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From Spam to Viral Web Video With John Cleese by Ted Page

May 3, 2005

This is a behind-the scenes story that reveals how one B2B marketer used a lot of silliness to increase its Web traffic tenfold and generate thousands of sales leads.

Picture a modern restaurant full of Vikings. A customer asks the waitress for the daily specials. She responds with an endless list of dishes, all of which are made with Spam. The more the waitress mentions this salty canned-meat product, the more the Vikings break out with chants of "Spam, Spam, Spam, Spam...."

This, of course, is the classic Monty Python sketch from the 1970s and the origin of the term "spam" as applied to unwanted emails that simply won't go away.

Interestingly, one of the architects of the original Monty Python Spam skit has recently engaged in a new form of Web marketing that, unlike Spam, people actually seek out and savor. Monty Python member John Cleese is now appearing on the Internet in a wildly popular comedy video created to draw IT managers to the Web site of a company called Live Vault (www.LiveVault.com.)

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Live Vault, a maker of disk-based data backup solutions, needed to make a splash in the market with a new product launch. Its independent marketing consultant, Jeff Weiner, had a solution. Make such a funny video starring John Cleese that viewers would tell their friends to go see it at the company's Web site. A small number of print ads and Web banners would help get the video launched, but after that it would, as they say, "go viral" and spread by word of mouth. In a moment of insanity, Live Vault agreed to do it.

And "go viral" it did.

The end results were what Mr. Cleese would have introduced by saying, "And now, for something completely different." Buzz in the industry. Dozens of blogs linking to Live Vault's site. Over 100,000 views of the video within six weeks. Web traffic that increased by a factor of ten. And thousands of sales leads generated.

How did this viral phenomenon go from wacky idea to revenue-generating success?

To learn how it happened, you have to get into the minds of Doug Feinburg, Fred Surr and yours truly (Ted Page)—something that should not be undertaken by the faint of heart! Doug's company, Thunder Sky Pictures, was hired by Weiner to produce the Cleese video. Doug, in turn, called on Fred and me to write and direct it.

In a meeting that involved too much coffee and lots of bad jokes, we came up with THE BIG IDEA. Cleese would play the part of Dr. Harold Twain Weck, director of the Institute for Backup Trauma. In the video, viewable only on Live Vault's site, Dr. Twain Weck would guide people through a tour of the Institute, where hapless IT managers suffering from Back-Up trauma are "treated" with a variety of unorthodox (and entirely ineffectual) remedies.

Because this was, of course, a B2B project, the plot was based on Live Vault's actual marketing strategy. The Back-up Trauma "victims" suffered their fate because they relied on out-of-date, tape-based backup systems that frequently fail.

The challenge with Web video is to make something that's not only really funny but also has your marketing messages built-in. People should get your selling points as part of the entertainment. With Web video, the humor can be tailored to a very specific audience. For the Live Vault video, for instance, we needed a piece of entertainment that would seem hysterical to IT managers.

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Therein lies much of the benefit to marketers seeking a better way to reach their niche B2B audience: They can pull in visitors who are actually interested in their product, and they can do it without the level of ad spending required for a traditional campaign.

In effect, Web video helps transform corporate Web sites into TV channels. Why pay CNN to run your commercial? It's incredibly expensive, and most of the people who see it won't care about your product. With a viral video approach, you can pull in just the people you want to your site, without spending a fortune on ad placement.

But, simply having a funny, content-rich Web video is not enough to achieve results—whether that's generating leads or promoting your brand. To get the most out of the video, it must be carefully integrated with the company's Web site, in order to steer audiences to the right sections. For example, in The Institute for Backup Trauma, the script called for John Cleese to invite viewers to click a series of buttons, all of which were built into the Web site.

Button number one leads to a tour of the highly irreverent Institute for Back-up Trauma Web site, created especially for the video. Reinforcing the theme of the Web video, it allows viewers to travel the hallways of the institute and includes symptoms to watch for, patient stories and prevention tips such as "copy all data by hand, just in case your tape fails."

Button number two leads to more information on Live Vault's solutions. It wasn't until Cleese was on the set in Los Angeles that we came up with the infamous "Third Button" option, which Cleese recorded last. Dr. Twain Weck admonishes viewers NOT to press the third button under ANY circumstances. We knew that if we told people not to press the third button, everyone would. It's human nature.

As it turns out, virtually everyone who watches the video presses the third button. Who can resist? It's the beauty of viral Web video.

So what happens when you press the infamous third button? You'll just have to watch the video to find out.

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Ted Page is a principal of Captains of Industry and its creative director. For more information or to view the John Cleese viral video, visit www.captainsofindustry.com.

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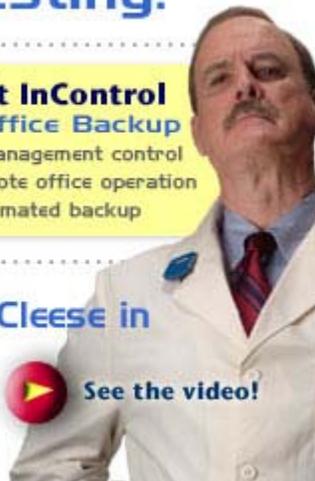
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