

THE ATTITUDES TOWARD APPLICATION OF VIRAL MARKETING IN THE FOOD INDUSTRY IN SERBIA

Tomislav Sudarević¹, Branislav Vlahović², Ivan Šurjanović³

Summary

This paper examines the attitudes toward application of viral marketing in the food industry in Serbia. The research consisted of both an extensive theory review and empirical research, including case studies, surveys and in-depth interviews. Viral marketing has been defined as any marketing program (online or offline) that is designed to achieve an exponential growth by spreading marketing effects from customer to customer. The paper's hypothesis, stating that marketing managers in Serbia have positive attitudes toward the usefulness of viral marketing in the food industry, has been supported by the results of both primary and secondary research. Finally, a number of limitations and risks associated with the viral marketing strategy have been presented, followed by a brief discussion of possible ways to overcome the challenges.

Key words: *viral marketing, word of mouth marketing, viral marketing in Serbia, food marketing.*

JEL: *M31*

Introduction

Although economic crisis had a negative impact on food sector in Serbia, it still represents “a significant segment of the industrial structure and an important factor of the stability of overall economic and social trends in Serbia“ (Savić et al., 2012).

One of the corner stones of its success is related to application of adequate communication tools. Although in food industry discounts and bonuses as a sales promotion activities are frequently used, the large volume of research into consumer-targeted sales promotion does

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not provide a unified conclusion regarding their effects (Mesaroš et al., 2013). Following the trends in economically developed countries, the food industry in Serbia is in a process of adoption and implementation of the viral marketing strategy as a relatively new communication tool with proven positive results. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the attitudes of marketing managers toward its use and effectiveness, as well the limitations and risks, of viral marketing in the food industry. A theoretical background on the scope and definitions of viral marketing will be given in the first part of the paper. The central part of the paper will discuss, based on empirical research data, the *attitudes* toward viral marketing in general, and more specifically in the food industry in Serbia. It will also give us an insight into the perception of usefulness of the application of viral marketing in the food industry in Serbia. In other words, the research hypothesis of our paper, that *marketing managers in Serbia have positive attitudes toward the usefulness of viral marketing in the food industry, will be tested.*

Research Method

Our theoretical research consisted of an extensive review of scholarly articles, books and Internet resources on both viral marketing and food marketing. The theoretical review was followed by empirical research (Survey, 2012) based on the following three methods:

1. Case study - understanding the critical success factors of eighty viral marketing campaigns (mostly in the US, Canada and Serbia). The purpose of this stage of research was to gain a better understanding of the nature of viral marketing, its common characteristics, and principles typical for most viral marketing campaigns.
2. Survey of marketing managers of 68 companies in Serbia.

The survey consisted of two samples. The first was a simple random sample involving marketing managers from thirty five companies with 50-4,000 employees, from various industries including auto industry, construction, food industry, health care, technology, industrial engineering and machinery, mining, tourism, wholesale and retail trading, marketing, media and trade show industry and professional services.

The second sample was a convenience sample consisting of thirty three selected small, medium and large companies in the food industry including soft drinks, distillers and vintners, brewers, agricultural products, meat, poultry and fish, packaged foods and meats, and food services.

3. In-depth interview with the marketing managers of ten companies who ran successful viral marketing campaigns in the past. The purpose of this research method was to discuss the experiences, success factors and effectiveness of various viral marketing campaigns.

When processing results from our sample, we have used the binomial test (e.g. when comparing positive and negative experiences with viral marketing), and gamma correlation coefficient (e.g. when relating those who have used viral marketing in the past and those who plan to use it in the future or those who believe in its benefits). Our research was mostly exploratory in nature due to applied sampling methods and a relatively small sample

size. In order to be able to create statistical inferences about the whole population (food businesses in Serbia), the survey research would require a larger random sample. It is worth noting, however, that most of the research results were consistent between various research methods (primary and secondary), different samples (whole industry vs. food industry), and between a number of similar survey questions.

The measurement of managers' attitudes has been based on quantitative analysis of survey questions such as:

- a) whether or not marketing managers believed that viral marketing can be successfully used in the food industry (table 2),
- b) whether or not marketing managers planned to use viral marketing in the future (table 3),
- c) whether or not they considered their viral campaigns as successful (table 4),
- d) whether or not they believed that viral marketing would benefit their company in the future (table 5),
- e) whether or not there was a positive correlation between those who had used viral marketing in the past and those who believed in its benefits (table 6), and finally
- f) whether or not there was a positive correlation between those who had used viral marketing in the past and those who planned to use it in the future (table 7).

Viral Marketing Defined

Companies now have great opportunities for the implementation of word of mouth marketing programs: satisfied (or even delighted) consumers of the product/service can now easily share their experience with a large number of other people by the use of social networks (Penenberg, 2009, McColl, 2010). Word of mouth is increasingly becoming "word of mouse" which, supported by Internet technology, gives impetus for the application of the viral marketing strategy (Sudarević, 2011).

The term "viral marketing" has been used widely over the last fifteen years, yet it has often been confused with a number of terms such as "buzz marketing," "word of mouth marketing," "e-word of mouth marketing (eWOM)," "word of mouse marketing," "evangelist marketing," "network marketing," "referral marketing," "guerilla marketing" and similar terms.

The term was first introduced by Steve Jurvetson and Tim Draper (1997), the founding investors of Hotmail, who considered viral marketing to be "the special catalyst for Hotmail's torrid growth". They used the term *viral* "not because any traditional viruses are involved, but because of the pattern of rapid adoption through word-of-mouth networks".

According to Ralph Wilson (2012), one of the first authors on viral marketing, viral marketing describes any strategy that encourages individuals to pass on a marketing message to others, creating the potential for exponential growth in the message's exposure and influence. According to Wilson, off the Internet, viral marketing has been referred to as "word-of-mouth," "creating a buzz," "leveraging the media" or "network marketing." But on the Internet, for better or worse, it's called "viral marketing."

Cordoba argued that „in a sense, viral marketing parallels word-of-mouth activities, but in an Internet setting” (Hung-Chang, C. et al., 2007). Similarly, Alison Stateman (2005) described viral marketing as a „network enhanced WOM”.

The Word of Mouth Marketing Association (2007) offered a broader definition of viral marketing as a type of word of mouth that involves “creating entertaining or informative messages that are designed to be passed along in an exponential fashion, often electronically or by email” (underlined by authors). WOMMA’s definition did not narrowly focus on the Internet or on electronic means, although this is what “often” makes things more viral. Similarly, Laudon and Traver (2002) in their definition did not even mention electronic media, but rather described viral marketing broadly as “the process of getting customers to pass along a company’s marketing message to friends, family, and colleagues”.

Based on the above, as well as on the analysis of real life viral marketing cases, we would like to suggest the following (broader) definition of viral marketing (Šurjanović, Sudarević, 2013): “*Viral marketing is any marketing program designed to achieve exponential growth by spreading marketing effects from customer to customer*”.

It is worth noting that according to our definition:

- a) The exponential growth⁴ is required for any marketing program to be considered “viral.”
- b) Viral marketing is based on spreading marketing effects from customer to customer. In other words, viral marketing is just one type or special case of word of mouth marketing which happens when the number of customers grows exponentially.
- c) Viral marketing takes place both online and offline. The difference is not in the media; the difference is in the intensity. During our research of viral marketing cases, we have seen quite a few viral marketing programs that took place even before the Internet era, yet they did meet the above criteria of “exponential growth.” The viral marketing examples of Apple’s Mac computers, Polaroid instant cameras, Volkswagen’s Beetle, Tupperware dishes, MCI’s Friends & Family Program (a telecommunications company), Harley Davidson motorcycles and similar other examples come to mind. In the food industry, examples of viral programs before the Internet include the Coca Cola contests (dated back as far as 1916!), the Pepsi Challenge, or Amway and Forever Living’s MLM marketing programs. However, it is fair to say that the viral marketing concept received full attention with the emergence of Internet technologies. The Internet is considered the perfect media for word of mouth marketing, as it allows news to spread much faster through the “word of mouse” (Šurjanovic, 2012), while at the same time, “consumers communicating via email may persuade more readily than mass media advertising” (Phelps et al, 2004). Kalyanam, Masonis and McIntyre (2007) conclude that viral marketing is

4 A number of authors have offered a mathematical framework for describing a viral marketing process and for measuring the intensity of word of mouth and viral marketing (Bouchard and St-Amant, 2012, Bughin, et al, 2010, Schmitt et al., 2011, Kumar et al., 2007, Shu-Chuan and Kim, 2011, Yang et al, 2010).

now increasingly used by the marketing managers of Fortune 500 companies, while Google's UK managing director Mark Howe urged even more firms to embrace viral marketing (Jones, 2007).

Application of Viral Marketing in the Food Industry

Companies in the food industry are no exception in terms of the use of the viral marketing strategy: there are many notable examples, such as Burger King, General Mills, Pepsi, Evian, Brewer Anheuser-Busch, Long John Silver's, Doritos, Chick-fil, Cadbury, McDonald's, Beer.com, Heineken, and Skittles.

Food businesses have been represented on most "top ten" viral lists in various publications over time. According to BlogStorm (Altoft, 2008), the UK's largest blog discussing Internet marketing, there were three food businesses among the top ten most successful viral campaigns of all time (Burger King, Thresheers and Cadbury). Advertising Age (Learmonth, 2011) created its own list of "Top Ten Viral Ads of All Time"; there were again three companies from the food industry among the top ten most successful campaigns (Evian, Pepsi and Doritos). Finally, at the recent third-annual Ad Age Viral Video Awards organized in April 2012 by AdAge.com (Pardee, 2012), two out of ten awarded campaigns were from the food industry (Coca Cola and Heineken).

Viral marketing has also been used in the food industry in Serbia. Several innovative viral marketing campaigns deserve to be mentioned here:

- Promotion of the new "Lav" beer bottle design by Carlsberg;
- "Hello!" musical contest and "Sosa" cooking recipes by Fruvita beverage company;
- Promotion of "Ella" skim milk through a Guinness book of records event by Mlekara Subotica;
- "Fans of Medeno Srce" Facebook marketing campaign by Pionir confectionary products;
- "Jelen Beer Bands" by Apatin Brewery;
- "Cookie by Cookie" campaign by Banini biscuit and wafer company;
- Virtual ice cream eating contest by Frikom ice cream and frozen food company, and
- "Chocolympic Games" by Stollwerck confectionary company.

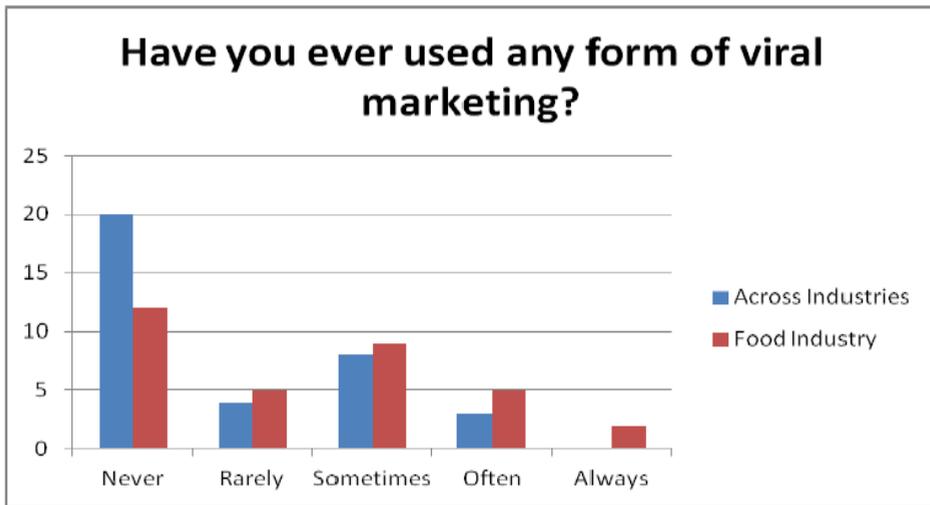
In order to determine *the degree of use of viral marketing campaigns*, we have first looked at the situation across industries. In our general random survey 42.86% of marketing managers in Serbia reported that they have used some form of the viral marketing strategy. This relatively high degree of use of the viral marketing strategy can be partly explained by the relatively broad definition of viral marketing in our survey; the questionnaire first described what was meant by viral marketing (through the definition and examples) and then asked the participants how often they had used any form of viral marketing, regardless of whether or not they had used the term "viral marketing" itself.

Table 1. The frequency of use of viral marketing in Serbia

	Have you ever used any form of viral marketing?					Total
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	
Across Industries	20	4	8	3	0	35
Food Industry	12	5	9	5	2	33

Source: survey data 2012

Picture 1. The frequency of use of viral marketing in Serbia



Source: survey data 2012

While the first survey was general, the next survey involved marketing managers in the food industry only. The percentage of those who have used the viral marketing strategy in the food industry in Serbia was 63.64%, much higher compared to the average across industries (42.85%). The difference was significant, as suggested by the calculated p-value of 0.013.

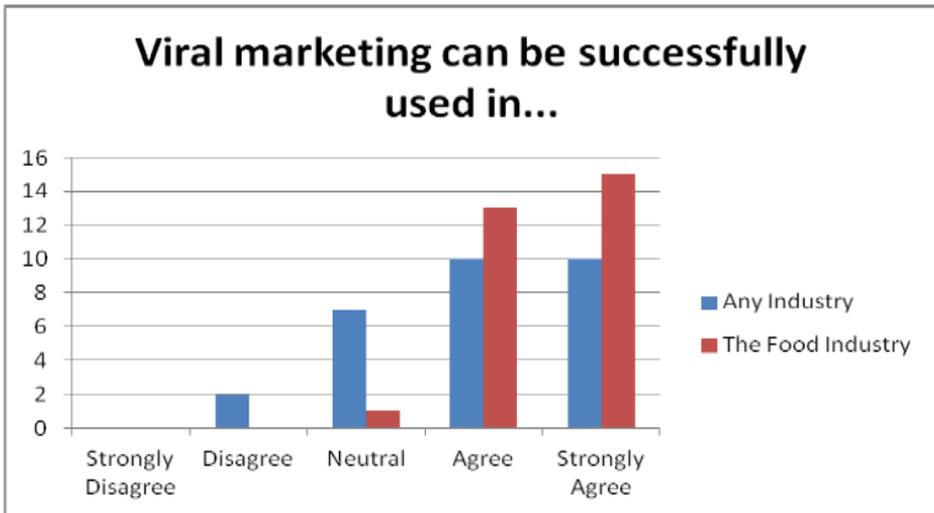
The attitudes toward the application of viral marketing in the food industry were evaluated using three questions. In the first question, respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement that viral marketing can successfully be used in *any* industry. The responses were expressed in five categories from 1-5 (where 5 indicated strong agreement). The responses are shown in the table 2.

Table 2. The attitudes toward the universality of use of viral marketing in Serbia

	Viral marketing can be successfully used in...					Average Rating
	Strongly Disagree ("1")	Disagree ("2")	Neutral ("3")	Agree ("4")	Strongly Agree ("5")	
Any Industry	0	2	7	10	10	3.97
The Food Industry	0	0	1	13	15	4.48

Source: survey data 2012

Picture 2. The attitudes toward the universality of use of viral marketing in Serbia



Source: survey data 2012

The relatively high average agreement of 3.97 (table 2) suggests that there was a widespread belief in Serbia that the viral marketing practice, in one form or another, could be widely used in any industry. This insight of the “universality” of viral marketing made sense, having in mind that most marketers typically have limited marketing budgets and therefore try to find new, creative ways of maximizing ROI of their campaigns, regardless of their type of business or industry.

In the following question, the respondents were asked whether they agree with the statement that viral marketing can successfully be used in the food industry. The purpose of this question was to serve as a first indication of possible problems or hesitations toward the application of viral marketing in the food industry, but also to check the consistency between answers to similar survey questions.

As indicated in the table 2, there was quite a high degree of optimism (a rating of 4.48) regarding the potential of viral marketing in the food industry in Serbia.

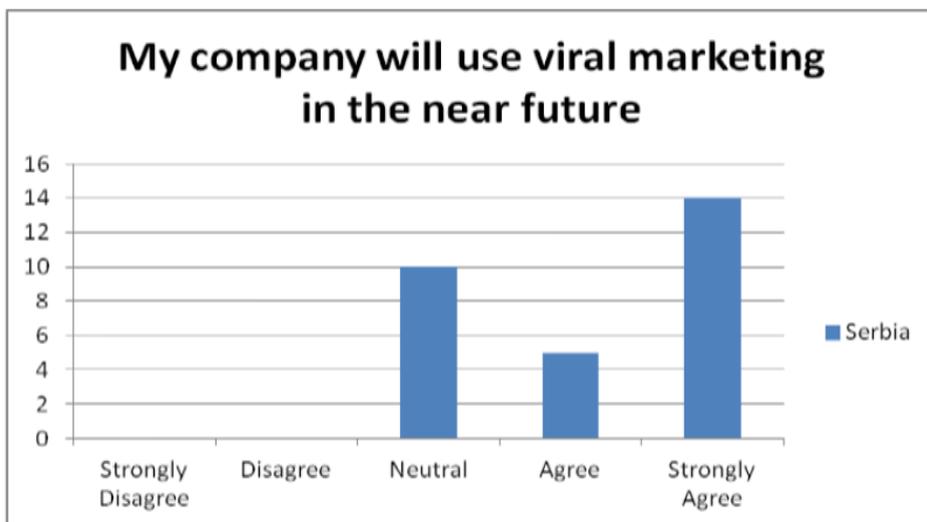
Finally, the third question was regarding the managers' plans to use viral marketing in the future; 65.52% of managers in the food businesses in Serbia agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they will use viral marketing in the near future, resulting in an average rating of 4.14 (table 3).

Table 3. The intentions to use viral marketing in the food industry in Serbia in the near future

Country	My company will use viral marketing in the near future					Average Rating
	Strongly Disagree ("1")	Disagree ("2")	Uncertain ("3")	Agree ("4")	Strongly Agree ("5")	
Serbia	0	0	10	5	14	4.14

Source: survey data 2012

Picture 3. The intentions to use viral marketing in the food industry in Serbia in the near future



Source: survey data 2012

In summary, the above secondary and primary research in Serbia demonstrated the wide acceptance and positive perceptions of viral marketing in the food industry; the viral marketing trend appears to be general, and the food industry seems to be no exception.

In an attempt to explain the popularity of viral marketing in the food industry, it might be argued that most of the consumers of food products are the mainstream consumers who generally respond well to any marketing or word of mouth marketing program. In addition, most food item purchases tend to be somewhat emotional or high impulse items, which provide the opportunity for viral marketers to more effectively influence buyer's decision making process.

Usefulness of the Application of Viral Marketing in the Food Industry in Serbia

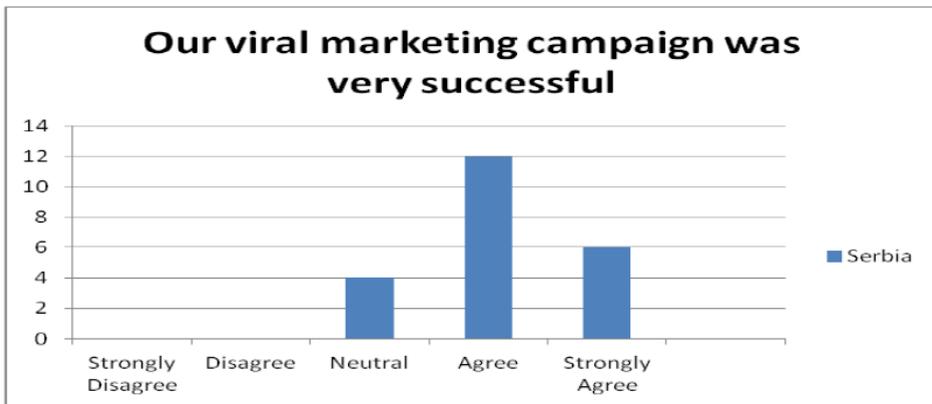
The usefulness of the application of viral marketing in the food industry was explored based on four questions or tests. In the first question, those managers who had previous experience with viral marketing campaigns were asked whether they agreed that their campaign had been very successful. Their responses are shown in the table 4.

Table 4. The perceived successfulness of viral marketing campaigns in the food industry

Country	Our viral marketing campaign was very successful					Average Rating
	Strongly Disagree ("1")	Disagree ("2")	Uncertain ("3")	Agree ("4")	Strongly Agree ("5")	
Serbia	0	0	4	12	6	4.09

Source: survey data 2012

Picture 4. The perceived successfulness of viral marketing campaigns in the food industry



Source: survey data 2012

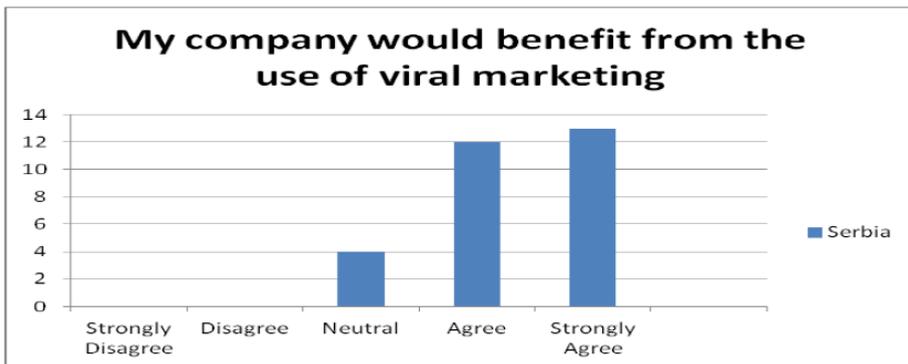
As presented in the table 4, the average agreement with the statement was 4.09 in Serbia. The results of the binomial test in the sample in Serbia suggested that *positive experiences are more common than negative experiences* (since the calculated p-value was 0.00). In the second question, the managers were asked whether they agreed that the use of viral marketing would benefit their company.

Table 5. The attitudes toward the benefits of viral marketing in the food industry

Country	My company would benefit from the use of viral marketing					Average Rating
	Strongly Disagree ("1")	Disagree ("2")	Uncertain ("3")	Agree ("4")	Strongly Agree ("5")	
Serbia	0	0	4	12	13	4.31

Source: survey data 2012

Picture 5. The attitudes toward the benefits of viral marketing in the food industry



Source: survey data 2012

The average rating of 4.31 revealed high degree of optimism about the usefulness of viral marketing.

The following two tests were based on the correlation between the responses to the previous questions. We first tested if those who had used viral marketing campaigns in the past (still) believed in its benefits (table 6).

Table 6. The correlation between those who had used viral marketing in the past and those who believed in its benefits

Pair of Variables	Valid N	Gamma	Z	p-value
Have you used any form of viral marketing in the past? & Our company would benefit from the use of viral marketing.	29	0.407035	2.200442	0.027776

Source: survey data 2012

The results shown in the table 6, based on the p-value of 0.027776, suggested that there was a significant and positive correlation between the two variables.

Furthermore, we also tested if those who had used any form of viral marketing in the past planned to use viral marketing again. The gamma rank correlation and p-values shown in table 7 suggest that there was a significant and positive correlation between the two variables in Serbia.

Table 7. The correlation between those who had used viral marketing in the past and those who planned to use it in the near future

Pair of Variables	Valid N	Gamma	Z	p-value
Have you used any form of viral marketing in the past? & Our company plans to use viral marketing in the near future.	29	0.653846	3.666039	0.000246

Source: survey data 2012

The last two findings are particularly relevant, as they confirm that the marketing managers who had had an experience with viral marketing in the past believed in the benefits of viral marketing. This is another, although indirect, indication of the usefulness of the application of the viral marketing strategy in the food industry.

Concluding Remarks

Our secondary research, both internationally and in Serbia, pointed out that there were quite a significant number of successful or extremely successful viral marketing campaigns, in terms of achieving the desired marketing effects. The campaigns of food businesses usually occupied the top positions among the most successful viral campaigns as listed by various professional publications.

Our primary research suggested that viral marketing, if defined in a broader sense, is actually quite widely accepted and used by marketing managers in the food industry in Serbia. The number of participants who reported successful campaigns significantly outnumbered those who reported that their campaign was not successful. Furthermore, most managers believed that the viral marketing program would benefit their company, and they planned to run the viral marketing campaign again in the future. There was a positive rank correlation between those who had used viral marketing in the past and those who believed in its benefits, as well as between those who had used it in the past and those who planned to use the viral marketing strategy in the near future.

We believe that there is sufficient evidence based on primary and secondary research to support the paper's hypothesis that *marketing managers in Serbia have positive attitudes toward the usefulness of viral marketing in the food industry*.

It is worth noting, however, that there are a number of issues and limitations of viral marketing. These issues are often discussed in professional circles and scholarly articles; they also surfaced in our surveys. The general negative comments about viral marketing highlighted the overall unpredictability of outcomes, the difficulty to completely control the marketing process, the danger of compromising the brand image, problems with achieving the growth plateau, difficult measurements of campaign effects, and similar. Some problems and limitations were more specific to the food industry, such as the problems in managing large increases in product demand, the inability to try the food products during the campaigns, as well as the specific regulations in the food industry⁵. Several respondents in Serbia also believed that it was too early to run viral marketing programs, as, in their opinion, part of the population was not yet ready for the campaigns centered on the new media.

These problems need to be addressed and managed. Some participants in the research suggested a number of principles and tactics to overcome these problems. Their comments stressed the *principles* of more rigorous planning, designing new viral marketing

5 The ethical and regulatory issues with the application of viral marketing in the food industry have been studied by Montgomery and Chester (2009).

measurements, synchronizing viral marketing campaigns with the overall branding strategy, integrating the viral marketing campaign with all other marketing activities, as well as genuinely caring about the real needs of customers. The suggested *tactics* in the food industry included a more extensive use of visual images and, whenever possible, the use of product samples or giveaways. The campaigns needed to be well coordinated with social media channels in order to encourage online conversations and receive early feedback from customers.

There is a need for the next stage of research that could identify the viral marketing principles and tactics that will help marketing managers plan and execute successful viral marketing campaigns while minimizing the risks associated with viral marketing.

Acknowledgment

The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia (Project III 46005).

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STAVOVI U POGLEDU PRIMENE VIRALNOG MARKETINGA U PREHRAMBENOJ INDUSTRIJI U SRBIJI

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Rezime

Rad istražuje stavove u pogledu primene viralnog marketinga u prehrambenoj industriji u Srbiji. Istraživanje se sastojalo od pregleda literature, kao i od empirijskog istraživanja na bazi analize slučajeva, anketa i ličnih intervjua u okviru prehrambene industrije u Srbiji. Viralni marketing je definisan kao bilo koji (onlajn ili oflajn) marketing program koji je osmišljen s ciljem da se postigne eksponencijano širenje marketing efekata od potrošača do potrošača. Hipoteza rada da marketing menadžeri u Srbiji imaju pozitivan stav po pitanju korisnosti primene viralnog marketinga u prehrambenoj industriji je podržana na osnovu rezultata i primarnog i sekundarnog istraživanja. Na kraju rada predstavljen je jedan broj ograničenja i rizika viralnog marketinga, i diskutovani su mogući putevi da se ovi problemi prevaziđu.

Ključne reči: *viralni marketing, marketing „od usta do usta”, viralni marketing u Srbiji, marketing prehrambenih proizvoda.*

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