

The YouTube Ad Campaign

With budgets tight in a struggling economy, some start-ups bank on an unpredictable but oh-so-cheap marketing technique.

LAUNCHING AN ONLINE AD CAMPAIGN for his start-up's digital picture frames, Matthew Growney faced a choice. He could pay up to \$650,000 to a Web marketing firm. Or he could do it himself for practically nothing. He didn't linger long over this one. "I didn't want to pay teenagers in a room drinking Red Bull to think of things I could think of myself," says Growney. Thus was born his foray into viral marketing—the art of getting people to share your advertising with friends as though it were the latest *Saturday Night Live* political parody.

Growney, the 35-year-old founder of Isabella Products, of Concord, Mass., gels his hair straight up in the front and can pass for a hipster when not wearing a suit.

Having founded and run a venture fund for Motorola, he understands the Web better than those who learned to type on IBM Selectrics. Hence his confidence when he predicts that his campaign will be so blazin', so fly, so compellingly interesting that it will go viral. "My ads *are* viral," he says.

A word about viral: No one predicts viral. "Everyone wants to do the Subservient Chicken," says Jonah Peretti, founder of viral-media tracking site BuzzFeed, referring to a legendary Burger King campaign whose reach was extended by e-mail sharing. But when it comes to who succeeds and who fizzles, "randomness is involved."

Growney is undeterred. With help from a filmmaking friend, he's creating eight to 10 two-min-

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ute "Webisodes" to begin rolling out on Isabella's Web site every two weeks. The idea is not to tout the product at first but to create suspense with documentary-style vignettes that are "like *The Office* but sillier," he says. The first clip shows Growney assembling his team by luring them away from their current jobs. (One of them apparently was a ballerina.) Another clip shows his head engineer going over the 120 written steps involved in manufacturing. Suddenly self-conscious, the engineer looks at the camera and asks, "Do you need an aspirin?" Not until the sixth Webisode will we learn about some of the product's features.

To drive traffic to his site, Growney will link the video to pages on Facebook and MySpace; he'll also ask suppliers and partners to carry it on their sites, and use networking sites Digg and Twitter to tell photo-sharing addicts about it. Naturally, he'll post it on YouTube. And he can do all of this for free. "I'd rather be an arms dealer than send money to Google" for ad placement, says Growney.

A long shot? Not necessarily. The San Diego tech company Chumby introduced a media player earlier this year—a homely product that looks like a beanbag. Before it hit the market, the company sent prototypes to tech bloggers, who wrote about

Instead of throwing big bucks at marketing firms, some small businesses try to generate their own buzz.

it and posted videos online of the player at work. Company founder Steve Tomlin claims that the exposure has helped him sell tens of thousands of the \$180 Chumbys without spending a dollar on ads. "We are a marketing-lite firm," he says.

Some rules for viral success: Don't overtly sell. Growney's slow reveal works because mystery is good, says Rick Webb, cofounder of The Barbarian Group, a Web marketing firm. But, he adds, "be honest, and don't insult viewers' intelligence." Tomlin agrees, citing a campaign for a Microsoft music player that backfired because it was like "Dad trying to be cool." Lastly but hardly least, says BuzzFeed's Peretti, avoid slickness; lofty production values can instantly seem inauthentic. Based on a peek at Growney's first clips, slickness doesn't appear to be a problem. **S**



Photograph by Evan Kafka