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May 22, 2013 12:00 PM

Top 10 viral auto ads show how online video is redrawing auto marketing boundaries

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YouTube

'Imported from Detroit' for Chrysler ranks No. 6 in a list of online viral auto ads by Visible Measures.

Like "The Force" and "Imported from Detroit," auto marketers continue to find success with videos that tell a broader story about their products and connect with customers in new ways.

Chrysler-Fiat marketing chief Olivier Francois hopes he has this summer's pop-music hit in his back pocket: the thumping soundtrack to a Fiat 500 commercial that has evolved into a full-length, party-themed video for a song with "Fiat" in its title.

"If it works, we will have written a page in the marketing books," with Super Bowl-sized exposure on YouTube, Francois said in an interview at the *Automotive News* Marketing Seminar in Los Angeles.

If it doesn't, the project could end up where most automakers' online video promotions do: languishing on YouTube and quickly forgotten.

Online video has redrawn the boundaries of auto marketing, giving companies a chance to sketch a broader story line around their products, break the conventions of TV and connect with customers in new ways. The auto industry is second only to video game makers in embracing the medium for its video advertising, according to a recent study by **Kantar Media**.

Sometimes, automakers strike gold with a video that goes viral, racking up millions of views online and heaps of good will with customers. Super Bowl spots from **Toyota**, **Chrysler Group LLC** and **Hyundai** all received more than 10 million views on YouTube and were some of the most widely viewed commercials of this year's big game. **Volkswagen's** 2011 Super Bowl spot "The Force" is the most viewed auto commercial of all time, according to **Visible Measures**, an online video marketing and analytics firm that tracks views on YouTube and other video sites.

But for much of advertising's off-season -- that long stretch between Super Bowls -- online videos from automakers and their agencies struggle to go viral. The breakout hits continue to depend on a push from a big-budget launching pad, such as a Super Bowl spot, a movie tie-in or other pop-culture hook.

"Outside of the Super Bowl, they have not had many successes," said Seraj Bharwani, chief analytics officer for Visible Measures.

Top 10 viral auto ads of all time

RANK	BRAND	CAMPAIGN	AGENCY	VEWS (millions)
1	Volkswagen	'The Force'	Deutsch Los Angeles	80.3
2	Volkswagen	'The Dog Strikes Back'	Deutsch Los Angeles	43.3
3	Volkswagen	'The Fun Theory'	DDB Stockholm	35
4	Kia	'Share Some Soul'	David & Goliath	29
5	Honda	'Matthew's Day Off'	RPA	26.7
6	Chrysler	'Imported from Detroit'	Wieden + Kennedy Portland	26.4
7	Ford	'Fiesta Movement'	Team Detroit	25.1
8	Toyota	'The Sienna Family'	Saatchi & Saatchi Los Angeles	23.8
9	Chrysler	'It's Halftime in America'	Wieden + Kennedy Portland	23.7
10	Toyota	'#WishGranted'	Saatchi & Saatchi Los Angeles	23.4

Source: Visible Measures, AutoNews

VIRAL HITS

Marketers can gauge the "virality" of a video by the total number of views on YouTube. Visible Measures' True Reach count includes views for all videos related to a particular campaign, from across the Web. True Reach tallies for some of the biggest viral hits: MUSIC VIDEOS • Psy's "Gangnam Style": 3.89 billion views • Carly Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe": 1.44 billion • Lady Gaga's "Bad Romance": 1.02 billion AUTOMOTIVE SPOTS • Volkswagen's "The Force": 84.5 million • Chrysler's "Born of Fire": 26.4 million OTHER SPOTS • Samsung's "LeBron's Day With the Samsung Galaxy Note II": 44.3 million • Kmart's "Ship My Pants": 24.5 million HOMEMADE • "Charlie bit my finger - again": 799.4 million Source: Visible Measures

The secret sauce

Marketers gauge the "virality" of a video by the tally of views it gets on YouTube and other sites. Those totals multiply as the video is embedded into other web sites or shared across social networks such as Facebook and Twitter.

Standards for a viral hit vary: The most successful automotive spots have gotten tens of millions of YouTube views, while the music video for the pop megahit "Gangnam Style" has topped 1.6 billion.

Automakers have run about 1,100 online video campaigns since 2009, garnering about 1.23 million views each on average, roughly 225,000 fewer views than the overall average among advertisers, according to Visible Measures. During that span, automotive online campaigns accounted for about 11 percent of the more than 10,000 branded online video campaigns yet attracted only 9 percent of all page views.

Automaker videos, Bharwani said, often lack the secret sauce of novelty, humor, topicality and promotional power that compels consumers to share the content with their friends. "It's not like you throw something on YouTube and all of a sudden, everybody's excited about it," he said. "You have to promote, and the promotion has to happen on the class of sites where there is a lot of sharing behavior."

Auto marketers, for their part, say it's all but impossible to create a spot with the express purpose of going viral, and the risks of being provocative on purpose are high in an industry in which brand perceptions are still forming.

One of the winners making the rounds now is a [2 1/2-minute film from Audi titled "The Challenge,"](#) which received more than 5 million YouTube views -- and reams of media coverage -- within a week of its release this month.

Piggybacking on buzz surrounding the feature film *Star Trek Into Darkness* (and stealing thunder from **Mazda**, the film's official marketing partner), the short features two generations of the TV show's Mr. Spock character -- actors Leonard Nimoy and Zachary Quinto -- ribbing each other over the phone en route to a golf outing, the younger Spock, Quinto, in an Audi S7, Nimoy in a Mercedes-Benz CLS550.

"Videos should be compelling, true to the brand and entertaining all at the same time, and all with a hook," an Audi spokesman said. "Given how passionate Audi's fan base is, coupled with the same passion that Mr. Nimoy and Mr. Quinto bring to the table, the stakes are very high. If you strike the wrong note on any level, the backlash could be devastating for a brand."

Rap parody

Jack Hollis, vice president of marketing for **Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A.**, agreed that while the prospect of millions of online views is alluring, automakers that try too hard to generate buzz run the risk of alienating their audiences.

"If you push too hard, you become inauthentic, and you become a poser," Hollis told *Automotive News*.

One Toyota viral hit came from an unlikely place: a 2010 campaign for the Sienna minivan. Surplus funds from the launch budget were used to create "**Swagger Wagon**," an online video featuring the husband and wife from the van's "Sienna Family" campaign rapping earnestly about the parenting life.

The black-and-white video is filled with rap video satire, such as a toddler struggling with the zipper on his hoodie and the phrase "mother-father" sprinkled into the lyrics. It has been viewed nearly 12 million times on YouTube and is still generating comments three years on.

Tim Morrison, the former marketing executive who oversaw the campaign and is now Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A.'s vice president of customer retention, said "Swagger Wagon" was a last-minute idea that didn't have to go through the normal approval channels because it was online-only.

"The viral-ness of that grew upon itself because it hit a nerve with people who thought it was cool," said Hollis, who was running Scion at the time but has since studied the spot. "It wasn't created to say, 'We're going to have 17 million views.' It was created to say, 'Let's have some fun around the car and these people.'"

Yet "Swagger Wagon" remains an exception. Most spots that blossom online have big creative and promotional budgets behind them. Steve Shannon, vice president of marketing at **Hyundai Motor America**, says almost all marketers spend large sums on generating views for their videos.

"A lot of what you see, you might think it's organic," he said, but "there is huge money behind putting that content on pre-roll and on the Web everywhere as advertising."

At Chrysler-Fiat, Francois hopes to challenge that convention. The Chrysler global marketing boss produced the song "Sexy People (The Fiat Song)" as the soundtrack to Fiat's "Immigrants" campaign from last summer, in which Fiat 500s leap off picturesque Italian cliffs into the sea and then emerge in New York City.

A four-minute video for the song features Italian pop star Arianna and rapper Pitbull partying on a yacht and dancing on a beach at sunset with dozens of bikini-clad women and shirtless men, along with dozens of Fiat 500s. It's nearing 6 million views on YouTube.

Francois says the "[Fiat Song](#)" video came about because Sony Music thought the song was a potential summer hit. He says Chrysler granted Sony the rights to the song in exchange for getting the word "Fiat" in its title. Sony then incorporated footage from commercials Chrysler-Fiat had already shot, requiring no additional spending from Fiat. Sony's distribution arm now has the song making rounds in nightclubs ahead of its June radio release.

"Viral is always experimental. Viral is unpredictable," he said. "Therefore -- and that's my religion -- viral can't cost. I invest time, creativity, energy, networking. ... I don't invest money."

If the song becomes a hit, it's "good for everyone. If not, I still have my ads," Francois said.

"Sexy People" isn't there yet, but Francois is focused on the upside.

"When a song is a real hit -- which this is not today -- it's very frequent that you'll pass 100 million views on YouTube," Francois said. "It happens a lot. For us, 100 million views means a Super Bowl audience."

Automotive News is a sister publication of Crain's Detroit Business.

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