



Viral Branding

By Angelo Biasi, General Manager of
SMART Marketing Solutions, LLC
(abiasi@smartmarketingllc.com, 239.963.9396)

The Black Dog

I recently vacationed in Martha's Vineyard where it was hard not to notice the proliferation of local brands in and around the area. One brand stood out most prominently. Nearly all tourists' SUVs, beat up island cars and other moving vehicles donned little round white stickers with a black dog in the middle. Throughout the various towns and beaches, shirts, totes, hats, and even flip-flops, to name a few items, were also spotted with that same black dog logo. In addition, just about any other merchandise you could think of, including but not limited to, cookbooks, toys, housewares, dog stuff, etc., was available for sale. And, yes, each had the same black dog logo. Most notably, there were two tall sailing ships in the Martha's Vineyard harbor that had large Black Dog flags on their masts as if to say "welcome all" to "Black Dog brand area" as tourists arrived via ferry; the dominant way in and out of the island for the masses. In summary, the black dog brand was everywhere, and it was cool.

All this merchandise running around town and then back to tourists' originating destinations came from one of the several of the island's Black Dog establishments; The Black Dog Tavern, The Black Dog Bakery, and of course several The Black Dog retail stores. The surprising part is that instead of being the geologically appropriated animal/emblem of Martha's Vineyard, the Black Dog is instead a commercial brand of a local business that dates back not that long ago, to 1971...

The original Black Dog started as a restaurant and tavern that became well known for its souvenir T-shirts, featuring its logo of the eponymous black dog. It subsequently expanded to sell other products with the same logo and got popular when well known celebrities including Bill Clinton, were seen wearing it in the 1990's. The brilliant marketing story goes on that in the early 1990's merchandise was only sold at one store and a limited number of people were allowed in at one time which created extensive demand and lines formed outside. While waiting in line, visitors were given catalogs to browse and shop increasing efficiencies when then entered the store. The Black Dog expanded to other locations in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, Maine, and Maryland, and put the logo on just about anything a New England tourist and local could buy, and the rest is history. Even though other local establishments have followed suit (i.e. The Menemsha Blues fish logo, The Vineyard Vines whale logo and several local shops including Mocha Mott's coffee with its bald head sticker that kids can color in and end up on their parent's cars and tourist cargo carriers that travel the world), The Black Dog has come to represent the New England-y vacation-laid-back lifestyle to some extent and continues to grow as more and more customers buy stuff with the logo, wear it, stick it, carry it and support it.

As a marketing guy, the whole Black Dog branding phenomenon thing astounds me. You see all the customers who publically use the branded products or choose to display their allegiance with those little white stickers are essentially advertising the brand to their network of friends, family and those who they come in contact with. It's truly a **brand gone viral!**

connecting you to a world of good business



Viral Branding

There's no doubt that when a customer latches onto your brand and is so willing to promote it to their own networks, that the reach and impact can be exponential. For example, just the Black Dog sticker on our Volvo was seen by approximately 250 - 1000 cars on our drive back to Florida. In addition, brands that go viral create amazing efficiencies. I actually paid for my Black Dog sticker and now I'm advertising their brand to my network and others at no cost to the brand. As a marketing guy, I have an issue with this. As a family guy who had a great vacation and thinks the logo is cool and represents a good feeling/memory, I'm proud to have it remind me of that with my public display.

There are a few other examples of successful viral brands. A few that immediately come to mind include: Life is Good, Nike and Harley Davidson. Harley Davidson is interesting in that several of the company's customers choose to tattoo the brand on their own skin; heck, you can't beat that permanent advertising.

How to Create Your Own Viral Brand

Following are a few suggestions to to create your own viral brand:

1. **Coolness Factor:** Start with a cool logo, tagline, single word or brand that will draw attention, curiosity and/or interest from your target audience. Think creatively beyond your own name or logo. For example, my company name is Smart Marketing Solutions. We pride ourselves on being marketing nerds (it's on my home page). The actual word "nerd" and images that describe nerds (i.e. pocket protectors, spaz glasses, etc.) can actually be cool if presented properly.
2. **A Picture Paints a Thousand Words (and Reaches A Thousand New Potential Customers):** Customers love to see themselves in a picture. Furthermore, they are more inclined to post it on their own social media and send to their hundreds or thousands of friends. For example, there's a great new waterfront restaurant in Bonita Sprints called Coconut Jacks. Outside the front entrance (while you're waiting for a table; as it's usually packed) is an unusually large chair with the Coconut Jacks logo painted on it. On our last visit, my five year olds wanted to sit 'in the chair.' My wife inevitably had to take a picture and there it was the next day on both of our Facebook walls, getting comments and exposing Coconut Jacks to hundreds within our own network. Cost to the brand = \$0!
3. **Encourage Usage:** Give something away for free. Think of who your target audience is and how your brand can be most exposed to them. The Boston Beer Garden recently gave away beer cozies that say something to the effect of "This was stolen from the Boston Beer Garden." I recently saw a Facebook post from a friend of simply the beer cozy with a beer in it. Once again advertising that cost the brand minimally yet the exposure and reach gained were exponential.
4. **Do Something Extraordinary or Extreme:** Have an event or solicit a celebrity to use your product/service or brand. Promote that indefinitely. I attend several music industry trade shows for the magazine I co-own called In Tune (In Tune is a textbook for young musicians in grades 7 – 12, and their teachers –



www.intunemonthly.com). At each of the trade shows and through my own connections I have the opportunity to pose with famous artists. Each time I do so, I try to get them to pose with an issue of the magazine. Knowing that those celebrities have greater appeal than myself, I understand that there is greater chance for that image to get posted on fans and magazine subscribers' walls (i.e. even in music classrooms) at any given time.

Creating a viral brand is not difficult yet locking into one that has mass appeal and traction can be. Try out a few different ideas and see if anything sticks. Who knows, your brand could be the next Black Dog and solve all your marketing challenges at no expense to you!

About the Author

Angelo Biasi is General Manager of SMART Marketing Solutions, LLC, a leading full-service integrated marketing company in Florida and New York since 2001. He has helped create and execute marketing plans and integrated marketing solutions for companies such as Playtex, Bic, Rogaine, Tauck, and over 35 colleges and universities, to name a few. Angelo has an MBA in Marketing from the University of Connecticut and teaches Marketing at New York University where he has for over six years. He has been quoted and/or featured in USA Today, Mobile Marketer magazine, Mobile Commerce Daily, Luxury Marketing magazine, BNET TV and Business Currents magazine, to name a few. For more information or to learn more, email him at abiasi@smartmarketingllc.com, visit www.smartmarketingllc.com, call him at 239.963.9396 and follow him on Twitter [@angbiasi](https://twitter.com/angbiasi).