

www.clickz.com/news/article.php/3418661

Group Sets Guidelines for Viral Marketing

By [Kevin Newcomb](#)
October 7, 2004

[The Viral + Buzz Marketing Association \(VBMA\) defined the organization's mission and guiding principles for network-enhanced word-of-mouth marketing campaigns in a document unveiled last night in London.](#)

"There is a lot of debate and confusion in general marketing circles (let alone the wider business world) about what is and isn't viral marketing, and how it is differentiated from buzz and/or word-of-mouth marketing," said acting VBMA president Thomas Zorbach, of Germany's VM-People.

The platform sets guidelines for marketers involved in viral, buzz, and word-of-mouth marketing (WOMM) which encourage marketers to be respectful of the audience and deliver relevant messages. These forms of marketing have long been part of companies' arsenals, but the rise of the Internet, and the ability to track such phenomena, has spurred the formation of two groups seeking to establish guiding principles -- the VBMA and the Word of Mouth Marketing Association (WOMMA).

While viral, buzz and WOMM are similar, there are subtle differences, to the VBMA's thinking. The group considers viral marketing to tend to be conducted online, buzz to be conducted through a traditional media network, and WOMM through traditional social networks.

"We strive to identify only those people who will be interested in a particular marketing message; deliver the message to them in a way that makes it an enjoyable or valuable experience; and provide it in a manner that encourages them to share it with others," the VBMA document states.

The VBMA also established its goal "to foster genuine enthusiasm about brands and brand communications, which can spread through networks in a way that is enjoyed, appreciated and/or valued." It also stressed the importance of enabling message recipients to become partners and stakeholders in marketing communication activities, putting them at the center of the marketing.

"We believe that whatever our target, we will always be dealing with educated people who detect when they are being deceived," according to the document. "These people appreciate brands that find smart ways to entertain, educate or inform them."

While this guideline encourages honesty, they do not require full disclosure, as long as the marketer intends to eventually reveal the deception, according to VBMA founder Justin Kirby, CEO of London-based Digital Media Communications.

"We didn't want to throw out the buzz baby with the bathwater. We have a very diverse group of practitioners, so we needed to ensure that PR company members are still able to carry out hoaxes/stunts or April Fool-type campaigns within these principles," he said.

For example, one member of the VBMA worked on the viral marketing of "the Blair Witch Project". If they were required to explain that they were working for the film company at the onset, they would not have been able to run the campaign, Kirby said.

Kirby notes the difference between working on a "War of the Worlds" hoax where the deception is supposed to be found out compared with one where marketers go undercover or infiltrate chat rooms where they don't wish their stealth to ever be found out.

"The principles are designed to safeguard consumers' interests, but still allow brands and VBMA members to have fun with their communication campaigns, which in many instances go well beyond simply profiling and recruiting influencers on word-of-mouth marketing campaigns in order to spread the word -- incentivized or not," Kirby said.

By following these guidelines, marketers will be "providing a benefit to our audiences and their acquaintances and in so doing, to the brands for which we work," according to the document.

With the adoption of this platform, the VBMA, with more than 40 members worldwide, hopes to bring respectability to the nascent and often misunderstood field of viral and buzz marketing. If members follow these guidelines, working in this field will be considered "acceptable, professional and valuable."

While membership in the VBMA is free and open, adhering to the group's principles is mandatory for all members. Membership in the VBMA can be revoked for carrying out a marketing message which runs contrary to the principles set out in the manifesto, Kirby said.

The principles that the VBMA put forth are merely the beginning, intended to begin defining the mission of a diverse group of marketers that include advertising and PR agencies, researchers, game developers, academics and consultants.

"We took a broad approach on what was our first stake in the ground in an evolving association and industry. There will be other manifestos and new versions of older ones, so there's no doubt that these principles will evolve too," Kirby said.