Social media and the success of viral campaigns

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Seth Meyers takes the ice bucket challenge backstage at the 2014 Emmy Awards. Credit: VOA News/Wikimedia Commons

Two years after millions of people dumped ice water on themselves to raise awareness and money for ALS research, the Ice Bucket Challenge

is being deemed a success.

Raising more than $200 million, the viral campaign helped to fund research projects that have discovered three different genes that can be linked to ALS, a progressive and fatal neurological disease that attacks the nerve cells responsible for voluntary muscle control. A key factor in the Ice Bucket Challenge's initial success was social media, as people posted videos of dumping water on themselves and then challenging others to do the same.

So we turned to assistant professor of marketing Yakov Bart to explain the role social media plays in charitable campaigns, the risk of oversaturation, and where the trend is headed.

How has the rise of social media changed the ways organizations reach their audiences and do things like raise money?

Traditionally, organizations have relied on crafting their message to appeal directly to their target audiences, using own and paid communication channels to distribute that message, but the rise of social media has opened multiple new opportunities. As my co-author Andrew T. Stephen and I discuss in our book on social media marketing principles and strategies, no organization can have a marketing strategy these days that doesn't take into account social interactivity among consumers in open and flexible social media environments with a fast-paced flow of information.

Charities are no exception to this trend: 98 percent of the top 400 nonprofit organizations are using at least one form of social media. While the Ice Bucket Challenge has certainly turned out to be a successful example of using social media tools, we've already seen many

others by now. For instance, the Make-A-Wish foundation encourages posting videos of wishes on YouTube and shares content related to granted wishes on Facebook and Twitter. The organization Charity: Water allows staff to publish their own personal content connecting them to their supporters. And the Movember community, built on sponsored mustache growing, has contributed millions of dollars to issues such as prostate cancer, testicular cancer, poor mental health, and physical inactivity.

Because so many people have access to social media, is there a concern of an oversaturation of fundraising requests? How can people deal with that?

This is a very good question. One may expect that exposing people more frequently to various fundraising requests would make them more likely to donate their time, money, and efforts for charitable causes than ever before. In other words, the hope here is that interacting with one charitable cause will make a person more receptive to appeals coming from other charities. However, psychologists have shown that doing a good thing today, like making a donation or two, may lead people to "feel secure in their moral self-regard," which then may lead them to ignore appeals for other worthy causes. This moral self-licensing paradox is something that people looking to "be good" need to be aware of.

Whether you are talking about a television show, advertising campaign, fundraising, or current events, do we now finally have a good understanding of how best to deploy social marketing tools? Are there some new tools becoming available today that you see as rapidly becoming popular in the future?

Social media marketing practices have indeed grown substantially lately and become mainstream, and many research articles have been published that examine its various aspects. So, we do already know much more about this phenomenon than five to 10 years ago. However, there are many questions that both practitioners and academic researchers are struggling with. For example, while we've known for a while that word-of-mouth marketing programs are generally successful in amplifying buzz around the product being marketed, not much was known about how running such a program for one product might affect the volume of consumer conversations about related products, offered by the same brand or in the same category. My co-authors and I have investigated this question in our research on word-of-mouth spillovers where we have empirically demonstrated that a viral marketing campaign focused on a branded product will lead to a dip in conversation volume about other products made by that brand. On the positive side, though, we've also found a similar effect at the category level, which suggests that companies can strategically use word-of-mouth campaigns to suppress conversations about their competitors' offerings in the same category.

Speaking of nascent tools, I believe that some of the most underestimated social marketing tools at the moment are the capabilities offered by Snapchat. While at first blush brands may find it unreasonable to allocate any part of their marketing budgets on sending almost-instantaneously-disappearing communications to consumers, they will soon realize that Snapchat is probably the closest any social media platform has come so far to imitating real-time conversations among consumers. It is easy to see why many brands would want to become part of these conversations, especially as the platform moves to offering relevant targeting solutions, such as branded location-based geofilters.

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