Innovative Idea

**Going Viral: The Creation of Irresistible Social Media Content**

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**Introduction/Need for Idea**

The introduction of social media has changed the way communicators distribute information from a one-way communications format to a two-way communication model. This model explains the need for communicators to use materials to engage in conversations by informing, listening, and answering (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998). Agriculturalists have used social media to inform audiences (White, Meyers, Doerfert, & Irlbeck, 2015); however, information needs to be structured in a way in which it is viral or spreadable to meet the masses (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013).

Jenkins et al. (2013) explained, “If it doesn’t spread, it’s dead” (p. 1). The premise of this statement is based on the sheer amount of online content: more than 100 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every 60 seconds, 4.75 billion pieces of content is distributed via Facebook, and 500 million tweets are sent per day, in addition to countless other outlets for social media communication (Ankeny, 2014). As agriculturalists, we must find ways to structure information so it becomes engaging content that is irresistible to audiences and that will encourage audience engagement to promote brands and organizations (Ankeny, 2014).

Ankeny (2014) discussed the role of emotions in viral content as a driving motivational factor for audience engagement. Whether content produces the positive emotions of warmth, happiness, hilarity, surprise or the negative emotions of confusion, contempt, disgust, or anger, these emotions provide a key role in the social motivation to engage in social media such as viewing, liking, commenting, or sharing (Harvard Business Review, 2015). By understanding the basics of human behavior and the underlying emotions that predict social motivation to share content, communicators can craft viral content (Ankeny, 2014). In addition to appealing emotionally to an audience, communicators must use this information to meet the needs of their target audience and organization (Cosper, 2014). The purpose of this innovative idea was to provide an opportunity for students to create and promote online content with the goal of making it “go viral.”

**Steps**

In this innovative idea, students enrolled in [course] at [university] were tasked with creating an engaging video (i.e., a viral video) that would drive audience engagement to promote the [department]. To do so, agricultural communications faculty members first collaborated on a script to highlight common sarcastic response to the question, “What is agricultural communications?” In order to emotionally appeal to the audience, the idea of sarcastic humor was used. With all the faculty members on board for the production of the video, the next step was having students review the script and provide additional suggestions. Faculty members in the agricultural communications program agreed to perform as actors in the video. The students were responsible for coordinating all the video production including shooting footage for the entire video and editing via Adobe Premiere Pro. This step was completed over a series of several weeks as student schedules allowed. The video was presented during a class section to discuss necessary revisions and also strategize how it would be promoted online. To do so, students developed a social media plan to promote the video on the department’s social media pages. Finally, the video was uploaded to department’s YouTube channel and promoted via the department Facebook page and emails to students and faculty within the college. Several students also led efforts to distribute the video through their own personal social media accounts.

**Results to Date/Implications**

The video was posted on April 1 to coincide with April Fools Day due to the sarcastic response of “What is Agricultural Communications?” All data were collected on May 4, one month after the original posting. In the month after the initial posting, the original promotional post on Facebook had accrued 1,229 reactions, comments, and shares. Additionally, there were 3,060 post clicks and 1,127 link clicks. According to the Facebook analytics, more than 74,000 people had been reached.

The video has been viewed 2,700 times on YouTube in 29 different countries. The majority of views 1,733 (70%) were through a mobile device, followed by desktop (*n =* 607, 25%), and tablet (*n =* 342, 5%). Additionally, the majority of the audience (65%) was female, while 35% was male. In addition to providing large engagement rates for the specific post, the number of likes on the [department’s] Facebook page increased from 276 to 633 in the week following the video’s launch date.

Because this is the first effort to create viral content through the [department], it is difficult to declare that the video went “viral.” However, the promotion of this video did generate the most engagement up to that point on the [department’s] Facebook and more than doubled the number of page likes. These factors can be considered areas of success for this viral marketing campaign.

**Future Plans/Advice to Others**

The footage collected during filming of this video did provide outtakes that can be used to create a follow-up video. Similar videos can be created for other areas of study in the department. When planning this type of content, it is important to keep the audience in mind. The final product is more likely to be shared and encourage engagement if it is emotionally appealing, such as humorous, to the audience (Harvard Business Review, 2015) and elicits a powerful response. If the goal of putting content online is to increase its views, that content must be shareable and the audience members must be motivated to help spread the message. Future courses in online, digital, or emerging media should consider producing a similar video. Students were able to understand how and why content should be created to meet the audience members’ social and emotional motivations to share media. Additionally, this experience allowed students a real-world look at the development and promotion of a viral video and the subsequent social media analytics.

**Costs/Resources Needed**

The creation of this video required technology already available in the department – cameras, tripods, and microphones. The students did design or locate several props for the video and scouted locations. Access to editing software is also necessary as the students used Adobe Premiere Pro. The video was posted to the department’s YouTube channel and shared via its Facebook page, which are free to create. The cost of video production may vary due to resources. For example, individuals can record quality videos on smartphones and edit via free-software for a cost-effective approach. Perhaps the most important resource is having students and faculty willing and able to be involved in this process.

**References**

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