

Charlie bit me!



CHARLIE BIT ME: HOW CAN BRANDS CREATE VIRAL MARKETING MATERIALS?

By Colin Strong

Most of us love getting a link to a piece of internet material which we find amusing and then forward on to our friends. It's harmless and generally leaves us with a good feeling so it is easy to see why many brands are so keen to get in on the act. It's also perhaps not unreasonable to expect digital viral material to potentially work well for technology companies given that the target market is likely to be spending more time online. Of course some brands do this extremely successfully, but many others try and fail – so what makes some succeed while others end up in the outer reaches of YouTube?

To try and answer this, GfK spoke to Dr Dominic Yeo, an academic at University of East Anglia with a particular expertise on this aspect of consumer behaviour about research he had conducted whilst pursuing his PhD at Cambridge

The main findings from his fascinating research are that whilst there are many reasons why a piece of digital material can go viral, findings generally point to two key factors. First, the content itself is (typically) emotionally engaging and possesses strong 'participatory potential' to enable further conversations, inspire

new versions, spin-offs and so on. The second key factor is the need to ensure that the social-networked environment of the people passing it on is very strong with many followers or friends.

In terms of the content, Dominic's own research has found that digital materials which go viral generally create a new spin on established behaviors. So, for example, we see twin babies appearing to talk to each other, a nerdy college kid doing his own take on star wars, a cat playing the piano. All of these are familiar activities, but with a highly unusual or provocative take.



Clip one: Yosemitebear Mountain Giant Double Rainbow



Clip two: Charlie bit me, again!

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As Dominic says, “This means that the viral materials usually create some kind of ambiguity or controversy which generates conversations; this in turn drives consumers to pass it on”.

Discoverability also has a significant role in making digital materials go viral. Some consumers clearly love the whole process of discovering new pieces of digital material that they can pass on to their friends. The excitement of discovering new material is

then almost matched by the pleasure of sharing this with friends and followers who in turn feel this as they send it on. But ‘discoverability’ will only really work if those consumers discovering the material have significant digital networks. The double rainbow viral video with over 31 million hits on YouTube is a good example. This viral video, posted by Paul “Bear” Vasquez, tracks his sighting of, and emotional reaction to, a double rainbow from his home just outside Yosemite National Park. This video made no impact for a while until an influential blogger discovered it and shared it on his blog. It then went viral, clearly demonstrating the importance of social network in creating viral videos.

Dominic argues that if material that has content with viral potential is made more ‘discoverable’, the chances of it going viral will clearly be much greater. This is why brands will often pay influential bloggers to cite their material, effectively ‘oiling the wheels’ of discoverability.

To illustrate some of these themes, Dominic cites two examples, one is purely consumer-generated and the other is brand-generated. The consumer-generated example is the ‘Charlie bit me’ video which is famous for being the most viewed YouTube video of all time. It has had more than 375 million views and, apart from professional music videos, remains the most viewed YouTube video. The clip features two English brothers, aged three and one. In the video, the younger brother, Charlie, bites the



Clip three: JK Wedding Entrance Dance



Clip four: The T-Mobile Royal Wedding

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finger of his older brother, Harry. This video has high 'participatory potential' in that it's easily imitated and it is emotionally engaging; search on YouTube and you will find countless 'Charlie bit me' music remixes, alternative versions, and spoofs. The marketer-generated example is the 'T-mobile Royal Wedding' video which is widely shared but has not inspired many re-takes. Interestingly enough, this is itself clearly a derivative of the original 'JK Wedding Entrance Dance' which generated over 70 million views on YouTube.

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Dominic's view is that, in the two examples, there are slightly different viral mechanisms involved; in the consumer-generated 'Charlie bit me' example, which is more 'organic', there wasn't

a budget involved to seed the video (e.g. to pay bloggers to distribute it). Rather, its spread was more dependent on the nature of the content, particularly its participatory potential. The marketer-generated T-Mobile Royal Wedding video on the other hand, played on a recent event by latching onto the popularity of another object and was widely seeded through social media. So, what it lacked in participatory potential (potential for imitation), it made up for by having lots of people passing it on. So what advice does Dominic have for a brand that wishes to increase the likelihood of making a successful piece of viral marketing?

The T-Mobile Royal Wedding example is, in all likelihood, the safer route for a brand to choose, as Dominic puts it, "because a digital content that possesses a high level of 'participatory potential' will definitely generate many spoofs which will almost inevitably entail something disparaging and not so flattering for the brand involved". Trawling through the huge number of videos with 'viral potential' on YouTube, it struck me that the other element, the 'discoverability' of the video is something that brands are unlikely to want to leave to chance either when trying to guess which of the millions of videos across millions of topics are likely to be the next 'Charlie bit me'.



Dr Dominic Yeo is Lecturer in Consumer Behaviour at Norwich Business School, University of East Anglia. He graduated with a PhD in Social Psychology from Cambridge University where he was a member of Trinity College.