

Message gone viral? Blame it on altruistic, yet image-conscious Internet 'e-mavens'

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Altruistic, yet image-conscious Internet users tend to share more online content, causing messages to go viral, says Assistant Professor Melanie Dempsey, Ted Rogers School of Business Management, and co-author of a study published on viral marketing.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Why do some online ad campaigns go viral while other online marketing messages gather "cyber-dust" on the information superhighway? The key may lie in the motivation of Internet users to email that content to their social network, say researchers from Ryerson University and Simon Fraser University.

"As more advertising dollars are shifted to viral marketing campaigns, little is known about the factors that contribute to their success, or the Internet users who voluntarily pass along this content," says Melanie Dempsey, an assistant professor of marketing in the Ted Rogers School

of Business Management.

Dempsey has co-authored a study on viral marketing with Jason Ho of Simon Fraser University. Their paper, Viral Marketing: Motivations to Forward Online Content, has been published online in the *Journal of Business Research*.

The researchers' goal was to gain insight on the factors that prompted Internet users to forward online content to their friends and family. They studied what they call 'e-mavens', people who spend a lot of time online, know intuitively what the next big idea is and spread marketplace information via electronic platforms, such as email. They asked 582 e-mavens, who are undergraduate students at a major university in Toronto, to fill out an [online survey](#) about their motivations for forwarding content, how often they share information electronically and how much time they spend on online activities (such as watching [YouTube](#) videos).

Dempsey and Ho identified four potential motivations that may guide an e-maven's behaviour. First, the need to be part of a group. Second, the need to be individualistic and stand out from a crowd. Third, the need to be altruistic and fourth, the need for personal growth.

The researchers discovered that Internet users who are more altruistic and/or more individualistic, tend to share more online content than others.

"While e-mavens want to help someone by forwarding online [content](#) that may interest them, at the same time, they want to be recognized as an expert," says Dempsey. "So although e-mavens carefully choose what will be forwarded, they are also trying to manage their self-image. E-mavens want to be unique."

The researchers also found that participants who spend more time online tend to share more information with others in their social network. Spending more time surfing the Web also may allow individuals to feel a sense of inclusion.

All of these results, according to Dempsey, may help viral marketing campaigns achieve more success.

"Given the amount of clutter on the Internet, marketers must be able to cut through that chatter and give the e-mavens a reason to share a marketing message with their social network. If they can appeal to the altruistic nature of these Internet users and boost their image online, a marketing campaign will have a better chance of going viral."

Provided by Ryerson University

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