

Beyond product placement: a model for advergaming as viral marketing tool in South Africa

ABSTRACT

In South Africa, advergaming currently does not reach a mass audience because of the low number of Internet users and the high cost of Internet access. However, as a brand communication tool, advergaming has the potential to be used as a viral marketing tactic. The article analyses the potential of the mobile environment as a catalyst for enabling the use of advergaming as a viral marketing tool in South Africa and proposes a theoretical model derived from an analysis of existing literature and observation, for operationalising mobile advergaming.

INTRODUCTION

As audiences become ever more inundated with messages from a variety of sources and through a variety of channels, innovative advertisers need to find new ways to reach them. In the digital age, the Internet looked like the ideal playing field in which to create new advertising forms and draw new audiences, but the promise remains as yet unfulfilled. Under one per cent of Internet users actually click on banner ads, let alone end up making a purchase as a result of a banner ad. The average click-through rate for banner ads in a 2008 study by MarketingSherpa was 0.21% (MarketingSherpa, 2008).

As a result of the failure of banner ads both to deliver conversions and to change target-audience behaviour, advertisers in the United States and Europe have drawn their inspiration from one of the fastest-growing segments of the online industry: gaming. According to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (Verklin, 2007), interactive advertisements embedded in quizzes and games made up more than \$1 billion of the \$12.5 billion in online ad revenue in 2005. Research firm Nielsen (Verklin & Kanner, 2007) predicted that advertising spending in games would increase from \$75 million in 2006 to \$1 billion by 2010.

The South African audience is familiar with the use of product placements in film and games, but to both audiences and advertisers alike advergaming is a relatively new concept. Internationally, the practice of creating purpose-made games that also double as advertisements is widespread, but in the South African context – where access to the Internet is limited – advergaming has failed to take off. Apart from the short-lived Pain Relief game (www.painrelief.co.za) from Adcock Ingram and a few Website-embedded examples that form part of larger campaigns, few well-known South African examples exist. Similarly, research on advergaming has focused primarily on product placement rather than on purpose-built branded games and there are currently no data on advergaming in South Africa. Yet advergaming, if harnessed correctly and adapted to the South African context, could be a useful tool for South African advertisers.

Essentially, advergaming is a brand communication tool that can be used as a broad category that can encompass a number of advertising forms. As Marolf (2006) explains, there are two different forms of advergaming: “On [the] one hand, advertising a brand or product with a computer-game (done on the Internet with so-called Adgames) is often synonymously called Advergames. On the other hand, advertising in computer and video games is a phenomenon that is emerging swiftly and is described under the term in-game advertising” (Marolf, 2006).

Product placement, which is also common in film and television, is often used in video games, particularly sports games. This type of adgame, however, lacks the impact of a true branded advergame in which the gameplay is linked to the brand in some way and the game itself is developed specifically to promote a brand. This kind of advergame offers greater engagement with the brand than does static product placement – in fact, the brand itself is the focus of the game. The focus of this article is on the type of advergaming in which a game is created by a

company for the sole purpose of promoting its brand, not on the use of product placement within commercial games.

Interest in advergames has developed partly in response to the change in audience behaviour in the international context. According to Deal (2005), consumers in the international context are moving away from television as their primary form both of entertainment and information and are increasingly turning to the Internet for these purposes. In addition, research studies have shown that Internet users are spending a significant portion of their time playing video games online (Deal, 2005). In South Africa, however, Internet access is not ubiquitous; yet mobile technology has the potential to fulfil that role within the South African context because of its reach, accessibility and relatively low cost.

South Africa has already demonstrated significant interest in mobile advertising. AdMob, a mobile ad marketplace, served one billion mobile Web ads in six months and South Africa was ranked as the second largest source of mobile Web users across AdMob's publisher base, thus accounting for 15% of the total or 66 million page views per month (Admob, 2008). Greystripe, a provider of ad-supported mobile games, also ranked South Africa in its top five in terms of users in 2007. While there has as yet been no formal research on the sector in South Africa, Exactmobile – which sponsored the South African team that won gold in the mobile competition of the World Cyber Games in 2008 – claims that “mobile gaming is fast becoming one of the most popular forms of gaming in South Africa” (Mole, 2008).

Mobile penetration, as compared with Internet access, is high. According to the International Telecommunications Union (ITU, 2007), mobile users represent 90.1% of the total number of telephone subscribers in South Africa, reaching 87.08% of the population. By combining mobile advertising and gaming, advertisers in South Africa could potentially reach a much wider audience in a more engaging way than traditional advertising media and other forms of mobile advertising.

This article argues that advergames can and should make the move to the mobile platform. It further proposes a model for the adaptation of advergames to the mobile platform. In this way, advertisers will be alerted to the barriers to the successful implementation of an advergame strategy in South Africa, possible solutions to overcoming the said barriers and how to operationalise a mass viral marketing advergame campaign in South Africa. This will provide valuable insight into the broader mobile advertising possibilities available in South Africa and offer guidelines on how to approach advertising in the mobile context.

The article explores the barriers to the use of advergames to reach a mass audience in South Africa through an analysis of the existing infrastructure and a comparison with the criteria for viral marketing as proposed by Porter and Golan (2006). The article further explores how advertisers in South Africa are currently using advergames in their advertising strategies. This is followed by an analysis of the mobile environment and its potential towards overcoming such barriers. Lastly, it proposes a model for the operationalisation of mobile advergames as a viral marketing tool.

1. METHODS

As already mentioned, this article proposes a model for the operationalisation of mobile advergaming as a viral marketing tool in South Africa. This model was developed through a thorough review of existing literature in an effort both to identify key factors that influence the success of mobile viral marketing and also to determine the characteristics of a mobile viral marketing system.

These findings were then combined with information gleaned from observation and from experience in the field to create a model that addresses the barriers currently preventing advergaming from being used as a viral marketing tool in South Africa. The model is theoretical and no practical testing of the model has as yet been done.

1.1 Literature on advergaming

The appeal of advergaming lies in its ability to immerse the user in a simulated environment in which the brand is at the forefront. This simulation draws on the theory of gaming, which proposes that the user relates to the simulation, is immersed in the game environment and therefore engages with the game at a different level than do more passive pursuits such as television. Frasca (2004a) holds the following view:

Traditional media are representational, not simulational. They excel at producing both descriptions of traits and sequences of events (narrative). A photograph of a plane will tell us information about its shape and color, but it will not fly or crash when manipulated. A flight simulator or a simple toy plane are [*sic*] not only signs, but machines that generate signs according to rules that model some of the behaviors of a real plane.

Both Blumler and Katz (1974) and McQuail (1983) propose that media users select specific media on the basis of their specific needs and that the media fulfil a specific role in respect of media users. It is thus plausible to propose that advergaming fulfils a particular need in users. It is important to understand that it can be difficult to connect a particular need with a particular type of media content since media use can supply multiple benefits at different points throughout its use (Underwood, 2003, quoted in G.N., 2005).

Advergaming may fulfil two primary needs: the need for entertaining relaxation and the need to compete. Most advergaming games include either a 'challenge a friend' and/or a high score-list aspect, which may appeal to users' need to prove themselves superior to others. This aspect also tends to be used as a tactic to ensure that users continue to play the games in order to beat their previous scores. Some advertisers also link an additional competition to the high score.

Gaming as a form of advertising has another advantage over television in that it encourages prolonged engagement with the advertisement. Whereas a television advertisement lasts just 30 seconds on average, a game, if sufficiently engaging, can hold a user's attention for hours.

The level of engagement relates to the complexity and nature of the gameplay and also to the user's needs in relation to the game.

Far from being direct selling tools like much above-the-line advertising in traditional media, advergames tends to focus on brand awareness. Winkler and Buckner (2006) state that most advergames aim to improve branding, boost product awareness and collect detailed data about existing and potential customers, clients and supporters. Advergames can also be educational in nature. For example, the Seattle Water Utility (<http://www2.seattle.gov/util/waterbusters/>) used an advergame to teach children and adults about saving water. This aspect, when translated into the mobile environment, could play a valuable role in communicating societal values (safe sex) and educating communities about safety (electricity, crime) and government services. It could be a tool for a social-awareness marketing strategy.

Because in-game advertising assumes different forms – ranging from static product placement to advergames where the brand takes centre stage – the brand integration can likewise assume various forms, depending on the aim of the advergame.

Chen and Ringel (quoted in Winkler & Buckner, 2006: 38-39) differentiate between three different levels of product integration in advergames. They define these levels as associative, illustrative and demonstrative:

The lowest level of integration is considered to be associative. In this case, the product or brand is linked to a certain lifestyle or a particular activity featured in the game. Most commonly this is realized by displaying the logo or product of a company in the background ... Illustrative integration can be considered the second level of brand incorporation. Here, the product itself plays a significant role in the gameplay ... the highest level of brand incorporation is represented by demonstrative integration. This concept allows the player to experience the product in its natural context that is reproduced in the gaming environment. Thus, the participant has the opportunity to interact with the features of the product, to 'live and feel' it within its virtual boundaries, or to select from a range of products.

The associative level is useful for creating or increasing brand awareness at a basic level, that is, logo or slogan recognition and familiarity. The illustrative level can combine with a didactic element to teach users about the product, service or brand, or – in advergames created for non-commercial purposes – to educate users about issues. It provides more depth of interaction and engagement with the brand. The last level, the demonstrative level, provides the most depth of experience and strives to create a virtual simulation of the product and its use.

2. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ADVERGAMES

Linking advergames to overall brand messages has merit, as evidenced by the receptiveness study conducted by Winkler and Buckner (2006). The study found that those who play are receptive to the advertising message or at least to the product or company that is displayed within

the game and, further, that players recall many of the details of the brand integration within the game – such as the location of the logo (Winkler & Buckner 2006: 38-39).

Winkler and Buckner suggest that this might be because even though most advergames are engrossing and keep players immersed in the game experience, they are generally simple and straightforward. Consequently, the player can subconsciously focus better on the advertising messages communicated through the game (Winkler & Buckner, 2006).

The results of the Winkler and Buckner study (2006) are significant, particularly when compared with earlier studies (Chaney, Lin & Chaney, 2004; Schlosser, Shavitt, & Kanfer, 1999), which focused on product placement. Yet cognisance should be taken of the fact that younger generations tend to have a photographic memory in the visual environment but not necessarily a conceptual memory and further that memory alone does not indicate either comprehension or, indeed, positive perception of a brand message. These younger generations, born from 1978 onwards and called the *digital natives*, learn differently than did past generations. They are held to be active experiential learners, proficient in multitasking, and dependent on communications technologies for accessing information and for interacting with others (Frاند, 2000; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Prensky, 2001; Tapscott, 1999 cited in Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008).

Prensky (2001) further describes digital natives as being accustomed to receiving information really fast. “They like to parallel process and multitask. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to ‘serious’ work” (Prensky, 2001). It can therefore be proposed that digital natives are more receptive to messages communicated through games. More research needs to be conducted on the influence of advergaming on brand perceptions and associations.

Also of significance to South African advertisers is the above researchers’ finding that suggests that advergames might work more effectively for brands that are already in some way known to the game player, indicating that advergames may be more suitable for enhancing and altering the brand impression instead of building brand awareness for a product that is new to the target audience. The current strategy of using advergames as part of a broader marketing campaign thus makes sense.

It is clear that advergaming has the potential to reach users with brand messages in an innovative and appealing way, but it is also clear that merely creating an advergame is not enough. After all, the core purpose of any form of brand communication is to communicate a message. An advergame that merely associates a brand with a gaming experience but fails to communicate a message about the brand cannot be considered successful, for, while it may create familiarity among users, it may not create positive associations or even disseminate any meaningful information about the brand. It also fails to leverage the unique nature of advergaming: its ability to simulate.

Frasca (2004a) points out that many advertisers are still satisfied with merely showing an image of the product or its brand logo within the game instead of trying to convey experiences related to what is being sold: “Advertisers ... use entertainment as a means but not as an end. What they want is to promote their brands and products and, because of this, they see in games a tool for persuasion”. He goes on to say that this puts them in an extremely privileged position for realising that the potential of games is not to tell a story but to simulate: to create an environment for experimentation. Advergames could thus provide a strong positive association without conveying a specific didactic message, yet they still impart information about the brand to the user. Advertisements in a magazine or on television may be able to describe facets of a product or service, but within the current context, images, sound and text are not enough, especially if they want their audiences to engage with the brand (Frasca, 2004a). A simulated environment provides an experience, which traditional advertising cannot do. It moreover does so in an engaging way that speaks to a digitally literate audience (Frasca, 2004a).

In order to understand how advergames is able to migrate to the mobile environment, it is first important to understand the broader mobile gaming context.

3. MOBILE GAMING

For the purposes of this article *mobile gaming* refers to all games played on a mobile device. These include both online mobile games that reside on a mobile portal or server and downloaded mobile games that reside on the device itself.

Nguyen (2007), a senior research analyst at Gartner, says that “given the ubiquity of mobile phones in many markets and the ease of game-play, mobile gaming is expected to reach more of the global population than has been the case for traditional PC and console gaming”. This translates into an appealing platform for advertisers.

Though exact figures on the number of mobile gamers in South Africa are not currently available, developments within the industry – such as the South African team winning gold in the mobile competition at the World Cyber Games in 2008 – point to increased interest in mobile gaming in the sector.

A study by Van Wyk and Van Belle (2005), in which 204 South African respondents were asked to complete questionnaires on their mobile gaming use, found that 75% of the 204 respondents – primarily youths between the ages of 16 and 25 – played games on their mobile phones. Significantly, though, the study also found that 88% of those who played mobile games only played games that came pre-installed on their phone. Those who played online mobile games represented only 1% of the total, and those who played downloaded mobile games represented 11%. However, since the study was conducted in 2004/2005, it is plausible to suggest that the figures may have increased as devices have become more sophisticated and access to mobile games has become easier.

Van Wyk and Van Belle (2005) focused on factors that could impact on the adoption of mobile

gaming in South Africa. As well as drawing on research by Pedersen and Nysveen (2002) on the theory of planned behaviour and its application in explaining teenagers' adoption of text messaging services, Van Wyk and Van Belle also drew on Pedersen and Methlie's work (2004) on the relationship between mobile data services, business models and user adoption.

The researchers (Pedersen and Methlie 2004; Pedersen and Nysveen 2002; Van Wyk & Van Belle, 2005) identify two main factors that impact on the adoption of technologies, namely *subjective norm* and *facilitating conditions*. They divide subjective norm into external influence, interpersonal influence and self-control. These subfactors deal with how personal beliefs and perceptions and also peer and social pressures influence adoption. *Facilitating conditions* deals with issues related to cost, awareness of a service, availability of a service, support for the service, security and service compatibility (Van Wyk & Van Belle, 2005).

In traditional mobile games, puzzle games and casual games tend to dominate because of their small size and ease of play, but more sophisticated games are slowly adapting to the environment. The key is to ensure a hook to get users to start playing and a solid interactive gaming experience to keep them playing. Greystripe's GameJump.com Mobile Game Consumer Insights Report (2006) identifies the top five mobile games: Texas Hold'em (Casino); Adventure Boy in Zootoo Land (Adventure); BlackJack (Casino); Aqualife (Action); and SuDoKu (puzzle). When designing an advergame, advertisers and game developers alike will need to investigate the appeal of successful mobile games so as to ensure that the advergame has appeal for its audience.

The mobile environment is attracting increased interest from advertisers. Already, rich media-animated ads have made their appearance on South African mobile phones, with cellular networks leading the way. Vodacom has used its iconic Mo the Meerkat mascot in its mobile promotions featuring audio, animation and text. Advergaming could take the concept one step further.

4. VIRAL MARKETING

The *subjective norm* factor identified above is of particular relevance in terms of the potential viral marketing function of advergaming in general and mobile advergaming in particular. *Viral marketing*, as a concept, has evolved from a traditional marketing term, Word of Mouth (WoM), which refers to "oral, person-to-person communication between a receiver and a communicator which the receiver perceives as a non-commercial message, regarding a brand, product or service" (Wiedemann, 2007).

Research by Pruden and Vavra (2004) shows that above-the-line media, of which WoM is a part, provide the most effective means of creating awareness in many markets. Their research found that customers ranked WoM highest in terms of the techniques used not only to gather information but also to make purchasing decisions (Pruden & Vavra, 2004).

Quoting Helm (2000), Porter and Golan (2006) emphasise that viral marketing can be described as "a communication and distribution concept that relies on customers to transmit digital products

via electronic mail to other potential customers in their social sphere and to animate these contacts to also transmit the products”, in a similar way to a virus, but with a positive effect for the company.

Porter and Golan (2006) expand on Helm’s definition in order also to make the concept applicable to non-digital products. Drawing on Welker (2002), they define viral marketing as “strategies that allow an easier, accelerated, and cost reduced [sic] transmission of messages by creating environments for a self-replicating, exponentially increasing diffusion, spiritualization, and impact of the message”.

Many online advergames are small enough to be emailed from user to user, thus spreading the game and the brand message quickly and with greater credibility. M & M’s Flip the Mix game is 2.34Mb, and can easily be shared among users with broadband connections. Similarly, American Airlines’ Chair-iots of Fire is 3Mb. However, this easy movement from user to user is impractical in the South African environment in that broadband Internet access is not ubiquitous. Current statistics on broadband-use in South Africa identify only 650 000 broadband users (Goldstuck, 2007).

The principles of viral marketing assume that a message relayed by a trusted and known person such as a friend is more persuasive than are those disseminated by an unknown or impersonal corporation. An advergame recommended by a friend could thus enjoy greater popularity and better brand recognition.

The free email service Hotmail (www.hotmail.com) is often cited as an example of viral marketing in practice and as the model for successful viral marketing (Fattah & Paul 2002; Porter & Golan, 2006). The model proposes the need for the following five aspects: (1) free products or services; (2) easy transmission; (3) exploitation of common human motivations; (4) use of existing social networks; and (5) use of others’ resources and infrastructure. Wilson (2000) added scalability to the list of requirements for success in viral marketing, stating that businesses should be prepared for rapid growth if they are to implement viral methods.

Gmail offers a further demonstration of the success of this model. Gmail was initially not available to everyone. A select few were invited to join and each was given 100 invitations with which to invite friends to use the free service. This resulted in increased interest in and demand for Gmail because of the personal invitations and the sense of exclusivity that had been created.

Viral marketing has been extended into the mobile environment, where it is referred to as *mobile viral marketing* (MVM). In a study by Wiedemann (2007), 70% of the 44 experts interviewed for the study indicated MVM, as a form of interpersonal communication, to be an important feature of a mobile marketing campaign. The research also demonstrated that recipients were more likely to participate in a mobile campaign if they received the mobile marketing message from familiar communicators (Wiedemann, 2007). This proposition is confirmed in a survey by Skopos (I-Play 2005): 30% of the surveyed population of 2 500 indicated that a friend’s recommendation would motivate them to download a mobile application.

This aspect of viral marketing – the credibility associated with a friend’s recommendation – is linked to the concept of subjective norm as proposed by Van Wyk and Van Belle (2005), in that social or interpersonal pressure plays a role in the adoption of new technologies such as mobile applications. This makes advergaming an attractive tool for advertisers trying to overcome the message clutter inherent in modern life, if they are able to harness the effect of social pressure positively. Wiedemann (2007) also points out that the cost to companies of MVM campaigns is relatively low in comparison with other forms of marketing. An advergame has the potential to become a form of viral marketing, which is where the potential for mobile advergaming becomes most attractive.

5. ADVERGAMING IN SOUTH AFRICA

Currently, advergaming as an advertising tactic is being used to complement existing marketing campaigns in South Africa. By means of an informal email conversation with advertising agencies around South Africa I found that most had not heard of advergaming and those that had, were implementing it on a very limited basis. Formal research to test this would however need to be conducted.

An examination of two local advergames developed by FCB Impact, a South African full-service advertising agency, demonstrates that the types of advergames in South Africa tend to fall into the associative category identified by Chen and Ringel (2001). Both of the said advergames are embedded within a branded website.

The first is the Klipdrift Kettie¹ Game (www.klipdrift.co.za). Visitors to the Klipdrift website are presented with a brandy cabinet, which, when clicked, opens to reveal four different varieties of Klipdrift. When users click on the Klipdrift original bottle, they are taken to a 3D country farmhouse, which they can explore. A map allows users to access different parts of the house and different parts of the Klipdrift site. In addition to the Kettie game, users can download mobile Klipdrift branded material, access recipes for cocktails and learn more about the drink. The objective of the game is – within the allocated time and with the provided number of marbles – to knock all the cans off the wall in the garden using a *kettie*.

The Kettie game is not directly related to the Klipdrift brand, except in linking the brand to a distinctly Afrikaans stereotype of *braaivleis*², rugby and sunshine in the vein of the old Chevrolet ads. The advergame is therefore associative in nature and builds on the existing brand identity created within the Klipdrift ‘Met Eish’³ television and print ads, which has seen the deracialisation

¹ ‘Kettie’ is the Afrikaans word for slingshot or catapult (SA informal English: ‘catty’).

² ‘Braaivleis’ is the South African term for barbeque.

³ ‘Ys’ is the Afrikaans word for ice, but ‘eish’ – which sounds similar when pronounced – refers to an exclamation often used in the black communities in South Africa. The ads played on this phonetic similarity for comic effect.

of the country setting for the new South African context. The Klipdrift logo is in the bottom right-hand corner of the page at all times. The tagline, 'Make yourself at home', is displayed in the bottom middle of the page just below the Klipdrift bottle cap, which is the menu access point on the page. These are the only brand elements near or in the game. This type of game, as it uses a simple interface and is easy to play, could easily make the transition to the mobile environment.

Also within the site, in the bar of the country farmhouse, is a pool game that follows the same formula, although it adds a competition as an additional incentive to keep playing and improve the user's score. The user can qualify to win a case of Klipdrift export brandy. The additional incentive is designed to keep the user playing longer.

Savanna, an apple cider, also makes use of online advergames linked to the official Savanna site (www.savanna.co.za). There are three branded advergames on the Savanna site, but this analysis will focus on the Savanna-branded Space Invaders game. Drawing on the nostalgia of old-fashioned arcade games, Savanna embeds its brand as an integral part of gameplay, by making the shooter a Savanna and the alien attackers lemon wedges that the user has to shoot.

Savanna is at the centre of the game and is used in various ways to communicate the brand message. It is associative in nature, since although the brand is integrated into the gameplay itself, its use within the game does not mirror its real-life use. The association, however, is unclear in that it does not link the brand with a particular lifestyle other than a generation of Savanna drinkers that would be familiar with the old Space Invaders game. It could easily be adapted to the mobile context because of its simplicity.

However, its simplicity can also be criticised. While studies (Winkler & Buckner, 2006) have shown that users tend to recall brand and product logos and placements within games, no real data exist on the attitude of the users towards those brands. Thus, while users may recall the Savanna brand, it may not translate into a benefit for the organisation. More research needs to be conducted on how playing an advergame influences attitudes towards brands and products.

The major criticism of this game is that while it places Savanna at the centre of the game by using it as part of the gameplay, it does not communicate any real brand message through this association. The aim may be to repeat both the brand logo and identity in order to increase familiarity. Yet this does not necessarily translate into positive brand associations.

Savanna's brand identity is linked with dry humour as evidenced by its television advertisements featuring comedian Barry Hilton. Its tag line, 'It's dry, but you can drink it', ties together the comedic elements of the ads. But the advergame does little to reinforce this brand identity and neither educates nor informs the user about the product. It could be argued that the goal is to associate Savanna with fun, yet this link is tenuous at best.

Each advergame analysed above forms part of a larger marketing and communications campaign that reinforces the core brand message across media. Advergames, which are thus just one small part of the whole, ultimately aim at increasing brand awareness and reinforcing existing brand

associations. Advergaming therefore need to be understood within the context of their broader marketing environment and in relation to the overall brand message being communicated.

5.1 Barriers to advergaming in South Africa

As discussed above, advergaming is currently used in South African marketing campaigns on a limited basis to reach a clearly defined niche audience of affluent users. The reason for this, it could be argued, is that advergaming is an online strategy and that Internet access within South Africa is low (Goldstuck, 2007). The three barriers to the use of advergaming to reach a mass audience on which this article focuses are access, mobility and cost.

Statistics on the access to Internet facilities in South Africa point to a lack of critical mass in this space (Goldstuck, 2007). Fewer than 10% of the population have access to Internet facilities and of those, only 650 000 have access to broadband Internet. This substantially limits the market for advergaming in the online environment, particularly in terms of the effectiveness of online advergaming that are hosted on a server. Dial-up users would experience bandwidth problems trying to access advergaming online and, even if they were able to download the game to their machines, they would be limited in terms of their ability to distribute the game to friends and family, as proposed in viral marketing. As a result, only a small minority of the South African population are at present able to access advergaming, making it a 'nice-to-have' for most marketers.

Linked to this is the concept of mobility. *Mobility* can in this study refer both to the mobility of the device, that is, the ability of the device to move from one place to the next quickly and easily, and to the mobility of the advergame itself. The latter is important in terms of the application of advergaming to viral marketing.

In the US environment, where advergaming is more prevalent and where 71.94 % inhabitants have Internet access and 23.94% have access to broadband Internet (ITU 2007), advergaming are being used as viral marketing tools. Blockdot, a developer of advergaming, claims a 4-5% click-through to a call to action at the end of a game (Hein, 2006). This is significant when compared with a banner click-through rate of 0.21% as described earlier (MarketingSherpa, 2008). This call to action is often linked to an incentive such as competition entry to increase interest.

While other barriers – such as cost – are acknowledged to have an impact on the ability of advergaming to reach a mass audience, these will however not be explored in this article.

5.2 The mobile environment as solution

The aim of this article is to argue that advergaming can and should make the move to the mobile environment in order to reach a mass audience and be viable as a viral marketing tool.

Significantly, Van Wyk and Van Belle's study (2005) on adoption factors related to mobile gaming in South Africa found that resource-based facilitating conditions were more important in the

South African context than those reported in a similar Norwegian study. This implies that issues of access and mobility – and also cost – are key determinants in the use of mobile gaming.

As already demonstrated, mobile access in South Africa is much higher than Internet access, with more than 80% of the population having access to some kind of mobile telephony (Goldstuck, 2007). This therefore creates a much larger potential user base for marketers seeking to use advergames within this environment. Further, as evidenced by the Van Wyk and Van Belle (2005) study, interest in mobile gaming in South Africa is increasing.

As a platform, the device is mobile. In addition, the device allows for easy transmission of data through SMS and MMS, providing a potential transmission method for an advergame. This will be explained in more depth in the discussion of the proposed model. Not all online advergames are however able to make the transition from online to mobile, but as mobile devices become more sophisticated and the more sophisticated mobile devices become less expensive, this situation should change.

In a study by Cruz and Fill (2008), one respondent pointed out that “advergames are an exceptional form of VMC, because they allow for high levels of interaction with target audiences and it is relatively easy to include a commercial ‘call to action’, unlike viral video clips”.

5.3 A model for mobile advergames in South Africa

Drawing on the literature and on observation of how mobile phones are used, the following model is proposed (Figure 1):

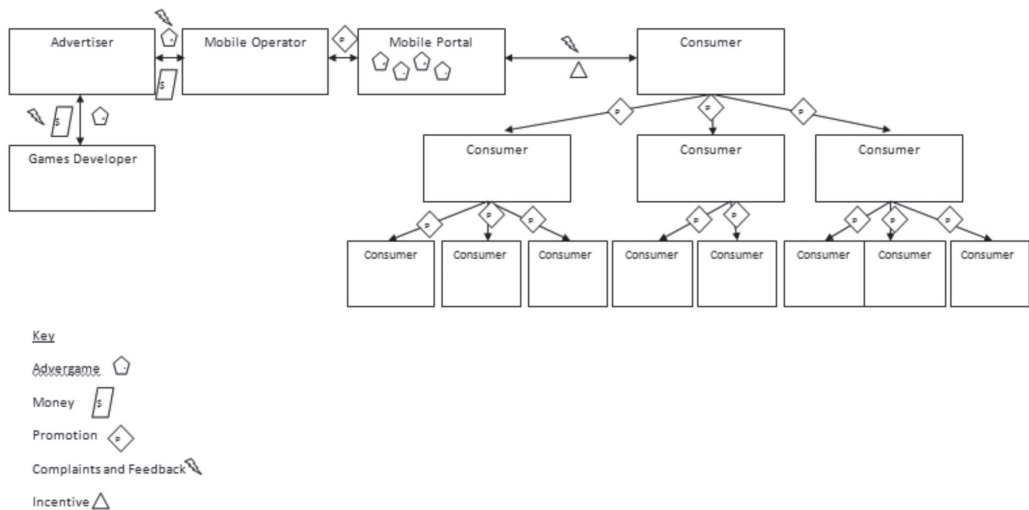


Figure 1: A model for operationalising advergames as a viral marketing tool in South Africa

The model is a graphical representation of the relationship between all parties in the advergame viral marketing system.

The advertiser will need to engage a games developer to create a branded game to distribute. The advertiser and games developer will need to ensure that they have enough data on the consumer and that there is balanced integration of the brand to enable them to create a sufficiently engaging game, so as firstly, to encourage regular, prolonged gameplay and secondly, to encourage dissemination of the advergame to friends and family as per the viral marketing model. Drawing on the research about the consumer, the advertiser and games developer will need to determine whether an associative, illustrative or demonstrative approach to brand integration is needed (Chen & Ringel, 2001). This implies a process of negotiation and continued input from both the advertiser and the games developer as set out in Figure 1.

Next, the advertiser would need to approach a mobile operator who manages a mobile portal through which the game could be seeded. *Seeding* refers to the placing of a viral message in the public domain for dissemination by consumers (Chaffey, 2008). The advertiser would provide the completed advertisement to the mobile operator and pay the mobile operator a fee per download or access of the advergame. In this way, the cost to the consumer becomes negligible, whereby the barrier of cost to the consumer is rendered irrelevant.

Once the advergame is placed on the mobile portal, the mobile operator will need in some way to promote it to the consumer. This could be as simple as listing it at the top of the mobile games list on the portal or as complex as sending a promotional SMS or MMS to consumers encouraging them to download or access the advergame.

The mobile operator and/or the advertiser will also need to provide an incentive to the consumer in order to disseminate the game or a message about the game. The incentive could take the form of a competition entry for each referral that downloads or accesses the game or even of reduced rates on SMSs or call charges for a specific length of time. Once the consumers access or download and play the game, an option at the end of the game will offer them the chance to 'challenge your friends'. It will automatically generate an SMS message for the consumers, who can then forward it to their friends.

When the friend receives the SMS, it will include an embedded link to the mobile portal where the game can be downloaded. The friend will need to enter the mobile number of the person who sent him/her the referral before he/she will be allowed to download or access the game. This will allow the mobile operator to track the number of referrals as well as downloads and accesses, and to manage the incentives for the campaign. The result would be that each consumer would become a brand ambassador for the advertiser, disseminating brand messages and encouraging engagement with the advergame.

The mobile environment thus offers almost all of the features required for viral marketing as

proposed by Porter and Golan (2006). Firstly, Porter and Golan (2006) recommend that viral marketing needs to offer free products or services and the advergames would be available free of charge to consumers under the proposed model. Secondly, they require easy transmission of the marketing message. By using SMS, the advergame is easily transmitted to the consumers. Thirdly, exploitation of common human motivations is reflected both in the incentive for referral and in the gameplay itself. The use of existing social networks will form part of the viral marketing process itself in that consumers will send the advergame to their network of friends and contacts. Lastly, the model demonstrates the use of others' resources and infrastructure in its use of the existing mobile network or of the existing mobile portal. The cost implications would then lie with the advertiser rather than with the consumer.

5.4 Limitations of the model

While the model seeks to offer a potential means of operationalising mobile advergames as a viral marketing tool in the South African context, its limitations are acknowledged. These limitations are the following:

- The model relies on the willingness of a mobile operator to manage the viral marketing-incentive process.
- The model increases the cost to the advertiser beyond that of the development of the advergame by making the advertiser carry the cost of access for the consumer. Further research to demonstrate that this investment is worth the initial cost would thus need to be conducted.
- The model does not propose either a particular type of advergame or a particular approach to brand integration as being ideal for such a viral marketing campaign.

Despite the mentioned shortcomings, the model provides a useful starting point for exploring the possibilities of mobile advergames as a viral marketing tool in South Africa.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article set out to make a case for advergames as a viral marketing tool and to propose a model for operationalising mobile advergames within the South African context. A review of existing literature – in the fields of in-game advertising, mobile gaming and viral marketing – points to the potential of advergames on mobile devices, despite there currently being barriers to online advergames.

The following conclusions and recommendations can be extrapolated from the literature and model presented above:

- At present advergames cannot reach a mass audience in South Africa. On the one hand there is a lack of access to the Internet among the majority of the population, while, on the other, there are barriers such as cost. The article has explored two of those barriers,

namely access and mobility, and concludes that the mobile environment has the potential to overcome these barriers and enable advergaming to reach a larger mass audience. It is therefore recommended that advertisers, game developers and mobile operators work together to operationalise the use of advergaming in the mobile environment in South Africa in order to leverage the benefits of reaching this mass audience.

- Viral marketing is an accepted tactic in online brand communication and has a demonstrated effectiveness as evidenced by the literature. Advergaming as a tactic can be adapted to become a viral marketing tool and, because of the increased level of engagement of a game as opposed to a commercial message, has high potential for even greater brand recall and positive brand association. More research needs to be done to determine to what extent brand recall of advergaming translates into positive brand association and sales conversions. In addition, the model itself needs to be tested in practical terms to determine its fit with the South African audience and the audience's willingness to spread the message.
- Incentivising advergaming in the mobile environment is an important solution to overcoming the cost implication of mobile advergaming to consumers. Also, advertisers and mobile operators can work together to create an environment in which the cost of advergaming to the consumer is negligible. It is therefore recommended that mobile operators form partnerships with both games developers and advertisers to create such an environment.
- Initial research mentioned in the literature points to the interest of users in mobile gaming, yet a larger study, focusing on how and why South African users access and play games on their mobile phones is needed to substantiate this research and to better inform the promotion of advergaming as a viral marketing tool. Such a study would also need to focus on the appeal of games and the characteristics of gameplay that start and keep users playing.

By not only leveraging the unique elements of advergaming, which include gameplay, simulation and engagement, but also the unique elements of the mobile environment, i.e. increased access and mobility with a potentially negligible cost to consumers, advertisers should be able to create a successful viral marketing campaign that results in greater brand recognition, awareness and positive association than that of traditional advertising forms. The model presents the possibility of reaching a mass audience in a way not yet achieved in South Africa and of translating some of the interactivity of the Internet onto the mobile device.

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