You want to go viral, do you?

By Sophie Baker   3 Feb 2016

The web is a busy place these days, and it's getting harder and harder to stand out from the crowd. Every content provider and marketing guru desperately wants to attain the holy grail of digital content - to go viral and take their place in the internet hall of fame.

It can be difficult to define what viral content is, as different individuals, organisations, and audiences will all have a different perception about what constitutes "virality". For example, Facebook insights allows users to measure the 'viral reach' of a post, which refers to the number of people who see one of your posts because one of your Facebook friends commented on, liked, or shared it. However, this wouldn't necessarily be the metric that another organisation would use to measure the virality of a YouTube video, or how *Huffington Post* would measure the viral reach of one of their articles.

In a nutshell, though, viral content is any piece of content or media that becomes an internet sensation in the blink of an eye. It gets an unusually large amount of attention in the form of likes, shares, views, and mentions across multiple platforms. The digital sphere has made it much more possible for content to go viral. One simple click of a mouse is all it takes to share the latest song, video, or funny picture with the world.

Viral content is set apart from other content by its shareability factor. If something is being continuously shared by almost everyone who sees it, then it's gone viral. Whatever the topic, message, or medium, viral content has to connect with people in a way that makes them want to share it with friends, family, and followers. Remember when you walked into your office to be asked 'WHAT COLOUR IS THE DRESS?', which inevitably sparked a three-hour long argument between you and your colleagues, you and your friends, and possibly came close to destroying your marriage too? Yeah, so do we.

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So what is it about certain pieces of content that make them inherently shareable? Plenty of research has been done into this topic. So much so, in fact, that it's become difficult to wade through the vast amounts of data to pinpoint the characteristics of highly shareable content and apply them to your own content creation strategy.

The golden thread running through all successful viral content is emotional engagement. If you can evoke such a strong emotional reaction that those who consume your content feel compelled to share it, you've already completed the first step. The problem is that emotional engagement is such a broad term - it's easy to know that you need to engage on an emotional level with your audience, but what are the key traits of content that manages to do exactly that?

States of high emotional arousal are key

There are seven commonly accepted 'high arousal' emotions according to marketing professor and social expert, Dr Jonah Berger. These seven emotions are awe, anger, anxiety, joy, fear, lust, and surprise. Seeing something humorous also results in high levels of arousal. Eliciting these types of emotions from your audience will naturally result in more shareable content. Evoking sadness, however, is generally a much less successful strategy.

Eliciting anger is a risky strategy, and it has to be noted that the aim isn't to provoke hostility in those who consume your content. The type of anger that results in shares and views of your content is generated when you convey a statement, message, or position that people disagree with. Writing a well-informed article which goes against common or accepted thinking is one such example. People will comment, share it with friends, write response articles, and generally defend their position or opinion. This is why you'll notice many headlines and teasers gently encourage this type of response by challenging a common belief right off the bat. An article with a headline like 'eating vegetables isn't good for you anymore' is an example of the kind of copywriting that is often employed to generate surprise or anger, and in turn make people want to read and offer their own opinions.

Some news discoveries can also give rise to feelings of anger. Examples would be the Nkandla scandal, or the pharmaceutical company CEO who wanted to inflate the price of antiretroviral drugs used to treat HIV/AIDS by 5000% for his own monetary benefit. In this case, the anger or outrage elicited isn't directed at you as the content creator, so you suffer no ill-effects. However, this kind of content is shared regularly as the community feels that they have a right to be outraged, especially if they are directly or indirectly affected by the topic in question.

Although content that evokes sadness can barely hold a candle to content that evokes joy, there are a few exceptions to sad content not going viral. These commonly include death of prominent people, natural disasters, or large-scale destruction, and sad content that people find inspiring (the story of someone battling cancer, a family coming together after a major setback, somebody fulfilling last wishes before death etc.). You might remember [this story](#) about a father singing 'Blackbird' to his dying son, for instance.

However, the likelihood of content that conjures up sadness in consumers going viral is much smaller than any of the other seven emotions listed. Let's take the example of the incredibly successful ALS Ice Bucket Challenge. The idea took the internet by storm in July 2014 and spread like wildfire with famous names like Taylor Swift, Bill Gates, Oprah, and Mark Zuckerberg quickly joining in and posting their videos online to their sizeable online networks. Aside from the viral video response, the challenge raised over $100 million dollars in one month for the ALS Association alone. Had the attempt to raise awareness of ALS been made via a sombre documentary-style video detailing the debilitating effects the disease has on sufferers and their families - eliciting sadness from viewers, the success probably would have been far less. It is likely that it would have been mostly those directly affected by ALS and thus already aware of the disease who shared it. Although there's no reason these types of videos shouldn't be made, they have less potential to be shared amongst the masses and don't encourage widespread participation in the same way.

The most difficult part of creating engagement via emotions is knowing exactly what emotion you're trying to leverage off,

and planning your content carefully around this. You need to research and understand what can and will trigger happiness, awe, surprise, or fear after consuming a given piece of content, and apply it to your own work. Once you have understood how to trigger a particular emotion in people, it becomes simple to create content which will elicit that particular emotion. Of course, if you can evoke a response that covers more than one of the high-arousal emotions, you're on the path to success. Some will go together more naturally than others, like joy and surprise for instance.

Aside from targeting specific emotions to engage your audience, there are one or two other strategies to consider which can also help you create content that's likely to be shared.

Positive content beats negative content

You wouldn't guess it from listening to the news, but positive content beats out negative content every time. It is far, far more likely that positive content will be shared than negative content, regardless of the platform. Everyone wants a dose of happiness in their day-to-day lives, so if your content helps uplift people, even only for a few seconds or minutes, it has more potential to be passed on.

Content that is useful increases shareability

There are a couple of categories as far as practical and useful content goes. One is day-to-day stuff that applies to everyone. Think 'lifehack' type posts. Ways to make everyday tasks quicker, easier, or cheaper. DIY hints. Upcycling. Pinterest has essentially built their entire following by allowing users to 'pin' this type of content.

Then there's the category that aims to expand people's knowledge or help them understand something. Useful articles and information that get shared via social media fall into this category. Whether it's advice on how to parent your kids, healthy eating, politics, financial planning, or any other given category, there are definitely a few articles that have been shared time and time again. These can, however, run the risk of being too specific and niche. For example, a parenting article might be interesting to a non-parent, but they are unlikely to share it if their network is comprised mostly of non-parents too.

Another category of content that regularly gets shared and arguably belongs under 'useful and practical' content, is that which people share with the aim of changing others' opinions. This would often be informative articles as mentioned above, but it can also be related to topical issues or news items. A Facebook status written by a soldier who lost his leg when a bomb exploded in Iraq went viral recently, as he attempted to change people's opinions of Islam and Muslims with an anti-racist rant. The Facebook post alone stands at just under 200,000 shares, but millions more will have seen his post across various websites, news channels, and blogs. This viral post has the ability to give rise to multiple thigh-arousal emotions within one individual (say joy and awe), but also evoke different emotional responses for each person consuming it. While one person might experience anger at the post if they disagree with his views, another might experience joy, and yet another might experience sadness, all depending on their own views, values, and circumstances. In this way, "useful" content combines with emotional content to produce something of a viral powerhouse of potential.

The takeaway lesson is that if you want to create content that will be shared across many platforms and reach a wide audience, you're going to need to create content that is useful and relatable for the masses, not just a tiny niche. Generally, useful and practical content will not be enough in itself to go viral, though it may get some reasonable traction. If you can tailor it so that your content evokes an emotional reaction like humour, anger, or happiness too, then you're doing a good job at creating content with a good chance of getting shared.

Readers love lists, quizzes, and pictures

Analytics experts BuzzSumo analysed over eight million posts, and of the top 10 most shared pieces of content in the last 10 months, eight were quizzes. Seven were from Buzzfeed, while one was from *The New York Times*. It's assumed that people share quiz results for narcissistic reasons - to boost their ego, share, and solidify their identity, and teach followers about their values and likes. I mean, obviously you know that your ideal celebrity match is Channing Tatum and you should definitely have been a famous musician instead of working your 9 to 5 job, but your Facebook friends need to know too,

right?

Judging from SumoBuzz' findings, there's no arguing that online content king Buzzfeed knows a bit about what makes good, shareable content. According to [data from Buzzfeed](#), 90% of their list posts go viral. Another simple way to increase the likelihood of getting shares and views is to include images in your content. Posts with images get more shares than without. BuzzSumo found that on average, Facebook users shared posts with at least one image twice as much as posts with no images.

If your content can easily be converted into a list or quiz without detracting from the quality of the content itself, then go ahead and give it a try! The popularity of images within posts held true for both Facebook and Twitter shares, so be sure to always add at least one image to every content piece you create for maximum shareability.

In the end, it isn't just about you

The harsh reality is, however, that even with all the knowledge in the world you don't simply sit down and "create viral content" as and when you feel like it. The reason viral content is so highly sought after and prized is that it really isn't easy to create. If it was, everybody would be doing it.

Even if you have incredibly compelling content, applying all of these strategies to the letter, and creating a useful list that conjures up awe, joy, and surprise in everyone who sees it, you still can't guarantee that your content will go viral. You can definitely make it more likely that you'll go viral, but the audiences are really the ones who make things happen.

As such, there's no fool proof recipe for creating viral content on demand. You're just going to have to keep plugging away, putting good content out there, and continuing to fill people with surprise, awe, joy, or whatever other high-arousal emotion you'd like.

ABOUT SOPHIE BAKER

Sophie Baker is the content producer at Biz4Afrika, a Mcrosoft-owned online hub providing help, information and networking opportunities for small businesses, through Content Studio.
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