

A virus worth catching

 By [Brett St Clair](#)

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It's winter and my Nokia N95 has flu. But it's late, and I am ignoring its coughs and splutters and reading a great book which I reckon could be well on its way to becoming a school history text book. It's about how technology and telecommunications flattened the world. How online phenomena such as Google and Facebook understood the power of the Internet and their brands spread like viral wildfire.

With more than a billion people using the Internet, it's easy to see how effective viral marketing can be - especially in the world of social networking.

Wildfire or explosion?

Now consider this: 3.6 billion people have mobile phones. Viral wildfire? More like a viral explosion. Because not only is the mobile phone a convenient medium to market and advertise on, it reaches a vast consumer base, you can target a consumer base to suit your brand and message, choose how often you communicate with your customers and how, and build interactive relationships with consumers.

But the real power of the mobile phone is that it is a personal device. However, with that power, comes huge responsibility to respect that person's privacy. Otherwise, brands that are not careful will alienate themselves and find themselves in the SPAM bin. And rightly so.

So the question is, how do marketers maximise the power of viral mobile?

Three key attributes

Let's go back to some basic attributes about viral campaigns or tipping points and look at how the phone has a multiplying effect on these. Here I have to reference another great book called *The Tipping Point*, where the author, Malcolm Gladwell, defines the three key attributes to achieving the tipping point or the point where something (brand, product, etc) catches on and spreads like a virus. These are: the power of context, stickiness and the law of few.

Each attribute plays a major role in determining whether an idea, brand or service reaches the tipping point.

We can apply this to mobi-marketing: first, when marketing with MMS (multimedia message) to a consumer you have to be aware of their context - where are they and what are they experiencing? We have strict curfews in mobi-marketing, up at 8am in bed by 8pm, if not earlier. Which means we will be marketing to consumers either while they are eating, driving or

working. So the message being marketed needs to take that into consideration. Unlike TV, where the marketer knows the consumer is sitting in front of the TV.

Then stickiness - this is a general challenge faced by all marketers, and which separates the men and woman from the mice. The message needs to be sticky enough so that it is memorable and compels them move - in the case of the mobile phone, that means following a call to action (SMS shortcode, call 0800, click to go to mobisite), making a purchase, or forwarding to a friend.

Forwarding to a friend

And it is forwarding to a friend that is the action we are most interested in when devising a viral mobile campaign. Why? Well, it follows the final tipping point attribute, the law of few. These are people in society who have influence in a social network (very few people have this as a natural ability - hence law of few) where people take the influencers' recommendation and act on it, whether it is a restaurant recommendation or a book.

With the mobile phone you can start to measure which influencer has the largest social network and, even better, who has the deepest social network (anyone heard about six degrees of separation?), so we are identifying the most influential brand advocates. Why focus your precious brand bucks on spray and pray (spam), when you can build and invest in your strongest brand advocates and begin to control word of mouth?

Did I really say control word of mouth? I certainly did. We may need to practice a bit more and develop our technology a little, but we're not far off from making it a reality.

As I return back to my world flattening book, my Nokia N95 splutters and sneezes. "Bless you," I say, without even looking up.

ABOUT BRETT ST CLAIR

Brett St Clair is a mobile multimedia expert who has spent 14 years implementing mobile multimedia delivery solutions to mobile operators across the globe. Recently he set up mobile media agency MobiOne (www.mobione.co.za), of which he is director/partner, to help brands make the transition to the cellular phone. Contact Brett on cell +27 (0)83 981 6343 or email him at brett@mobione.co.za.

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