journalists' needs into your online media room. As you work toward starting your design, try to think a bit more like a publisher and less like a viral marketing person. A publisher carefully identifies and defines target audiences and then develops the content required to meet the needs of each distinct demographic. Graphical elements, colors, fonts, and other visual manifestations of the site are also important but should take a back seat during the content-needs analysis process.

Optimize Your News Releases for Searching and for Browsing

The best online media rooms are built with the understanding that some people need to search for content and others are browsing. Many people already know what they are looking for—the latest release, perhaps, or the name of the CEO. They need answers to specific questions,

and organizations must therefore optimize content so that it can be found, perhaps by including a search engine. The second way that people use content is to be told something that they do not already know and therefore couldn't think to ask. This is why browsability is also important; it allows users to stumble across useful information they didn't even know they were looking for. While many Web-savvy marketers understand the importance of search-engine optimization, they often forget that sites must be designed for browsing, too. Failing to do so is particularly unfortunate because the high traffic on news release pages comes partly from the many people who browse these pages as they conduct research.

You should deploy a navigational design in a way that provides valuable information visitors might not have thought to ask for. Consider including multiple browsing techniques. For instance, you can create different links to targeted releases for different buyer personas (maybe by vertical market or some other demographic factor appropriate to your organization). You might also organize the same releases by product (because some members of the media may be covering just one of your products in a review or story), by geography, or by market served. Most organizations simply list news releases in reverse-chronological order (the newest release is at the top of the page, and ones from last year are hidden away somewhere). While this is fine for the main news release page, you need to have additional navigation links so people can browse the releases. Don't forget that people may also need to print out news releases, so consider providing printer-friendly formats (e.g., PDF format as well as HTML).

Create Background Information That Helps Journalists Write Stories

You should publish a set of background materials about your organization, sometimes called an online media kit or press kit, in an easy-to-find place in your online media room. This kit should contain a lot of information, basically anything you think journalists might need in order to write about you and your products or services. Company history and timeline, executive biographies, investor profiles, board of advisors* or board of directors' bios, product and service information, information about analysts who cover your company, and links to recent media coverage will help your media kit save journalists time and tedious effort. Make this content easy to find and to browse with appropriate navigational links.

Include Multimedia Content

Innovative communicators make use of nontext content, such as photos, charts, graphs, audio feeds, and video clips, to inform site visitors and the media. Include executive photos, logo images, product photos, and other content that is ready (and preapproved) to be published or linked to by journalists. You should offer audio and video clips (such as parts of executive speeches or product demonstrations), photos, and logos in such a way that journalists can use them in their written stories as well as on TV and radio shows. Again, you will find that many people besides journalists will access this, so include appropriate content for your buyer personas as well as for the media.

Include Detailed Product Specs and Other Valuable Data

Communicators who use online media rooms to offer valuable content are more likely to score the positive story. However, organizations often shy away from posting much of their best content because they deem it proprietary. On many sites, even information like detailed product specifications and price lists are available only through a direct connection with a PR contact or a lengthy registration form with approval mechanisms. Yet this is exactly the sort of content that, if freely available, would help convince journalists to write a story. All communicators and marketing professionals working at corporations, government agencies, or nonprofits struggle to decide what content is appropriate to post on their organizations' sites. However, with well-meaning executives who worry about corporate image, legal departments with a reflexive tendency to say "no," and salespeople who think it is easier to sell when they're the sole source of knowledge, it might be difficult to gain the necessary approvals to post proprietary content. But there is no doubt that the more valuable your media room's content looks to reporters and buyers, the more attractive your company will look to them as well.

If Appropriate, Go Global

The Web has made reaching the world far easier, so when it is appropriate, the effort to create and offer local content to customers worldwide can help an organization better serve both local and global journalists. Many organizations, particularly those headquartered in the United States, make the mistake of including site content that reflects (and therefore has value for) only the home market. Basic approaches to get your site up to global standards might

include offering case studies from customers in various countries or spec sheets describing products with local country standards (such as metric measurements or local regulatory compliance). Sometimes the little things make a difference. For example, don't forget that the rest of the world uses standard A4 paper instead of the U.S. letter size, so having fact sheets and other materials that print properly on both formats is useful to users outside the United States. Providing content in local languages can also help show the global aspect of your business, though this need not mean a wholesale translation of your entire online media room. A simple Web landing page with basic information in the local language, a few news releases, a case study or two, and appropriate local contact information will often suffice.

Provide Content for All Levels of Media Understanding

To be effective, communicators at many organizations specifically design media room content that supports journalists level of knowledge of your organization. Some journalists may never have written about your company before; they need the basics spelled out in easy-to-understand language. In other cases, a reporter or analyst may have been covering the company for years, enjoy personal relationships with the executives, and know a great deal about what's going on with you, your competitors, and your market. You need content for this person, too; she may want to compare your offerings, and she therefore needs detailed company information, lists of features and benefits, and stories about your customers. Of course, all reporters need easy navigation directly to content so they get what they need quickly. In my experience, the vast majority of online media rooms are little more than online brochures with a bunch of news releases. Don't let the opportunities that the Web offers pass your online media room by. Help journalists along the path to their keyboards by offering content directly linked to their various levels of understanding.

List Executive Appearances, Conferences, and Tradeshow Participation

One of the best ways to positively influence journalists is to visit with them in person. Many journalists attend tradeshow, conferences, and other events on a regular basis and use that time to meet with representatives of companies that they may consider writing about. The best way to get your organization on journalists calendars is to make certain that they know where your executives will be appearing. List all appropriate public speaking appearances, tradeshow and conference participation, and other events in a separate calendar section in

your online media room. Make certain to list all appropriate future events, and remember to include any international events. Keep the older listings up for at least a few months after the events to show that you are in demand as experts in your field, but be sure to keep the list up to date. Don't forget that even this information is not just for the media. Even if they do not attend industry events, your buyers will see that your company is active and that your executives are in demand as speakers and presenters; this adds to your corporate credibility and your image as an industry leader.

Include Calls to Action for Journalists

It is a great idea to include special offers for the media. Perhaps the simplest thing to offer is an executive interview. But why not include a trial or demonstration offer of some kind, where journalists get to test out your offerings, attend your events, or in some way experience what your organization does? You can even create a landing page specifically for journalists with a registration form and special offers. Include this link within news releases and other pages in the online media room to drive interested journalists to the landing page.

Embrace Bloggers as You Do Traditional Journalists

Bloggers who cover your company visit your online media room. Encourage them by responding to inquiries quickly, by including bloggers in your news release distribution email list, and by granting them interviews with executives upon request. The fact is that bloggers are influential, and they want to be treated with the same respect as traditional journalists. It's to your advantage to do so.

The Importance of RSS Feeds in Your Online Media Room

To provide alternative content routes, many organizations use digital delivery methods, including email newsletters for journalists and bloggers and RSS feeds, as part of their online media rooms; this pushes content directly to the media and other interested people. Smart organizations are using RSS (Really Simple Syndication) to easily update prospects, customers, investors, and the media, but too few organizations are using this simple marketing technique for sharing valuable information.

RSS feeds can (and should) be added to most parts of your web site. But because they are essentially subscription mechanisms to regularly updated content, many organizations have the RSS subscription page as part of the online media room and use it as a primary way to deliver news release content. Companies such as Microsoft, IBM, and Intel syndicate information via RSS feeds to reach specific external audiences such as the media, Wall Street analysts, customers, partners, distributors, and resellers.

The online media room is a place where many people congregate, not just journalists. It is one place on your organization's web site that you can control, without interference, approval processes, and IT support, so it presents a terrific opportunity for marketing and PR people to get content out into the marketplace. On the Web, success equals content. And one of the easiest ways to get content into the market is via an online media room with RSS feeds.

11. Reaching the Media

As the Web has made communicating with reporters and editors extremely easy, breaking through using the online methods everyone else uses has become increasingly difficult. These days, you can find the email addresses of reporters in seconds, either through commercial services that sell subscriptions to their databases of thousands of journalists or simply by using a search engine. Unfortunately, way too many PR people are spamming journalists with unsolicited and unrelenting commercial messages in the form of news releases and untargeted broadcast pitches.

Barraging large groups of journalists with indiscriminate PR materials is not a good strategy to get reporters and editors to pay attention to you.

Nontargeted, Broadcast Pitches Are Spam

The good news is that there are effective "new rules" approaches that work very well to get your messages into the hands (and onto the screens) of reporters so they will be more likely to write about you. Don't forget that reporters are always looking for interesting companies, products, and ideas to write about. They want to find you. If you have great content on your web site and your online media room, reporters will find you via search engines.

Try to think about reaching journalists with ways that aren't just one-way spam. Pay attention to what individual reporters write about by reading their stories (and, better yet, their blogs) and write specific and targeted pitches crafted especially for them. Or start a real relationship with reporters by commenting on their blogs or sending them information that is not just a blatant pitch for your company. Become part of their network of sources, rather than simply a shill for one company's message. If you or someone in your organization writes a blog in the space that a reporter covers, let him know about it, because what you blog about may become prime fodder for the reporter's future stories. Don't forget to pitch bloggers. Not only does a mention in a widely read blog reach your buyers, reporters and editors read these blogs for story ideas and to understand early market trends.

The Web has changed the rules. If you're still following the traditional PR techniques, I'm sure you're finding that they are ineffective. To be much more successful, consider and use these rules:

- Nontargeted, broadcast pitches are spam.
- News releases sent to reporters in subject areas they do not cover are spam.
- Reporters who don't know you yet are looking for organizations like yours and products like yours—make sure they will find you on sites such as Google and Technorati.
- If you blog, reporters who cover the space will find you.
- Pitch bloggers, because being covered in important blogs will get you noticed by mainstream media.
- When was the last news release you sent? Make sure your organization is "busy".
- Journalists want a great online media room.
- Include video and photos in your online media room.
- Some (but not all) reporters love RSS feeds.
- Personal relationships with reporters are important.
- Don't tell journalists what your product does. Tell them how you solve customer problems.
- Does the reporter have a blog? Read it. Comment on it. Track back to it (send a message whenever you blog on a subject that the reporter blogged about first).

- Before you pitch, read (or listen to or watch) the publication (or radio program or TV show) you'll be pitching to.
- Once you know what a reporter is interested in, send her an individualized pitch crafted especially for her needs.

How to Pitch the Media

As marketers know, having your company, product, or executive appear in an appropriate publication is great marketing. That's why billions of dollars are spent on PR each year (though much of its wasted, I'm afraid). When your organization appears in a story, not only do you reach the publication's audience directly, you also can point your prospects to the piece later, using reprints or Web links. Media coverage means legitimacy. As I've said, broadcast spamming of the media doesn't work. But sometimes you really want to target a specific publication (your hometown paper, perhaps). So, what should you do?

- Target one reporter at a time. Taking the time to read a publication and then crafting a unique pitch to a particular journalist can work wonders. Mention a specific article he wrote and then explain why your company or product would be interesting for the journalist to look at. Make certain to target the subject line of the email to help ensure that it gets opened.
- Help the journalist to understand the big picture. Often its difficult to understand how some widget or service or organization actually fits into a wider trend. You make a journalists job much easier if you describe the big picture of why your particular product or service is interesting. Often this helps you get mentioned in the reporters future articles or columns about trends in your space.
- Explain how customers use your product or work with your organization. Reporters hear hundreds of pitches from company spokespeople about how products work. But its much more useful to hear about a product in action from someone who actually uses it. If you can set up interviews with customers or provide written case studies of

your products or services, it will be much easier for journalists to write about your company.

- Don't send email attachments unless asked. These days, it is a rare journalist indeed who opens an unexpected email attachment, even from a recognized company. Yet many PR people still distribute news releases as email attachments. Don't do it. Send plain-text emails instead. If you're asked for other information, you can follow up with attachments, but be sure to clearly reference in the email what you're sending and why, so the journalist will remember asking for it.
- Follow up promptly with potential contacts.
- Don't forget, its a two-way street—journalists need you to pitch them! The bottom line is that reporters want to know what you have to say. It is unfortunate that the spam problem in PR is as big as it is, because it makes journalists' jobs more difficult.

There is no doubt that mainstream media are still vital as a channel for your buyers to learn about your products. Besides all the people who will see your company, product, or executives name, a mention in a major publication lends you legitimacy. Reporters have a job to do, and they need the help that PR people can provide to them. But the rules have changed. To get noticed, you need to be smart about how you tell your story on the Web—and about how you tell your story to journalists.

12. Final Words

There are four main ways to generate attention in today's marketing landscape. We've discussed them throughout these pages, so this list is not really new, but seeing them all collected together will give us some fresh perspective for dealing with people who might be skeptical or meddlesome.

- You can buy attention with advertising such as television commercials, magazine and newspaper ads, the Yellow Pages, billboards, trade show floor space, direct mail lists, and the like.
- You can get attention from the editorial gatekeepers at radio and TV stations, magazines, newspapers, and trade journals.
- You can have a team of salespeople generate attention one person at a time by knocking on doors, calling people on the telephone, sending personal emails, or waiting for individuals to walk into your showroom.
- You can earn attention online by using the viral marketing ideas in this guide, creating something interesting and publishing it online for free: a YouTube video, blog, research report, series of photos, Twitter stream, e-book, Facebook fan page, or other piece of Web content.

In order to understand the motivations of your colleagues and bosses as they offer advice and give you unwanted criticism, I recommend that you know and understand these four means of generating attention. And you should understand the point of view of the person you are talking to about attention, especially when their inevitable pushback about earning it in new ways surfaces.

You see, most organizations have a corporate culture centered around one of these approaches. For examples, P&G primarily generates attention through advertising, Apple via PR, EMC via sales, and Zappos via viral marketing. Often the defining organizational culture springs from the founder or CEOs strong point of view. So if the CEO came up through the

sales track, all attention problems are likely to become sales problems. Chances are that your colleagues and bosses did not come up via the social media track, nor have they likely read this book. The point is, you'll have to convince your boss to invest in social media, because its likely he or she doesn't consider it the most important way of gaining attention. Most organizations overspend on advertising and sales and underinvest in social media, but nearly all organizations should be doing some combination of each. If you can help your bosses and colleagues understand this trend, they'll probably lighten up a little.

There's no doubt that your organization will benefit from your getting out there and creating Web content in whatever form you're most comfortable with. But I'm also convinced that no matter who you are or what you do, your professional and personal life will improve, too.

Go on. Get out there and make it happen!