



'A fascinating deep  
dive into what drives  
us to share.'

Pamela Meyer, CEO,  
Calibrate and top 20  
TED speaker

# GOING VIRAL

The **9** SECRETS  
of irresistible  
marketing

**Brent Coker**

# 1

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Power of Share

In 2010 I was sitting at my desk putting together some notes for a night class I was scheduled to teach, when I got a phone call. The woman calling introduced herself as Cheryl, and explained that she was the director of a boutique advertising agency in Sydney Australia. Her voice was rushed and forceful, like she was stressed. She explained she heard I was researching about viral movies, and wanted some advice. I was flattered she called me, and curious.

We chatted for about five minutes, where after some small talk and pleasantries she explained her predicament. She told me her agency had recently taken on a client who wanted to launch a new brand of underwear. Her brief was to produce an advertisement for the internet that needed to “go viral”. The problem was that the advertisement wasn’t creating buzz—after several months it had barely 400 views, and the client wanted answers.

Cheryl was understandably desperate, and wanted to find out if anything could be done to fix it. To make it go viral. Before the phone call ended I promised Cheryl I would take a look at the campaign, though secretly suspecting that it would be unlikely anything could be fixed.

I set aside my class preparation, and clicked on the link she sent me. It was a personalized story type advertisement, a technique I had seen before. How this technique works is that the viewer is first asked to upload a photo of themselves that is eventually included in the story. The aim is to surprise the viewer who isn't expecting to become part of the story. I uploaded a photo of myself, selected male for my gender, and sat back and watched.

The movie began with a pan of a half-lit retrofitted studio apartment. The camera focussed, and a woman appeared from the shadows of the apartment wearing lingerie. She glided past a coffee table, pausing to pick up a magazine, and headed towards her bed. She lay on the bed and opened the magazine, snapping through a few pages before pausing on one with intent. The camera zoomed in on the page to show a muscular tanned male posing in a G-string. The camera zoomed in more to reveal the face—it was me!

Then things got steamy—as the women glared at the picture she began to caress herself, and... I flashed back to my phone conversation with Cheryl, and felt uncomfortable.

It was obvious to me why the ad hadn't gone viral. The problem wasn't the quality of the production—clearly a lot of effort and expense had gone into it. Where it went wrong was that it assumed that sex sells. Or more precisely, that showing provocative content makes people want to share...

## **Why sex doesn't sell**

Sharing is what makes something go viral. The more people feel compelled to share something with others in their network, the more viral something will become.

This concept of sharing is not new. Marketers have known for a long time that word-of-mouth is a powerful force contributing to the success of a brand. Back in the day

people would hear from their friends, family, or work colleagues about things that caught everyone's interest. Perhaps there was an interesting billboard on the drive into work, or maybe an extra creative advertisement on TV the night before. People might mention it while chatting around the watercooler, or at a party. Nowadays of course, most people are connected to each other online. The internet has evolved into a tool that creates and manages social connections and community. If someone has some information that they think has some value, they'll share it with others through digital networks. News travels fast online, and something that has value can go viral extremely quickly if people have a reason to share it.

Something might be very interesting to people online, but it won't go viral if there's no reason to share it. All content online that has a high number of views also has a high number of shares. There's a strong positive correlation between views and shares. If there's no reason to tell others about something, it won't go viral.

The reason why Cheryl's advertisement hadn't gone viral was because it had a disincentive to share. Most people would feel quite awkward sharing something sexually explicit in their social networks, since people don't necessarily know all their connections that well. People care about social norms, and people choose their actions based on what society expects. Most people care about signalling something weird about their personality to others. People share things online not just because it's interesting, but also because they care about what other people think. When it comes to online advertising, sex doesn't sell because it's not very sharable.

## **When Social Status Causes Viral Sharing**

I used to work with a woman many years ago who would bring homemade cakes to work for everyone to eat. I was grateful to her when eating her cake, and she was a lovely person, but I often wondered what her motives for doing this were. Was she just being nice? Or was there some other reason. If she'd brought a different flavoured cake each time I might have assumed she did it out of her love of baking. But

she only ever brought banana cake or raspberry sponge.

Psychologists might argue that her motives for bringing cakes to work were driven by a desire to earn *social currency*. Social currency is a kind of value that people earn from interacting and being social with others. When you have social currency you have a good reputation, people respect you, and you feel sense of belonging. Generally, the more social currency you have, the better your social status. Likely at some point in her life she learned that when she bought things to a group that everyone appreciated, people liked her more.

One way people earn social currency is by contributing in a positive way to a group. Ever wonder why some men watch sports that they don't actually play? Oftentimes it's so they can use their knowledge of the sport to manage their membership when socialising with other men. Shared interests are one of the forces that bind a group together. We learn from a young age that when we make people laugh they like us more and treat us better. When we're kind to others, they're usually kind in return. When we co-operate in a team, the team values our membership and we earn respect.

So why is social currency so important to people?

According to biologists, people's desire to earn social currency has evolved from an evolutionary process to ensure survival. Back in the early years of human existence, it was advantageous for people to be in groups because it gave everyone a better chance of success when hunting for food, and a better chance of surviving against predator attacks. Over time, to ensure the group stayed together and functioned properly, status and social hierarchies evolved. This meant that people had to learn group customs and communication styles to ensure in-group conflict was kept to a minimum. Group harmony was and still is necessary for groups to function well. The way to move up in a group's social hierarchy is to "earn" it. In other words, earn social currency.

Social currency acts as a powerful motivator for people to share information with others. Understanding how people use information to build social currency is critical to understanding how something goes viral. People will share a humorous image, a joke, an idea, a movie, or any other information if they feel that other people will appreciate their efforts to share something that has value. People appreciate others who share useful information, which results in the sharer earning social currency.

## **It's Not about Controversy**

One of the oldest mantras in Marketing is that sex sells. Instances of scantily clad women can be found in advertising as far back as 1871 when Pearl Tobacco used an illustration of a naked woman on their tobacco package. Calvin Klein were quite successful using sex appeal advertising in the 1980's, featuring near naked male bodies on billboards, and the infamous model Brook Shields exclaiming "Want to know what gets between me and my Calvins? Nothing." The aim of sex appeal advertising was to not only associate the brand with desirability, but to also create controversy.

The theory behind controversy is that if you do something that's taboo, then people will start talking about it. The brand might take a bit of a hit, since usually the controversy is something that's not really socially appropriate for a lot of people, but at least the brand gets some talk time. In this day and age, controversy doesn't fit the way things work anymore.

In 2011 Benetton released their Unhate advertising campaign that featured cleverly photoshopped images of world leaders passionately kissing each other. One of the images featured the Pope kissing a senior Islamic leader. The image was awkward and difficult to look at without grimacing, even for people who aren't very religious. The Vatican got so outraged they threatened legal action unless the images were removed.

Although the campaign featured in the world's most well-known tabloids, it never went viral. It was not on social media, and no-one was sharing it. In fact, the only place you could really find the images was on news websites reporting on The Vatican's response. There was no motive to share any of the images in the campaign. The topic of religion as a conversation piece is pretty much taboo in most cultures, further adding to the stigmatism of sharing.

The Benetton example illustrates how controversy isn't the best strategy for viral. No one wants other people forming opinions about them that might tarnish their public image. In the digital economy, marketers need to think about creating content that's sharable. The way to do that is by pushing out content that has share value. If something can earn someone social capital, they'll share it.

### **The Most Shared Image of All Time**

Shortly after winning the 2012 election, Barack Obama posted an image of himself hugging his wife Michelle on Facebook, with the caption: Four more years. Just 15 hours later the image had over 3.5 million Facebook Likes and nearly half a million Shares. To date it's the most shared image on Facebook ever.



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## CHAPTER NINE

# Bump

The first video advertisement to reach 1 million views on YouTube was a [Nike ad](#). The advertisement went viral in October 2005, eight months after YouTube was founded.

The advertisement featured footage of the Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho receiving a new pair of Nike football boots. He puts the new boots on while sitting down on the grass, then stands up and proceeds to play with a ball. He juggles the ball with his feet, balances it on his head, and kicks it at a goal crossbar. The most impressive part is that he's able to kick the ball and bounce it off the top bar of the goal from 100 metres away, and then regain control of it before it touches the ground. He does this several times. It almost looks fake, but the reputation of Ronaldinho and detail of movement suggest the display of skills is genuine.

At the time the advertisement was considered revolutionary since the idea of an advertisement going viral was almost unheard of. The concept of the ad has subsequently been replicated many times since, including on several occasions by Nike using different sports stars.

### **What's wrong with Video Advertising?**

Before the internet, TV advertisers had it easy. There were a limited number of TV

channels, almost everyone watched TV, and it was impossible to fast forward or skip advertisements. Until the mid-eighties most people didn't even have remote controls so were forced to endure ads, unless of course they felt energetic enough to get off the couch. Marketers had everyone's attention, whether they liked it or not.

But the game has changed. Nowadays people can escape advertising with relative ease. Ad blockers, fast forwarding, and close buttons are just some of the ways consumers escape advertising.

The Nike Ronaldinho advertisement did more than just break the magical 1 million views mark. It also redefined the basic structure of digital video advertising. Up until 2005 when the Nike Ronaldinho ad came out, advertisers were still thinking about internet video advertising in the same way as TV advertising. Almost all internet video advertisements were using the same style as TV ads since there were no templates for internet video advertising and few examples of advertising that had gone viral.

TV style advertising comes in a variety of styles. There's the so-called "realist" style that shows a real life situation that the target audience can relate to. Shampoo advertisements often follow this style: The girl has frizzy hair, she washes her hair with the product, her hair becomes magically smooth and glossy and she's smiling with joy. Then there's the "documentary" style that includes interviews of people who work for the brand. The "talking heads" style that's a series of interviews of users of the brand. And the "series" style which is more like a drama that's played out over several ads over time.

Around the time of the Nike Ronaldinho advertisement Marketers began to realise a few things. First, TV style advertising on the internet doesn't work well. Second, internet users can easily escape advertising on the internet. Third, and most importantly, on the internet ads can go viral.

Most Marketers want to create an ad that people genuinely want to watch, but ob-

viously there is difficulty. Most of it comes down to relevancy, and making sure the right people see the ad. If I'm looking to book a holiday in Japan, I'd welcome ads that notify me of sale fares to Japan. But showing people ads who don't want to see them can not only annoy, it can also damage perceptions of the brand. In effect, some brands are paying to be disliked rather than liked, if their advertisements aren't welcomed.

## **The Structure of Bump**

Video ad campaigns on the internet have come a long way since the early days of internet advertising. Through trial and error and estimations of what causes an ad to go viral, Marketers have identified a unique style of video ad suited to the internet—a style that has the right structure to maximise the chances of capturing people's attention and being shared. It's called the Branded Viral Marketing Production (BVMP). Or "Bump" for short.

Bump's guiding principle is that advertising is an exchange in value between the advertiser and the consumer: *"In exchange for your valuable time taken to watch my ad, I'll show you something that will affect you in a positive way"*. This is a different mindset than the traditional *"I'm going to be as noisy/different as possible to catch your attention"*. People don't want noise, and that's certainly not giving people a reason to share. Bump is designed to maximise sharing and minimise annoyance.

One of the main features of Bump is a transformative structure. Transformational type advertising "transforms" the viewer to imagine the experience, feelings, and emotions of using the brand. This in contrast to informational type advertising where the focus is on the features of the product. The Nike Ronaldinho ad for example forces the viewer to wonder what it must be like to wear the football boots and have the skills necessary to perform amazing tricks wearing the boots. There is no specific information on what the boots are made of or any technology or comfort

facts as there would be in a traditional informational type advertisement. Although transformational advertising did exist prior to the internet, it's important to note that the vast majority of ads that go viral online have a transformational style. Only people who are in the market to buy are attracted to product design facts as found in traditional informational type advertising. Though of course there are always exceptions, such as the Blendtec Will it Blend? series where founder Tom Dickson puts unusual things like iphones and golf balls into his blender to see what will happen. Though by and large, most video ads on the internet are transformative.

Another contrasting feature of Bump in comparison to traditional style TV advertising is that it uses a narrative storytelling style. By framing the advertisement as a story, the appeal widens to a greater range of people, whether in the market to purchase the product or not. With transformational story style advertising, there's less chance of generating resentment from jaded consumers who would rather avoid yet another advertisement.

Think about the last time you witnessed a road accident. Probably you couldn't help yourself from looking. Your mind was trying to make sense of what was going on so that you could learn not make the same dangerous mistake. The scientific reason for why people are attracted to transformational style advertisements rather than informational style advertisements is related to people's desire to make sense of the world around them. There's general acceptance in the academic literature that humans, and probably other animals with advanced nervous systems, are driven to convert their understanding of the world into stories to help them understand their lives. A story is basically an event that's supported by a beginning that adds context to the event, and an ending that resolves any conflict created by the event. A story has a beginning, middle, and an end. If you hear a strange noise at night, likely you can't sleep again until you find out what the noise was. You'll feel uneasy until you resolve the issue, essentially ending the story. Once you discover that it was only the cat climbing through the window, the story is complete, and you can get back to sleep.

Consider the shampoo ad example given earlier. If the facts about the product are given, such as ingredients features and price, the consumer will evaluate each fact making arguments for why or why not the product might or might not be a good fit for them. If the advertisement is not relevant to them because they are not in the market to buy, they'll likely reach the conclusion that the product is unsuitable, and skip the ad. But if the advertisement is presented in a transformational type way, perhaps with a story of how the girl got more compliments at work and felt more alive after using the shampoo, then it forces the viewer to imagine themselves using the product. When you engage someone's imagination, then you can access their memories and emotions, and make them feel the advertisement, rather than argue against it. This is transformational advertising.

The power of storytelling in affecting people's wellbeing can be seen in the way that clinical psychologists use them to treat patients suffering from mental trauma. Psychologists believe that mental trauma is not just about the events that caused the distress, but how the person dealt with the events afterwards. In other words, how the victim interprets and constructs the story of what happened. Distressful events such as a divorce, or a significant career setback, cause the sufferer to obsessively run through their minds what happened in an attempt to find causes and make sense of it all. The distress is caused from people's inability to find a satisfactory ending to the story, since the facts don't appear to make sense to them. Psychologists in psychotherapy sessions get the sufferer to tell their story, or sometimes write it down, to help them simplify what happened and therefore help them understand.

Transformational storytelling follows a pattern as described in "Todorov's Narrative Framework". The framework has three parts: Equilibrium, Disruption, and Resolution. A story begins with Equilibrium where everything is normal and as it should be. Then an event happens, usually some kind of Disruption that shakes things up and is out of the ordinary. The story then concludes with a Resolution to fix the disruption to bring things back to normal. Most movies follow this script, and it's also found in music videos and even songs. It's the basis of storytelling.

Let's see how one of my favourite movies of all time uses the framework: Good Will Hunting.

The film begins with Will (Matt Damon) and Chuckie (Ben Affleck) sitting in a bar talking with friends, having a laugh. The scenes change to shots of the city of Boston, and people going about their daily lives. Then back to Will and Chuckie going for a drive. Then to an MIT classroom, packed full of students, where Professor Lambeau (Stellan Skarsgård) is lecturing. There is Equilibrium: All is as it should be, and things are normal and calm.

Things start getting interesting when Professor Lambeau leaves an extremely difficult math problem on the blackboard overnight, and finds the next morning that someone from outside his classroom has solved it. It turns out that Will, who is actually the janitor, was the person who solved it. Will had a troubled childhood, and following a chain of events lands in trouble with the law. This is the Disruption. Will's life is suddenly in chaos.

Professor Lambeau then tries to restore equilibrium by arranging for Will to forgo jail time in return for doing psychotherapy with his friend Dr Sean Maguire (Robin Williams). Eventually Will changes his ways, and sets forth into the sunset to "go see about a girl" he fell in love with. Calm is restored—this is the Resolution.

Not surprisingly, this story structure also fits the Nike Ronaldinho advertisement. The scene begins with Ronaldinho sitting calmly on the grass putting his boots on. In the background the stadium is empty, and other team members jog and pass the ball in practice. This is the equilibrium.

Then Ronaldinho stands up, flicks the ball into action with his feet, and begins doing his tricks. The skills escalate rapidly as he begins to kick the ball at the goal crossbar, bouncing it back and kicking it again while not letting the ball touch the ground. The viewer is psychologically aroused and amazed. This is the disruption.

Finally, Ronaldinho's tricks begin to wind down, and he dribbles the ball back to the man who gave him the shoes. He shakes the man's hand, and things return back to normal. Equilibrium is restored—this is the resolution.

These are just two examples, but you will find that almost all of the supervirals discussed in this book follow this basic pattern of storytelling. It should be the starting point for all viral advertising projects.

## **How to Include a Brand**

Thales Teixeira and his colleagues at Harvard University conducted a study to answer one of the biggest questions faced by advertisers: how should the brand be incorporated into the advertisement?[3] The reason why this question is so important is because of a double edged sword in advertising: Include the brand too prominently and people will stop taking notice or skip through it. But include the brand too briefly, and people will remember the advertisement, but not the brand. The challenge has always been to find the sweet spot—the middle ground where the advertisement keeps viewers engaged without putting them off, but at the same time makes people remember who the brand was.

What Teixeira and his colleagues found was that the optimal way to include a brand in an advertisement is to “pulse” it. This means that the brand reveals itself briefly and intermittently through the advertisement, rather than just once at the beginning or end. Consider a car advertisement—the new car travels swiftly down a winding road past picturesque scenery. The footage shoots between the driver enjoying the driving experience, and shots of the car from a distance. In between these shots, short glimpses of the steering-wheel or bonnet logo are shown. With this type of pulsed brand placement, people were 10% less likely to skip the advertisement than if the brand were only shown one time at either the beginning or the end.

Teixeira's study highlights an important issue that you should spend considerable effort addressing: There's a tendency for people to switch off and not share when they realise they're watching an ad. According to a study done by Charles Adams[7] in the 60's, the average person back then was exposed to around 560 advertisements a day, yet on average only noticed 76. More recent studies in modern times have found similar results[10]. People have been conditioned over many years of advertising exposure to block it out. Your challenge is not only to motivate them to watch, but to affect them in such a way that they are thankful that they watched.

To get through to consumers, Marketers realised early on that they had to rethink how internet advertising was produced. Most viral movies, even to this day, are what we call "user generated content", which is usually someone's shaky phone footage that has captured something of interest like a road accident, or skateboard trick, or pet cat. Marketers used user generated content as a starting point, to see if they could use the same structure for advertisements. Early attempts at producing Bumps attempted to replicate user generated content by hiding the brand in some way.

Some of these ads used deception to trick the viewer that it was user generated and not brand generated. An advertisement designed to create buzz for the upcoming movie *The Wacked* was one of the first. The movie begins by showing shaky mobile phone footage of London's Buckingham Palace at night. The URL [Kingtag.com](http://Kingtag.com) is displayed on the lower left of the screen, suggesting that perhaps the movie might be from some underground organisation. A man appears wearing a hoody. He's with his friend who is the one taking the phone footage. The scene switches back to the palace to show guards marching past. As soon as the guards are gone, the men scale the palace fence, and run over to the front of the palace where they take cover in the shadows. One of the men produces a spray can and begins writing some graffiti on the front of the palace. The men then escape back over the palace fence before the guards return. The final shot shows the product of their efforts—the graffiti tag. In stylized graffiti style writing, the tag says "The Wackness".

The stunt was counting on controversy to drive the viral effect. But it was also deceptive pretending to be user generated and not professionally produced. They were hoping that people would be curious about what the man had written, and subsequently search the internet to find out what The Wackness meant. An accompanying website was setup to show trailers and other information about the movie. The movie did create some buzz, but never really went viral as the producers intended. It has just 11,000 views on YouTube.

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Everyone wants their voice to be heard  
above the noise of other brands.

But how do you get your messages  
to spread far and wide?

## YOU NEED TO GO VIRAL

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'There will always be a degree of unpredictability in any attempt to create viral video, but Brent's work will help you improve your odds substantially.'

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