

Hey, are you passing a virus on to others? Well, in this apparently post-Covid era, at least we trust the worst of the pandemic is over! But are you passing on a virus anyway? The best answer to that is: we should all hope so—we should hope that we're passing on a *good* virus to others! Wait, you might say, you've gotta be kidding! Nope, not kidding! Let's have a go at that—and it's going to be crazy good!

This episode's focus today is the practice of *viral marketing*. Now the term *viral marketing* was not really in truly widespread use until the current digital era. And it's defined in different ways. No matter: together, we'll still explore the idea of viral marketing, and we'll start with working to craft a thorough definition.

Viral marketing is an *organizational strategy that utilizes existing social networks and perhaps creates new social networks to promote the organization's products or services*. So, let's parse that a bit to get clarity: viral marketing is a key *strategy*, a deliberate approach that an organization designs to try to accomplish its marketing goals. And it's *promotional*, trying to prompt consumers to act on its products or services. And it focuses on existing and maybe new *social networks* to help produce desired behaviors or structures.

Safe to say, viral marketing is often on the lips of marketing executives at so many organizations due to the vast capability of *digital* communications networks and social networks. Before technology began to permeate our everyday lives so deeply, the earlier, related idea of *word-of-mouth* impact was part of what marketers were striving for—getting people to chat with others about their product or service. But now, with digital vehicles like YouTube, huge numbers of consumers are possible for many initiatives.

But viral marketing impact is a *sustainable* success *only* when the underlying product or service supports the breadth of the viral marketing. For example, if your organization offers a product that sucks, your viral marketing impact will be forgotten in about, oh, 3.5 seconds! How many times have you been entertained by a meme or a GIF or a YouTube video—but you couldn't even remember it a couple of days later? That's right, scale and sustainability are elusive without a foundational, strong offering that has solid value.

A couple of modern viral marketing campaigns are worth illuminating here. Dove famously created their "Real Beauty Sketches" video in the 2010s, when they hired a seasoned police sketch artist. He crafted pictures of each of several participating women from their own personal descriptions of features of their faces—and he sketched those without seeing the participating women. Then the same sketch artist crafted a picture of each of the same women from the description of their facial features as described by someone who just met them. The differences between the two sketches were striking—the women were portrayed as more beautiful by strangers than they perceived themselves...and that was the very message that Dove wanted to send: *that Dove thinks women are beautiful!* That video "went viral"—as the saying goes—touching countless viewers anywhere the internet reaches, even today! Famous. Powerful. Viral.

Another famous viral marketing case study is the story of fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger, who was struggling in New York City in the 1980s. Then, Hilfiger's worldwide image was launched with a prominent billboard ad in Times Square in New York, which started with, "THE 4 GREAT AMERICAN DESIGNERS FOR MEN ARE"...then, there were four names listed below in a puzzle—a puzzle revealing only the first letters of both the first and last name of each designer. Seeing the billboard, the aware fashion consumer could easily solve the first three names, the ones who *were* famous: Ralph Lauren, Perry Ellis, and Calvin Klein.

But hardly anyone quickly identified who the little-known fourth designer was...and, of course, it was Tommy Hilfiger, that "great American designer for men!" And in the course of the public's puzzle-solving process, Hilfiger captured outstanding marketing exposure, then strove mightily to meet the fashion-buying crowd's expectations. The resulting combination of Hilfiger's designs and his viral marketing exposure was very sustainable, with Hilfiger enjoying strong, worldwide brand status even decades later!

Notice that the billboard was in the heart of one of the most self-conscious, fashion-conscious cities in America—New York City, specifically Manhattan. Not on a billboard in Milwaukee. Not on broadcast TV across America. The Hilfiger puzzle went viral *where it was best positioned to go viral for fashion impact*.

Look, here's the thing. Every modern organization striving for success has to think about viral marketing. So, get busy—it's about the stewardship of your organization's valuable offerings. And, along those lines, there's perhaps the most interesting, valuable, real-world case study of all for understanding success in viral marketing—and that's from *both* the key perspectives of a core offering that has value *and* some of the principles of fruitful viral marketing. And this is what's really interesting: parts of this enduring organization have also been spectacularly *un*-successful throughout much of its history, too—that's been when organizational leaders were forgetting or ignoring proper foundations, mission, and marketing.

'Course, I'm talking about the universal church here! We must always remember that some churches are highly effective at Kingdom priorities—while others are clearly not! So, let's look at success *and* failure.

In previous episodes, we've talked about the topic of "Jesus and Brand" and have woven in the essential narrative of "Christ and Him crucified" many times. The main point is this, as we've said in discussing classic marketing strategy: Jesus's death and resurrection is the *ultimate* offering that has value. So, let's recap just a bit as to what God orchestrated in the incredible unfolding of events to manifest that offering.

In His ministry, Jesus used an astonishing mix of Satan-resisting, teaching, discipling, preaching, dialoguing, effecting miracles, defeating demons, serving, and, yes, even dying on the Cross. Then, after that, the Resurrected Jesus appeared to 500 people...living among them, teaching them, telling them not to depart from Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit baptism, instructing them to witness locally and "to the end of the earth," and then, ascending to heaven. And, of course, those instructions were a whole lot about marketing, yes, *virally* proclaiming Jesus's unique offering on the Cross to the whole creation. (Mark 16:15)

Next, the Holy Spirit came as promised at the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. That was the visible start of the Kingdom's viral marketing! Here's how Acts 2:4-8 (ESV) recorded that: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. And they were amazed and astonished, saying, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own language?'" So, Peter answered all that with an astounding sermon!

Then Acts 2:41-43 tells us a powerful account of what happened next. "So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles." Yes, eternal puzzles were being revealed *and* solved—the tongues, the teaching, the miracles, the redemption of humanity!

Wow, see the amazing elements of viral marketing? Yes, serious Jews gathered in Jerusalem from every nation for Pentecost, doing God's business! Yes, worldviews changed by signs and wonders! Yes, events explained by Spirit-led teaching! Yes, and not least, 3,000 souls prepared to virally distribute the Gospel of the Kingdom to those in their own nations! That's right—*virally-distributed good news!* Before YouTube. Before the internet. Before TV. Before the printing press! *Nevertheless*, key elements of viral marketing were faithfully upheld—and the linked, modern outcome is hundreds of millions of believers worldwide!

But the effective telling of that good news—the Gospel of the Kingdom—is often shrunken in the countries and churches often very prideful about their Christian heritage. Wonder why that may be. Well, one clear challenge is in 2 Corinthians 3: Paul timelessly warns Christians of the ministry of condemnation of the Ten Commandments that leads to death, contrasted with the truly glorious ministry of the New Covenant leading to eternal life. Could it be that many Christians actually prefer a viral ministry of condemnation—one of politics and culture-wars—over a viral ministry of the New Covenant? *Really?* Priority 1 is Christians ministering death "carved in letters on stone" instead of ministering life with *the Gospel?* God forbid!

So. The Gospel is the most amazing viral marketing *ever!* The question is, are we spreading the right virus?

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. How's your workplace doing at viral marketing of its valuable products or services? Give results that your workplace uses to measure that success.
2. Personally, are you faithfully carrying forward the viral marketing of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God locally and around the world? Give results that you use to measure that success.
3. Is your church faithfully carrying forward the viral marketing of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God locally and around the world? Give results your church uses to measure that success.