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Fourth Edition



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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.,¹⁰ 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,” which 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 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**,¹¹ 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, more than 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. It's 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.

Notes

- [1. youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19fo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9bZkp7q19fo)
- [2. http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33599/HubSpot-Releases-Gangnam-Style-Parody-Inbound-Style-MUSIC-VIDEO.aspx](http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33599/HubSpot-Releases-Gangnam-Style-Parody-Inbound-Style-MUSIC-VIDEO.aspx)
- [3. http://eepybird.com](http://eepybird.com)
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