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Viral Online Content and the College Market Using RateMyProfessors.com and HowsTheLiving.com as Case Studies

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Chancellor's Honors and Haslam Scholars Program

Senior Honors Thesis

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Spring 2012

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Viral Online Content and the College Market
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I. Introduction

The overall purpose of this paper is to determine what makes online content go viral. We will discuss the definition of viral and will base our discussion on two types of online content: "general online content" and "websites operated by a company." *Figure 1* shows a visual of the framework that will be used in our discussion.[a]
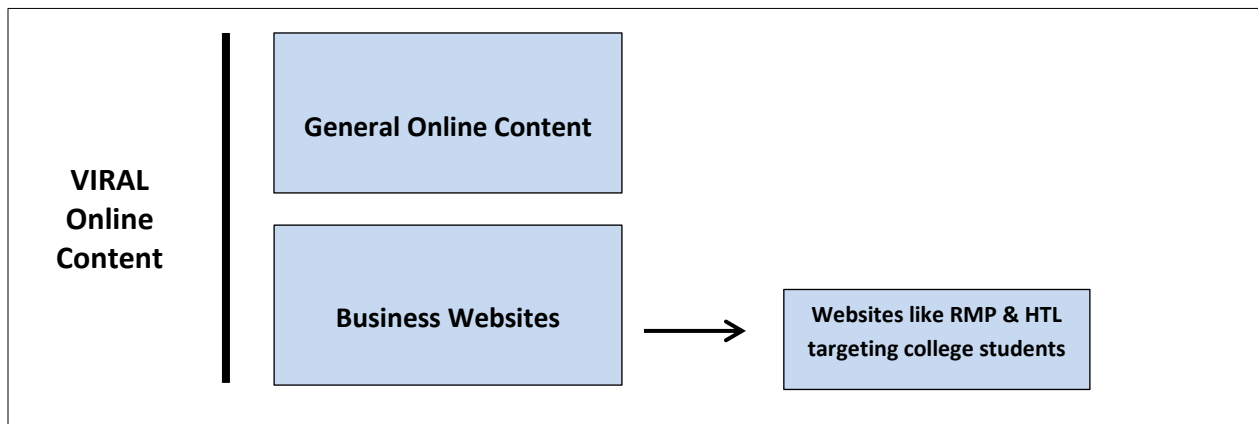

Figure 1: Types of Viral – A Framework

General online content is represented by online videos, photos, ideas, and other types of media that someone creates[b] and that usually appeals to other people's emotions. An example of viral general online content is the humorous Volkswagen commercial about "The Force,"[1] which in just one year received over 50 million views on YouTube. Business websites are websites operated by a company created for brand awareness and profit purposes. With this type, a company needs user input and work, and therefore the alignment of a website user's interests at a low cost is a key contributor to the viral growth of these websites.

Most business websites never achieve viral growth and seemingly ubiquitous brand awareness with their target markets, but there are some strategies and techniques that have helped websites achieve this type of growth and scale. An important connection between general online content and business websites is the way in which some companies use general online content such as humorous videos and other media, to redirect traffic to their websites. This technique can accelerate awareness of the website, and can help the company gain sales or whatever other type of user input or work the website is seeking to attain.

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[a] For our discussion "websites operated by a company" will also be represented by "business websites."
[b] This type of general online content is usually initially created just for fun and not for money making purposes.

Over the past two years, I started and have been managing a start-up company called How's The Living, Inc. which runs the website HowsTheLiving.com (HTL).[c] It allows college students to view and to write reviews of college housing. In this paper, I will try to uncover how websites operated by companies achieve viral user growth, but with emphasis on those companies with website functionalities and a market similar to that of HTL.

I determined that RateMyProfessors.com (RMP)[d], which allows college students to view and write reviews for college professors, was an excellent company to use as a main reference point. RMP was sold to mtvU[2], a division of Viacom's MTV Networks, for an undisclosed amount rumored to be in the tens of millions. Our discussion of business websites will focus on those that target college students with a goal of determining key factors that those websites can use to grow users by the hundreds of thousands and millions at exponential rates. It will mention specific case studies of RMP and of my own personal experiences with HTL and will focus on viral growth fundamentals, as well as strategies that rating & review websites focusing on the college market can use to go viral. Most of these fundamentals and strategies, however, will apply to products in other industries and markets.

I have spoken to many current and former founders and employees of different companies. I met with the founder of RMP in New York City to gather data about how he started and grew his company. I also spoke with Corey Cleek (co-founder and CEO at Uloop[e]), Will Overstreet (founder and CEO at Voices Heard Media[f]), and numerous other entrepreneurs and mentors. They were willing to share their personal and business experiences, including successes and failures, that have helped me better understand the processes involved in virally growing users. I have also studied dozens of web publications and multiple books relating to the concept of viral growth, which are noted in the references section. This paper will be a culmination of what I have learned about factors that help general online content and business websites go viral.

II. The Concept of Viral

The word "viral" oftentimes evokes impressions of the life sciences. But throughout the past decade the term has taken on a meaning that commonly describes a geometric growth of activity from people as they discover and spread the awareness of online content. According to the medical definition, a virus replicates exponentially and spreads through physical or non-physical contact from host to host. Similarly, a viral online offering spreads through word-of-mouth, online, or other channels from user to user based on a number of factors. Here is an example the process of viral growth of general online content.[3]

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[c] Retrieved from http://www.howstheliving.com
[d] Retrieved from http://www.ratemyprofessors.com
[e] Retrieved from http://uloop.com
[f] Retrieved from http://voicesheardmedia.com

1. Person A finds a funny photo on the web, and shares it with her friends, Person B and Person C, because she thinks they'll like it.
2. Person B and Person C both agree that it's a pretty hilarious photo, and both share it with a few of their friends.
3. The friends of Person B and Person C then share it with their friends, who share it with their friends, and so on and so forth.
4. Within a few days, the photo has been viewed by tens of thousands of people around the world.

Some things that go viral, particularly general online content, does not provide much benefit to the audience; they may be videos, pictures or other media that entertains the audience. Other viral content actually provides value to the intended audience, and companies try to create this type of content on their websites to create awareness of their products.

Most times, entrepreneurs and product evangelists whose products and services go viral figure out the "hook" that entices people to use the product or service, then to tell others about their experience in a relatively short period of time. Some examples of hooks include discounts, coupons, and educational content.[4] Still, some products go viral without much thought about a "hook" on the creator's part; some products are just *that* good and are easy to share! People just talk about them because they like them. This is called *organic* growth. On the contrary, *inorganic growth* relies on paid forms of marketing, which could include Search Engine Optimization (SEO), services such as Google Adwords, and other forms where the marketer directly pays cash to create brand awareness.

The reality is that a company can build a sustainable business without "going viral."[5] However, the lack of pure *virality* implies that a company absolutely must retain existing users to grow. In addition, viral growth is perhaps most important to companies that cannot afford to spend money on paid marketing channels, which in turn requires that the cost to acquire a user to be low. Having a free method, ideally a user-driven method with *virality* built into the product is critical to consumer web startups.[6] RMP utilized such a method by promoting controversial reviews that students posted about professors, and students helped spread conversations about these reviews. HTL attempted to leverage online videos produced through a national online contest to drive user traffic to the website.

III. Background

Since our two case study companies have a targeted niche market (college students) in a specific industry (review websites), it is important to discuss some key elements of these characteristics because they have significant impacts on viral growth strategies.

A brief history of review websites[g]

The popularity of websites providing consumer reviews culminated in the late 1990s and early 2000s, with Amazon.com and Epinions.com being two of the earlier ones.[7] Review websites are unique for a number of reasons; one of the main reasons is because they often have to overcome the "chicken-and-the-egg" issue, which basically demonstrates that they need users to gain content while simultaneously needing content to gain users. Most of the successful review websites to date have overcome this issue.

Key Characteristics of the target market (the college market)

It is important to understand the primary dynamics of a market before devising and implementing strategies for growth. Below are some of the chief characteristics of the college market that should be considered.

Seasonality. There are approximately 18 million college students in the United States.[8] Seasonality is a significant factor that companies must consider when targeting the college market. Seasonality refers to the cycle of student attendance associated with the quarters and semesters in which colleges and universities are organized. As a demonstration of seasonality, think of the time periods of summer and winter break when students are not taking classes. They are typically not as active on certain types of websites, whereas web traffic for other websites increases significantly. For example, during winter break there is an increased likelihood that students will visit online textbook purchase and rental destinations, such as Chegg.com[h] and Amazon.com,[i] and it is less likely that they will visit class note sharing websites like Studyblue.com.[j] I do not intend to over-explain this concept, but I do intend to emphasize its potential effects on visitor growth. Timing can be a key factor linked to viral growth.

The Incentivization Structure. Frankly, college students are incentivized by money and "free stuff," with food being perhaps the chief motivator. This is an important characteristic of the college market that significantly affects the rate at which websites gain exponential growth of online visitors. Granted, on some occasions the high value of the website and its content serve as a suitable incentive and no other "freebies" are needed for visitors to embrace and spread the product.

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[g] This paper uses two review websites, RateMyProfessors.com and HowsTheLiving.com as bases of comparisons to discuss strategies that can be used to achieve viral growth.
[h] Retrieved from http://www.chegg.com/
[i] Retrieved from http://www.amazon.com/
[j] Retrieved from http://www.studyblue.com/

IV. RateMyProfessors.com

RateMyProfessors.com is a review website that allows college students to view and to post reviews of professors. It was started back in 1999 with the creative spark of Michael Hussey, then a recent graduate of the University of Maine with a degree in Financial Economics. RMP branched off from a project that Michael created called the "Rate My" network. This functioned as a holding company that utilized a franchise model and that contained a portfolio of other franchises. Franchisees could utilize an online platform that Michael and his team developed to market many different types of rating sites, including concepts such as "Rate My Sunglasses" and "Rate My Furniture." In early 2000, Michael partnered with John Swapceinski, who was developing a similar concept of Ratemyprofessors.com, and they eventually teamed up to grow the website nationally and internationally. Eventually, due to the series of events leading through the early 2000's, Michael Hussey's RMP and RateMyTeachers.com emerged as two of his more popular websites. RMP was eventually sold to Patrick Nagle, then to Viacom and mtvU to become part of MTV networks.

RMP achieved viral growth. I travelled to New York City and personally visited with Michael Hussey, one of the original founders of RMP. The purpose of the trip was to understand strategies he used to grow the website to over 10 million reviews and how he helped make it the most popular destination for professor reviews on the internet, which eventually led to its multi-million dollar acquisition by mtvU.

V. HowsTheLiving.com

HowsTheLiving.com is a student housing review website started by Aeron Glover and Kaliv Parker in 2010. It allows students to view ratings and reviews and to browse on-campus and off-campus housing around universities. The website is currently in beta focusing on the University of Tennessee (UT) market. Overall, three versions of the website have been released. The three differ significantly in user interface, but the functionality stayed relatively the same: providing an online method for students to view and post reviews of student housing.

Two key constraints affecting HTL's growth has been the founders' lack of industry experience and time to test strategies. However, with the correct set of personnel and strategies in place, the company has potential to achieve viral growth. The end of our discussion will focus on such strategies.

VI. Mathematical Analysis of the Concept of Viral

There is a mathematical expression that helps represent the process of viral growth. It can be used to describe the viral spread of both general online content and of business website online traffic. It was developed partly by David Skok, a venture capitalist and former entrepreneur. Two key components that drive viral growth are the viral coefficient (K) and the viral cycle time (cyct).[9] The mathematical expression was derived primarily by Stan Reiss, a general partner at the venture capital firm Matrix Partners. It is represented below:

$$v(t) = v_o * \frac{K^{(\frac{t}{cyct}+1)} - 1}{K - 1}$$

where,

$v(t)$ = total number of end visitors
v_o = initial number of visitors at time = 0
K = viral coefficient
t = time[k]
cyct = viral cycle time

One of the main purposes of this section is to discuss and demonstrate the effects of the viral coefficient (K) and viral cycle time (cyct) on the number of visitors, v(t).

The viral coefficient (K)

Thinking back to when RMP first started, there were an initial number of students who heard about the website and who used it. So they were the first website visitors and they started to invite their friends to visit the website, then these friends invited more friends, and the cycle continued until the campus was saturated with students who used the website. With this framework K is represented mathematically by the following expression:

$$K = invites * conv$$

where,

invites = number of invites sent out by each new visitor
conv = percentage of invites that convert[l] into actual visitors

K represents the actual number of students that each existing visitor is able to convert. Think of K this way: for every visitor that comes to the website, he or she refers an additional visitor or multiple visitors, and this improves the chances that the number of visitors of the website will "hockey stick."[10]

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[k] This paper uses days as the unit for time, t. However, in viral growth models any time unit can be used.
[l] In the context of our discussion, "convert" means to "become a visitor of the general online content or business website."

Now we will see how K affects the number of visitors RMP would attain as we go through our first cycle of viral "infection." Using RMP as our basis for analysis, suppose the information below is true:

Variable Name	Description	Example Value
v(0)	Initial number of visitors	10
invites	Number of invites sent out by each existing visitor	15
conv	Percentage of invites that convert into new visitors	20%

Table 1: Variable Values for the Viral Growth Model

Here, we have assumed that the initial 10 students will each send out 15 invitations, where 20%[m] of these (or 3 students each) will visit RMP. So the new number of visitors after the first cycle will equal the initial 10, plus the additional 30, for a total of 40.

At this point, we will take a look at our model, and we will also include subsequent cycles following the initial cycle.

Using the following conditions,

Variable	Description	Value
v(0)	Initial number of visitors	10
invites	Number of invites sent out by each existing visitor	15
conv	Percentage of invites that convert into new visitors	20%
K	The viral coefficient (invites*conv)	3
v(t)	Total number of end visitors	Shown in *Table 3*

Table 2: Initial Conditions with K>1

We have the following model:

Cycle	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
v(0)	10	40	130	400	1,210	3,640	10,930	32,800	98,410	295,240
invites	150	450	1350	4,050	12,150	36,450	109,350	328,050	984,150	2,952,450
conv	30	90	270	810	2,430	7,290	21,870	65,610	196,830	590,490
v(t)	**40**	**130**	**400**	**1,210**	**3,640**	**10,930**	**32,800**	**98,410**	**295,240**	**885,730**

Table 3: Viral Growth Model with K>1

With each cycle, only the "Conversions to New Visitors (invites*conv)" send out the invitations that result in the acquisition of new visitors for the subsequent cycle. For example, the 90 new visitors in Cycle 2 each sent out 15 invites, for a total of 1350 invites at a 20% conversion rate which resulted in the 270 conversions to new visitors (conv) shown in Cycle 3. This process was taken because it is unlikely that the entire population of visitors will continue to send out invitations in every cycle.

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[m] Here, we have taken 20% as an arbitrary conversion percentage which represents the percentage of students that convert after receiving invites from an initial student.
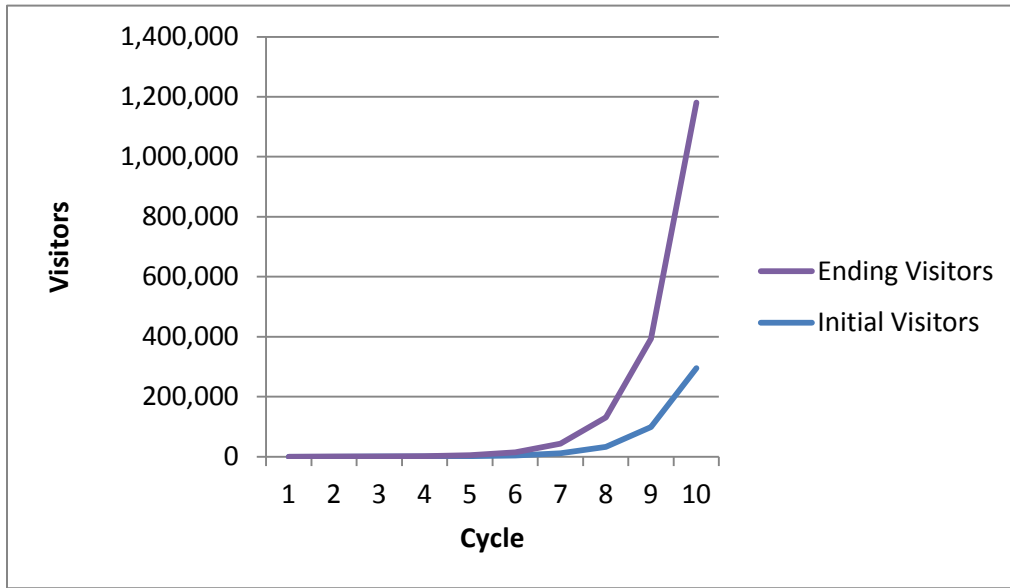
The data from *Table 3* is plotted below:

Figure 2: Viral Growth Model with K>1

<u>The viral coefficient must be greater than one.</u> *Table 4* and *Table 5* below demonstrate some important characteristics and consequences of the viral coefficient. In order to demonstrate the effect of having a viral coefficient less than one, we have changed the conversion percentage to 5% while keeping all other parameters constant. These figures demonstrate that, in order to achieve viral growth, the viral coefficient must be greater than 1.[n] In Figure 3, as each new cycle starts, the percentage increase in visitors per cycle decreases and eventually becomes zero.

Using the following conditions,

Variable	Description	Value
v(0)	Initial number of visitors	10
invites	Number of invites sent out by each existing visitor	15
conv	Percentage of invites that convert into new visitors	5%
K	The Viral Coefficient (invites*conv)	0.75
v(t)	Total number of end visitors	Shown in *Table 5*

Table 4: Initial Conditions with K<1

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[n] To get a viral coefficient (K) of less than 1, we could have decreased either the conversion percentage or the number of invites, since K is determined by the product (invites)*(conv). In *Figure 3* and *Figure 4*, we used 5% as the conversion rate, but any arbitrary conversion percentage that causes the viral coefficient to be less than 1 will adequately demonstrate this point.

We have the following model:

Cycle	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
v(0)	10	17.5	23	27	31	33	35	36	37	38
invites	150	112.5	84	63	47	36	27	20	15	11
conv	7.5	6	4	3	2	2	1	1	1	1
v(t)	**17.5**	**23**	**27**	**31**	**33**	**35**	**36**	**37**	**38**	**38**

Table 5: Viral Growth Model with K<1

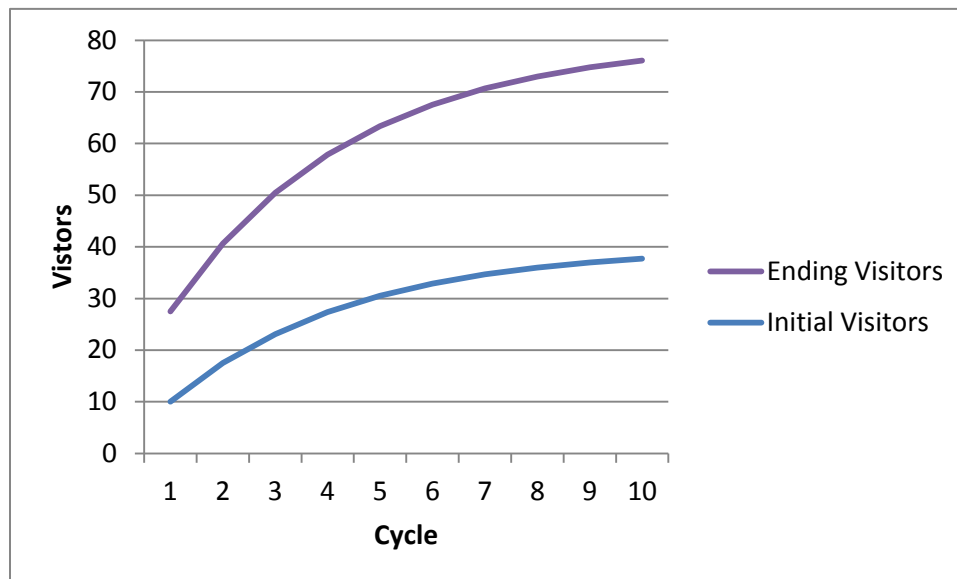The data from *Table 4 and Table 5* is plotted below

Figure 3: Viral Growth Model with K < 1

The viral cycle time

Until now, we have primarily discussed the importance of the viral coefficient, but as can be inferred from the model, the time between cycles is also very important. A high viral coefficient in the absence of relatively short viral cycle times will decrease the chances of viral growth. Whether it takes a matter of minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, etc. for a new visitor to invite more visitors and for those visitors to convert will significantly affect how viral the product becomes.

The example mentioned earlier in the discussion, about Person A sharing a photo with Person B, and the ripple effect that ensued, in fact, demonstrated the viral cycle time. *Figure 4* shows a graphical explanation.
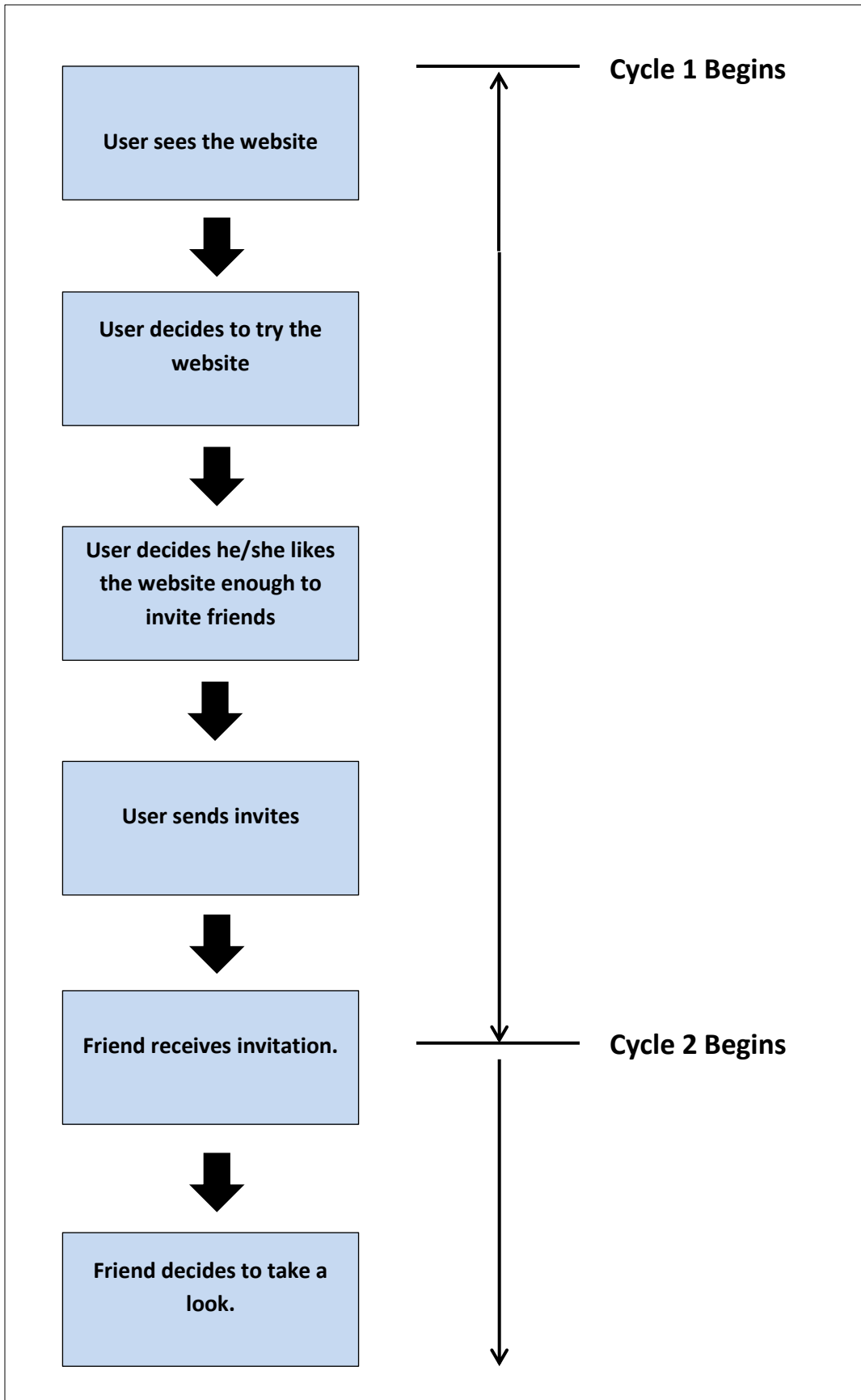
Figure 4: Graphical Representation of Viral Cycle Time

Table 5 and Table 6 demonstrate the effect the viral cycle time has on the number of end visitors. For the sake of demonstrating viral growth, it is assumed that the viral coefficient is greater than one.

Using the following conditions,

Variable	Description	Value
v(0)	Initial number of visitors	10
invites	Number of invites sent out by each existing visitor	15
conv	Percentage of invites that convert into new visitors	20%
K	The Viral Coefficient (invites*conv)	3
cyct	The Viral Cycle Time (weeks)	Shown in *Table 6*
v(t)	Total number of end visitors	Shown in *Table 6*

Table 5: Initial Conditions for Viral Cycle Time Model

We have the following model:

Time Passed (t) in Weeks		0	5	10	15	20
Viral Cycle Times (cyct) in Weeks	1	10	3,640	885,730	215,233,600	52,301,766,010
	2	10	229	3,640	56,815	885,730
	5	10	40	130	400	1,210
	10	10	21	40	73	130
	20	10	15	21	29	40
	40	10	12	15	18	21
	80	10	11	12	13	15
	100	10	11	12	13	14

Table 6: The effect of varying the viral cycle time

By inspection of this model, one can see that the cycle time, cyct, has a significant effect on the number of end visitors. For example, after 10 weeks with a cycle time of two weeks, you will have 3,640 visitors, but if you halved that cycle time to one week, you would have nearly 885,730 visitors!

Key takeaways

- The viral coefficient (K) must be greater than 1 and is absolutely essential if the goal is viral growth.
- The viral cycle Time (cyct) is mathematically the most important factor and it should be as short as possible.
- Increase the number of invitations sent out and the conversion rate as much as possible. This will increase the viral coefficient (K).
- The initial set of visitors at time = 0 is important despite its non-geometric relationship in the viral model.

VII. How RMP went Viral

The website was easy to use, intuitive, and unique

RMP created an environment that encouraged students to tell their friends about it. As mentioned by Michael Hussey, "RMP was inherently social and unique. There was nothing else like it at the time."[11] Students wanted to help other students, and some students even wanted to "get even" with a professor. In addition, the process to post a review was simple and as a result the concept spread throughout campuses. Note, RMP dawned before the huge web 2.0 and social media movement that started in the mid 2000's and that continues to grow today. However, the "social" element of RMP was embedded in its social benefits. "Students were encouraged to share the website because, essentially, the website helped students. It made their lives easier."[12] People who rated would want to show their friends and there was nothing else like it at the time.

Website visitors were not required to create an account and login to use the website (ease of access)

Visitors could view the information on the website and could post reviews without sharing their personal information. With this requirement removed from the website, however, there needed to be a reasonable number of "moderators" to ensure that the reviews were not out of scope with RMP's mission.° Companies often have to hire staff to do this task but RMP figured out a way to get this done for free, which leads directly into our next key success factor.

Thousands of volunteers as moderators over the content

The staff at RMP had free content development and content moderation, which helped them achieve online visitor growth with low user acquisition costs. So basically they had "volunteer employees" stationed at each operating university helping to generate buzz on campus and to grow brand awareness of the product. This helped them grow and scale without high capital costs while simultaneously utilizing faces familiar to their online visitors on campuses to decrease the viral cycle time in each of the markets.

Finding the initial "instigators" at each university to provide the spark

RMP introduced students to a relatively new concept, and because of that it was not difficult to get a small group of students at each university in which they operated excited, and to become volunteers. Back in the late 90s and early 2000s online commerce, online social interaction, and user generated content communities were still quite new, and these initial brand ambassadors accelerated the organic growth of the website.

° This element of RMP's strategy, not requiring visitors to create an account, also caused people to question the authenticity and integrity of the reviews, since anyone could post reviews as many times as they wanted without having to login.

VIII. How HTL can go Viral

These strategies will be grounded on the conclusions drawn from our analysis of the mathematical viral growth models, namely *increasing* the viral coefficient and *decreasing* the viral cycle time at low costs and ultimately in the most economical ways. We should also keep in mind the different types of online content on which we are basing our discussion: general online content and business websites. HTL and RMP fit into the latter category of course.

One of the most significant trends is when business websites create and distribute general online content around the web to redirect traffic back to the website. HTL's viral growth strategies are framed from this perspective, with attention specifically on the distribution of general online content and the website viral features and functionalities. In later sections of this paper, we will discuss current key trends that affect HTL's viral growth strategy.[p]

Viral growth strategies - leveraging general online content

Produce different types of general online content to redirect traffic to the website.[13] Generally, video content is considered one of the types of content most likely to go viral on the internet. However, there are others, such as blog posts, controversial articles, and interactive content like games, quizzes, and widgets. HTL can generate such content, stream it through high traffic online channels[q] and measure the content's effectiveness in redirecting visitors to the website. The content should be hosted on HTL and would essentially be "super savvy ads."[14] The ultimate goal of these types of campaigns is to use the content to lure people to the website, and for them to browse housing listings and post reviews. To increase the chances of this content going viral, it should "make people feel something." Examples of *how* this can be done is shown below:

- The content is funny (people want breaks and mood elevators)
- The content is incredible or unbelievable
- The content is deeply emotional

Visitors need to be able to pass along this content with absolute ease, which leads directly into our next section.

Viral growth strategies - leveraging the functionality of the website

A website's design and ease of use cannot be emphasized enough when analyzing factors that affect viral growth. Granted, producing and distributing great online video, blog, or other content is great, but the user interface of the website that the visitor is redirected to is equally, if not more, important. In this section, we discuss areas in which HTL should focus in order to increase the chances of the website going viral.

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[p] RMP grew prior to most of these trends became mainstream in the consumer internet industry.
[q] Primarily social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube

Clearly define the website's "call to action." Every business website has some ultimate "thing" that it wants visitors to do. For example, Amazon.com[r] wants visitors to browse and purchase items and NewYorkTimes.com[s] wants visitors to read and share articles. RMP wants students to browse and post reviews of their professors and similarly HTL wants students to browse and post reviews of student housing. HTL should make sure that this action is spelled out on every page. It can be taken care of it with a widget on the sidebar, or maybe by popup,[15] but the main goal here is to get the message to visitor, and to make sure they know what HTL wants them to do when they enter the site.

Ensure that visitors can easily share posts on the website. This can be done by ensuring that users can easily share the website links and videos by including easy-to-use social sharing buttons for the major social sites. It is important not to clutter the site with share buttons everywhere, while making it easy for users to find and access them. If the Twitter and Facebook share buttons are hidden away down at the bottom of the pages, it is not likely that viewers will find them. Likewise, the buttons should not only appear at the top of the post, because users may not scroll back up after viewing the website. And visitors should be able to embed, email, download, bookmark, and link to the website content in just a couple of clicks.

In order to build traffic with viral marketing for HTL, everyone and anyone needs to be able to see the content, even if they are not students at a university. Understandably, it is tempting to restrict access to a website.[16] Earlier versions of HTL restricted access to the profile pages of housing to only those who created a user account. From our website analytics, we eventually learned that this was significantly inhibiting the growth of the website, so we changed it immediately. Potentially viral content should not require visitors to register, login, download plugins, make a purchase, or do anything else that could potentially turn them off from viewing the content. HTL's viral content is a marketing tool, and the process for sharing the content should be as easy as possible.

Ensure review content has value and focus on website utility. One of HTL's greatest content assets is its reviews and HTL should heavily promote this content. But before the heavy promotion occurs, it is first imperative to filter and curate the content using scalable, efficient, and cost-effective processes. RMP had communities of students at the universities that were listed on the website to flag inappropriate posts and otherwise alert RMP admins about content that would likely degrade its perceived value. In addition to great, relevant content HTL should simplify the website's user interface to better encourage visitors to invite others, which will hopefully increase the viral coefficient.

Lower user acquisition costs. Some of the most successful and fastest growing startups figured out how to grow at minimal financial cost to the business. In addition, lowering the user acquisition cost decreases the chances of the company failing.[17] It is difficult for a company operating a business website to go viral if the costs to operate exceed the financial and human resources to grow! Therefore, it is vital for HTL to do this as well.

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[r] Retrieved from http://www.amazon.com/
[s] Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/

Integrate incentivization features on the website. These types of strategies will help increase the chances that visitors of HTL will tell their friends about the website. An example strategy is if HTL could run campaigns that donate money or resources to charities if it gets a certain number of shares on the reviews or other content on the website.[18] There are numerous different ways to build these types of features into the product, but the main point is to make it enticing to visitors and not too expensive to implement.

Additional thoughts and strategies

Increase product entrance points. HTL should provide visitors multiple channels to use the product, and this includes through mobile apps, text messaging integrations, and of course online through PC's and other computers. When we think of a product going viral, we often envision users being able to discover the product or online service through more than one medium, and this quality consequently helps a product grow viral at a faster rate.

Gain distribution through a strategic partner. HTL has a grand opportunity to collaborate with different organizations to help spread the awareness of the product. University housing departments and off-campus student housing real estate companies are two prime examples. If HTL can adequately convey its value proposition to these two groups, then they will provide expansive channels that can be used to bring awareness of HTL to students.

Determine core focus: revenue or eyeballs. Over the past few years there have been numerous consumer internet and mobile startups to get acquired by larger technology organizations primarily on the basis of their large number of registered members (eyeballs.) Many of these companies had earned zero or very near-zero revenue prior to their acquisitions. Therefore, to better execute a viral campaign, HTL should determine its balance between revenue and eyeballs; namely, HTL should determine what is most important because this will greatly affect the types of campaigns that HTL will host.

High Search Engine Optimization (SEO) rankings for housing names. Michael Hussey from RMP heavily emphasized this milestone. His reasoning was that the opportunity to rank high in search results for keywords associated with student housing buildings is significant. Students often resort to simple and fast web searches when looking for places to live and oftentimes SEO is overlooked.

Key Trends affecting HTL

Web 2.0 The age of social sharing and user generated is upon us. We see all the buttons on webpages that enable us to share articles and content. Some of the popular buttons are:

- Facebook's Like Button
- Twitter's Tweet Button
- Google's +1

These sharing mechanisms help online content spread fast. Early on, RMP did not rely heavily on social sharing, chiefly because the huge web. 2.0 and social media movement didn't take full swing until 4-5 years after the company's initial conception. HTL, on the other hand, has significant opportunity to

leverage these features to increase the viral effect. Both RMP and HTL are naturally dependent on user generated content just by virtue of the nature of review websites: Users read and gain value from comments posted by other users. A balanced mix of great content and social sharing will enable most companies to achieve a significant boost in their brand awareness amongst users.

Mobile. One of my mentors told me "If you're not mobile, you're dead!" He was referring specifically about HTL, but more generally about internet companies. The dynamic abilities of the smartphone has changed it from a device with physical buttons that were used exclusively for making phone calls to an advanced computer that essentially serves as an all-in-one, comprehensive communication and organization solution. Mobile companies increase their chances of *virality* by minimizing users' barriers to interacting with the product and by creating additional distribution channels to reach the end consumer. Below, some of these core channels are outlined.

- Mobile applications (apps) are perhaps the shining knights of smartphones. Oftentimes, they are simplified versions of the company's actual website (as it would appear on a laptop or desktop) that focus on the core elements and functionalities of the website.[19] They can be obtained from app marketplaces.
- Mobile websites (mobile web) are also optimized versions of the websites. But they do not have to be obtained from an app marketplace. They are usually less expensive to make than a mobile app and users access the mobile website by simply using the web browser on their phones. A notable benefit of a mobile website over using the company's regular website in the browser is that a user does not have to scroll horizontally to view content.

IX. Conclusion

Frankly, there are no shortcuts to viral growth– companies operating business websites just have to plug away at it until they find their own unique angle that resonates with the masses, and creators of general online content just have to create something that plays towards people's emotions.[20] To get viral growth, companies have to work to perfect a soft onboarding of *virality* that is based on high engagement, and have to create a product that people love and will come back to, while layering viral techniques on top of that.[21] The content is also key. The more interesting, useful, and entertaining the content, the further and faster it is likely to spread.[22]

Also, here is an important point – companies and other creators of general online content cannot *make* their online content go viral. They can hope for it, they can position the content to be at its best and most interesting with the underlying wish that it will catch on, and they can build features into it that help increase the viral coefficient and that decreases the viral cycle time, but they cannot *make* it go viral. At the most, as Ann Handley and C.C. Chapman explain in their book Content Rules, they can "nudge, poke, and pray for it, but the truth is that viral is largely a happy accident." So, it is important to increase the viral nature of the content by concentrating fully on making it compelling, at the top of its niche, interesting, funny, moving, and definitely something able to resonate with a lot of readers or viewers. They must accept that it will be their audience who makes the ultimate decision on the content's "viral worthiness."[23]

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