

Viral advertising in tourism: a creative tool to promote countries and cities

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Abstract

There are not many people who have not seen "Gangnam Style", which was published on the video-sharing website Youtube in July 2012, and have reached almost three billion views since then. Moreover, classic media also adopted it as a news piece, therefore it has also reached people who do not use Internet.

The rather peculiar music video made the Korean singer and Seoul's "Gangnam" quarter famous worldwide. The magnitude might be different, but settlements, regions and countries producing viral videos desire something similar – to draw the attention of tourists or the media.

But what should a viral video promoting tourism be like? This study presents some of the most successful international best practices. Examples include a viral campaign for a country with several million citizens and an advertising campaign for a village with 78 inhabitants. There is one thing in common: we can learn from all of them.

Therefore the summary at the end of the article also provides practical suggestions on what questions to ask before tourism marketing specialists choose to create a viral video concept.

Keywords: tourism marketing, viral advertising, viral video, country branding, city branding

1. Introduction: What is viral advertising?

If someone says that he or she is producing viral advertisements, we might look at him or her strangely. Or we may think that our computers get infected by viruses because of people like them. But this is not the case. The expression only refers to the fact that a given content (in this case, an advertisement, most likely a video) is spreading like a virus. And who is spreading it? We ourselves, humans: for example, by forwarding them to our contacts, or posting and sharing them on social networks such as Facebook.

According to one theory on viral advertisement, the way these viruses spread is the same as cell division known from biology: the message always reaches further two people, that is, the virus duplicates with each iteration. Therefore its spread may be described with the powers of the number two: $2^0 - 2^1 - 2^2 - 2^3 - 2^4 - 2^5 - 2^6 - 2^7 - 2^8$ etc., that is, $1 - 2 - 4 - 8 - 16 - 32 - 64 - 128$, and so on.

Another theory focuses on societal and social relationships. A human is a social being. A narrow and close relationship circle of 8-12 people on average is formed around each person: family members, close friends, and colleagues. They are the ones with whom we best understand each other, whose thinking is similar to ours. If something happens to us, we share it with them. If we receive exciting news, we inform them first. Therefore, if we suppose that everyone has 8 such acquaintances, the spread of the virus may be interpreted as the powers of the number eight: $1 - 8 - 8^2 - 8^3 - 8^4 - 8^5 - 8^6 - 8^7 - 8^8$, etc., that is, $1 - 8 - 64 - 512 - 4096 - 32768 - 262144 - 2097152$, and so on. According to this theory the spread of the virus is much faster.

However, life is not always the same as theory. There are people who forward things to 8-12 people, ones who share them with 100, 1000 or even more acquaintances, and even ones who do not forward them to anyone. From the aspect of spreading the virus, the first and second groups are interesting.

It is also important to mention some information highlighted by an article on viral marketing published in HASZON Magazin (2011): "They often say that viral advertisements spread exponentially in a spontaneous way. This could have been true in the early years of Internet. However, this has changed by today – besides a well-defined awareness-raising message, time and money is also needed for the promotion of advertising. Spots and games that

spread by themselves like wildfire are extremely rare, and in several cases they reach their destination by accident.” Even in the case of Gangnam Style, some Internet users were hired in secret previously, thus they shared the video consciously.

But why do people forward an advertisement or any kind of video or picture voluntarily? According to István SAS, advertising psychologist and TV commercial director, the motivation of forwarding may be attributed to 6 basic points (Sas 2012):

1. Sharing – that is, the perception of a community experience, and expressions of shared joy and grief
2. Signal – when we pass on information that we consider important
3. Community – when it is important that we have the same opinion and belong to the same group
4. Being an insider – possessing information that we have received is value that we would like to share with others in order to prove our own value
5. Present – an expression of love (mostly in the case of contents based on this notion, e.g. contents related to feasts)
6. Self-expression – it represents something that we can identify with and we also advertise our own personality by sharing

Any of these may serve as motivation to forward a message, therefore whichever of them is used by the virus, there is a good chance that Internet users with similar interests will also forward the information (and this includes not only computer users, but mainly people who use their mobile phones to access the Internet).

From the aspect of creation, SAS and PAPP-VÁRY (2007) also point out that the spread of a viral advertisement is likely if it is unusual, cheeky, provocative, intelligent, interactive, and creative. Which simply means that it is good.

2. The most famous example: the best job in the world

One of the most successful tourism campaigns of all time (not just viral campaign, but communications campaign) was “The best job in the world” in 2009. According to official statistics, the Australian Great Barrier Reef, and, especially, Hamilton island could achieve media coverage worth 100 million Dollars with an investment of 1.2 million Dollars.

The idea of the campaign was simple: Tourism Australia (a government agency promoting Australia as a destination) was accepting applications for “the best job in the world”, recruiting someone “willing” to take care of the island for 6 months for 150,000 Australian Dollars. Major tasks included feeding the turtles, cleaning the pool, diving, managing incoming mail, etc.

A viral video accompanied these job advertisements placed in traditional offline press and on the Internet – it presented the beautiful island, and “The best job in the world” banner ads directed traffic to the page.

Illustration 1: “The best job in the world” advertisement in print media

THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD.

Island Caretaker:
Islands of the Great Barrier Reef, Australia.

Full-time, live-in position with flexible hours. AUD\$150,000 for a six-month contract. Accommodation provided – luxury home on Hamilton Island, over-looking Australia's famous Great Barrier Reef.

Responsibilities: • Explore the island and report back • Clean the pool • Feed the fish • Collect the mail. Apply to Tourism Queensland at islandreef@job.com

Anyone can apply.
*Refer to the Terms and Conditions at islandreef@job.com

QUEENSLAND

Functions Attendant

We are looking for a functions attendant to service our front of house operations at the University of Queensland.

J J Hospitality Agency

We are seeking Chefs, wait staff, baristas, event coordinators and kitchen hands to register with us. Please forward your profile to cc@jjhospitality.com.au

Junior Required

Approx 20 hours, must be 18 years, poker machine and TAB knowledge – a advantage. Phone: 02 950 4241 Fax: 02 950 4241 or 02 950 4241 ask for the manager.

MAGUIRES LODGE, HAAST, SOUTH WESTLAND

Chief Bar & Wait Staff. High Staff. Housekeeping. 30 Experienced, mature, multi-skilled applicants sought. Quality, style, a team opportunity exists for an applicant with a passion for the great outdoors, who committed to providing professional service. An addition to Haast, known for its reputation as a centre of excellence in wilderness management. Please contact the Manager, Maguires Lodge, PO Box 15, HAAST. Enquiries: info@maguireslodge.co.nz Phone: 03 7580 1111 www.maguireslodge.co.nz

Operator/Manager

Strong skills & great attitude in various sectors. Some experience. General Manager. Minimum 5 years experience in fast food environment but not essential. \$18 p/hr according to experience. Please send your resume to: info@maguireslodge.co.nz

Source: http://www.thenewspaperworks.com.au/images/StandardImage/091105_015640716_Best_Job_in_the_world-artic.jpg

However, the most important aim was to engage consumers: all applicants had to upload a one-minute video to the Youtube channel of the campaign claiming that they would be the best choice. All in all, 34,684 application videos from 201 countries were uploaded, and the winner received more than 450,000 votes. This was also supported by the Facebook page and Twitter channel of the campaign.

The website <http://www.islandreefjob.com/> produced 6.8 million unique visitors and 47.5 million page downloads within 56 days, but, more importantly, they spent 8.62 minutes on the website on average, which is an extremely high number.

Moreover, the attention did not stop when someone was hired for the job, because one of the winner's role was to blog from the locations for six months, describing his time there.

However, not only online media, but offline press including abc, Telemadrid, FOX, BBC, SKY NEWS, CNN, and several other media outlets also reported about the Australian Great Barrier Reef.

The campaign became a three times grand prix winner at the 2009 Cannes Lions advertising festival in the categories PR, Cyber and Direct.

The case study has been included in the marketing education programmes of several universities and colleges, and many experts tried to find out the secret of its success. According to publication NEOSZKÓP by NEO Interactive agency (2011) the key was the following: „While we never took our eyes off the attractive product, the campaign actually did not put the island into the consumers' perspective, but placed the consumer in the world of the product.”

Illustration 2: The mechanism of the "The best job in the world" campaign



Source: http://www.casestudiesonline.com/images/best_job_campaign.jpg

Illustration 3: "The best job in the world" campaign and its results

Source: http://files.coloribus.com/files/adsarchive/part_1283/12833755/file/great-barrier-reef-the-best-job-in-the-world-small-23086.jpg

The success of the campaign is not only demonstrated by the results mentioned above, but also the number of marketing efforts trying to copy it. For example, Durex Australia advertised its condom testing position as the "dream job", encouraged by the example of the Australian Great Barrier Reef campaign.

In Hungary, Tensi Tours (a travel bureau) announced a competition for "the second best job in the world". The winner of the contest won unique trips and a million Hungarian forints for each month for half a year. Similarly to the original campaign, he had to create texts, photos and videos as part of the coverage of his adventures.

It is a pleasure for the author of this study that the winner of the competition was Balázs Gyémánt, who was his student at the BA and MA programmes at the Budapest College of Communication and Business (today: Budapest Metropolitan University).

3. Engaging the audience

As we can see from the theoretical overview and the practical examples mentioned above, engaging the community may be the most important tool. Therefore the Philippines' Department of Tourism asked locals and tourists to be its "reporters" in 2011.

BBD0, an advertising agency produced 3 picture postcards saying that it is "more fun in the Philippines", then anyone could send in a picture produced in the country, and the slogan was included with the help of the morefunmaker.com site.

Illustration 4-5: Several thousand versions of the 3 images were created with the involvement of the community: "It's more fun in the Philippines"



Source: <http://www.ourawesomeplanet.com/images/ItsMoreFUNinthePhilippines.jpg>



Source: http://img.scoop.it/3IDO8MdCKNoVU7iDeMpz1zl72eJkfbmt4t8yenImKBVaiQDB_Rd1H6kmuBWtceBJ

As a result, more than 12 000 postcards are circulating on the Internet, and several video montages have been created featuring the best ones. The "#itsmorefuninthePhilippines" tag have also become a trend on Twitter. Having

seen these results, the international media was glad to report the campaign and the country, which is also important because the Philippines had mostly appeared in the media with negative news.

The "Locals know" campaign by the Canadian Tourism Commission (CTC) was somewhat similar in 2009. The concept of the campaign was based on the notion that people living in Canada know best what is worth visiting in the country. The campaign thus also contributed to greater attention to Canada's lesser-known attractions: locals shared 4000 locations demonstrating the beauties of the country. The marketing terminology calls this kind of involvement "user generated content", or "user generated marketing".

Illustration 6: Canada: The "Locals know" campaign



Source: <http://iamusergenerated.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Locals-Know-grab.jpg>

The primary aim was to make Canadians spend their dollars for travel and excursions domestically, which proved successful: they estimate that more than 400 000 out of 2.7 million domestic bookings came from people who had originally planned trips abroad, for example to the United States or the Caribbean. The campaign met with acclaim by the Forbes business magazine, and was listed among the ten best tourism marketing campaigns of the world. (FORBES 2009)

In Hokkaido, a Japanese island, a settlement called Yubari had a successful campaign with an original idea and the related video and communications support. It is basically an ill-fated mining town which had a population of 100 000 in the 1960s, but only 10 000 locals have remained as a result of mine closures and migration. They tried and tested various things: tourist attractions were created and an amusement park was built, but tourists just did not want to come, and the city faced increasing financial difficulties – it even declared bankruptcy in 2007.

Then they hired a consulting company, whose first task was to study carefully all information available about the city. As a result of the analysis they found some interesting statistics: Yubari was the city with the least divorces in Japan. These findings lead to an interesting concept called "No money but love" – the mayor declared that Yubari is "the city of happy couples", and he established the Department of Happily Married Couples. Several thousand couples arriving from all around Japan (and Yubari itself) could confirm their marriage with official, stamped Happily Married Certificates.

Illustration 7: The "No money but love" campaign of Yubari City

YUBARI CITY CAMPAIGN

NO MONEY BUT LOVE.

YUBARI-FUSAI

Background: With a debt of **\$353 million**, Yubari City, Japan, was bankrupt.

Challenge: Promote Yubari, reenergize its citizens, and help erase the debt.

Idea: Yubari has the lowest divorce rate in Japan so we created the idea, "Yubari, no money but love". In expanding this idea we created a loveable, yet ironic character called "Yubari Fusai". "Fusai" means both "debt" and "spouse" in Japanese. Then we collaborated with the City government to create revenue-generating schemes positioning the city as a destination for happy couples.

Results: **\$1.5 million** generated in unpaid media • Tourism up 10% year-on-year • **\$31 million** generated towards alleviating the city's debt.

Source: <http://thecreativebazaar.files.wordpress.com/2009/07/yubari.jpg>

Consequently, a whole "marketing machine" was created for the promotion of the city: they published a CD packed with love songs wearing the design of the city, and visitors could buy souvenirs from a wide range of merchandise products including mugs, T-shirts, pens, chocolates, beers, etc.

Moreover, as Japan is a country with a significant fan base of figures like Hello Kitty, the city also created similar figures called "Fusai" which means both "couple" and "debt", referring to the situation of the city.

The initiative was successful in media: more than 300 press organs reported it, and it was covered by about 100 TV programmes. The number of visitors has been increasing by 10% each year, and the finances of the city also seem to be settling. What is even more important: locals may be proud of their city, and their self-esteem has also improved.

Sometimes another kind of crisis creates the necessity of a (viral) campaign. As a result of the volcano eruption in 2010, Iceland produced the *Inspired by Iceland* video featuring people in various Icelandic landscapes, dancing to the music *Jungle Drum* by Emiliana Torrini.

Illustration 8: Iceland drew attention to the country with a viral video



Source: <http://i280.photobucket.com/albums/kk187/visuالتone/myheartisiceland.jpg>

The professional video was then followed by a series of amateur videos where tourists or locals presented how they were "dancing the dance". The "Inspired by Iceland" concept soon appeared on stills, too.

4. Sometimes fun ideas become reality

In Iceland it was ash pouring from the sky, but in Switzerland birds were "dropping" from above. At least this was what they pointed out in the video "Swiss Mountain Cleaners".

The video states that a cleaning team works for the elimination of minor accidents, that is, bird droppings, in order to make the ranges of the Alps all spotless, and the tourists' holiday perfect. The slogan also suggests this: "We do everything to make your holidays perfect."

Illustration 9: A special problem in Switzerland: bird droppings on the slopes of the Alps



Source: http://b.vimeocdn.com/ts/685/650/6856506_640.jpg

Moreover, the video recruited volunteers to clean the mountains, and attracted 30 000 applicants. As they point out, "April Fools' Day has become reality".

Illustration 10: The April Fools' Day topic has become reality: there were a lot of applications for the cleaning of the Swiss Alps



Source: http://newlyswissed.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/Mountain_Cleaner1.jpg

Another Swiss viral campaign achieved even greater success, even though it was about Obermütten, a village with 78 inhabitants, a church, a hotel and a few cows.

One day the mayor of the village and the owner of the local restaurant decided that they would post a printed version of the Facebook profiles of people liking Obermütten's Facebook page on the local notice board.

It did not take much time before the board was full of these prints, but locals went on, and printed profiles were posted on the walls of the restaurant and houses.

In the meantime, the small village received global coverage – as the film summarizing the campaign said, "Obermütten. A little village goes global".

Illustration 11: People liking Obermütten’s Facebook page were posted on the notice board of the village, and also appeared on local houses.



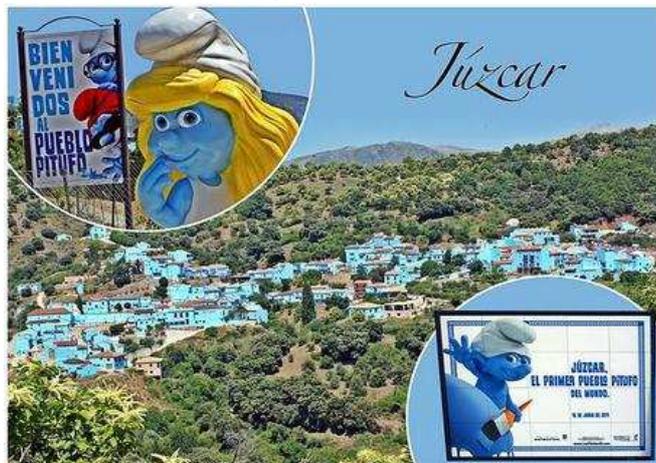
Source: http://2.bp.blogspot.com/-mDMqGYzTc6c/TsH257yckUI/AAAAAAAAABqE/Y7y991bgt_0/s1600/MPiRe+--+Obermuetten1.jpg

Within four weeks, Obermütten had fans from 32 countries from all continents. As of today, more than 60 million people have read, seen or heard something about the village, and the 10 000 Swiss Francs invested resulted in media coverage worth 2 400 000 Francs. The number of visitors on the local tourism website increased by 250%, and several tourists actually appeared in the village with 78 souls to see where their Facebook profiles had been posted. (JUNG VON MATT / LIMMAT 2011)

In the case of Júzcar, a village in Southern Spain, they did not only produce a viral film, but also repainted the settlement with a completely new colour. Walls that had been white became Smurf blue. Why that specific colour? Of course the reason was the Smurfs series, and, especially, the 3D movie released in 2012. A significant characteristic of the movie campaign was that it did not only use traditional advertisements to draw attention, but also involved alternative tools. The Smurf-blue village was perfect for that purpose.

When the campaign was over, and the contract of the village expired, it was obvious that the village would be restored to its original state, and buildings would be painted white again. However though, they soon realized that their Smurf blue state was a distinguishing characteristic that would attract tourists to the village, even for a lunch or a cup of coffee. Therefore they decided to hold a referendum, and the village with 211 inhabitants decided to keep the Smurf-blue colour. (THE INDEPENDENT 2011)

Illustration 12: Júzcar, the first "Smurf-blue" settlement



Source: <http://m5.paperblog.com/i/11/117440/juzcar-the-first-smurf-village-in-the-world-L-OfGiAJ.jpeg>

Another settlement, Agira in Sicily did not become famous because of films, but a fashion outlet that opened near Agira and also dressed locals. Later on, special characters and their style have become famous via the Internet.

Illustration 13: Agira, the fashion village in Sicily



Source: http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_Y2_WLZ83A5I/TNwBTaw4XRI/AAAAAAAAEQw/5B4pwWkEyhs/s1600/1.jpg

However, the examples presented in this chapter show that the success of a virus video may be significantly greater if there is a real change in the city. This does not only make it a subject of discussion, but also creates motivation to visit it as a tourist.

5. Controversial viruses: regarded as both good and bad

The interesting thing is, if we are looking for the first country image viral video, we will probably find out that Israel was the first country to produce one. The video became popular before the Youtube era, not even mentioning Facebook – it mostly spread as an email attachment.

In the advertisement two American guys rest at a Tel Aviv seaside and look at the beautiful girls at the seaside with an astonished look. They drool over the beauties and comment on the sight: "Holy shit man! Holy fuck! Holy Jesus! Holy mother of God!". Then one of the girls accidentally hits the ball in front of the boys' feet, and goes for it in slow motion. The boys' faces shine with joy when the bikini bombshell bends down for the ball and smiles at them. At the climax of the spot, when the camera is focusing on the back of the girl, the slogan "Israel. No wonder they call it the Holy Land." appears.

Another film features guys playing soccer on the seashore. However, they sometimes goggle at the bombshell ladies bathing nearby in the sea. There is only one boy complaining that they should concentrate on the game, not women. Then he also goggles as a bathing person he likes is coming out of the sea – and it is a man. The slogan for the spot is "Israel – No wonder we didn't make it to the world cup."

Many people protested against the outrageous videos in Israel and around the world, criticizing the board of tourism for spending money on campaigns like this. At the same time it is a fact that free associations about Israel had included Jews, Judaism, conflict, terrorism, bombings, suicide attackers, desert, high-tech, Holocaust, the land of the Bible, Jerusalem and Jesus, and these advertisements showed a completely new – and realistic – side of the country. (See PAPP-VÁRY AND GYÉMÁNT, 2010)

Illustration 14: The viral videos about Israel shocked many people, but, on the positive side, also shaded the existing image of the country with new associations



Source: <http://img534.imageshack.us/img534/4571/funnycommercialvideos.jpg>

Denmark, if possible, even went further than Israel, although the first impression was not that – they did not show scantily dressed ladies, but a blond beauty called Karen, holding a baby in her arms. Then the woman told that about a year ago she was on the way home from a bar in the night, when she met a man who could not find his buddies, and somehow they ended up in her apartment. Karen does not know the name and origin of the man, and does not blame him for anything, but would like to let him know that he has a child in Denmark. Moreover, she added that she is not a swindler, and is sure that the father of the child is this man as she has not had a relationship with anyone else since then.

This video of Karen holding her baby soon swept through online communities and social media. According to Wikipedia, at least 700 thousand people viewed it online, and we must add that classical media also covered it as a newsworthy piece. (WIKIPEDIA VISIT DENMARK 2012)

A response video was also produced, with a bucktooth person saying that he does remember Karen, but he has also had similar experiences with several other girls, and all of them said that "she is not like that". Then it turned out that the response video was also produced by Mind Jumpers Social Media Group, the advertising agency creating the original.

Illustration 15: In a viral video by Visit Denmark, a Danish lady is looking for the father of her child



Source: http://anonymusradioshow.files.wordpress.com/2009/09/danish_tourism_video.jpg?w=270&h=209

The woman impersonating Karen was also invited to a Danish TV show, where she confessed that this was only a funny viral video with the aim of increasing the number of visitors on the visitdenmark.com website and in Denmark itself.

Of course the creators of the viral video received a wide variety of comments. Many people wrote that it was a great idea and they had fun watching it, but others noted with indignation that it is not lucky to depict Denmark as the country of one-night stands.

According to a statement by a VisitDenmark representative, the film features a woman who lives in a free society, and takes responsibility for her actions and the consequences using the tools of modern media (social media). Therefore the story suggests that Denmark is a free country, where we can do whatever we want...

Summary and advice for tourism marketing professionals

The above examples prove that the transfer of viral videos promoting places involves aspects that are similar to other marketing cases. Videos that reach a wide audience are unusual, cheeky, provocative, intelligent, interactive and creative. They are just good.

At the same time, there is another interesting fact: the most successful cases are ones that are justified by some actual change, country branding, city branding, or village branding concept. The greatest examples include "The Best Job in the World" at Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Júczar in Spain, Agira in Sicily, or Obermitten in Switzerland.

The reader might think that international examples have nothing to do with local challenges, but consider that every joke is new for a newborn.

If this is the first time you see these advertisements, there are probably many people in your environment or country who also have not met them before.

Therefore it might be useful to consider how to adapt the ideas presented. In other words, consider how your settlement/country could:

- ⇒ Demonstrate that it has the best job in the world or the country. (Or what would be that best job there?)
- ⇒ Emphasize that it is a more fun and vibrant place than other people think (if they have any opinion about the settlement/country at all).
- ⇒ Gather facts and statistical information about the place or country. What is the most unique characteristic with an indicator much lower or higher than in the case of other cities or countries?
- ⇒ Present the settlement/country in a film in a way that – let's say – someone is dancing in front of famous local sights. How would you convince a great number of locals to perform some kind of dance together? (This could be really newsworthy.)
- ⇒ Create a different kind of a tourism campaign that could present the unique features of the place/city with the help of people living there, the locals.
- ⇒ Convince Facebook users to "like" your place on the platform, and engage in conversations about it.
- ⇒ Paint the houses of the city or village to a special colour that would distinguish it from other villages, cities.
- ⇒ Dress locals in trendy clothes, and make the settlement the trendiest place in the country.
- ⇒ Find the idea that could actually "shock" the viewers of the video, but at the same time would introduce to the public some new aspect of the city/country.

Raise several further questions like these, and do not forget that sometimes silliest questions make the best ideas. We could also say that "there are no stupid questions".

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