

## **Viral Advertising**

This morning I got an email from a friend announcing she has started her retirement. I wanted to congratulate her by sending a “free” ecard from the Rubber Chicken eCard site. Friends have sent me ecards from RC and I think they have the best-animated cards I’ve seen online.

Well, after spending several minutes perusing the different cards I found the perfect one to send, Great Day Psychick, so I proceeded to hit the SEND NOW button. A page came up asking me to type in my email address for a FREE 10 day trial. I typed in my email address and hit SUBMIT which brought me to another page asking for all my personal info; name, address, phone number, even my birth date and gender. After filling out all the info except for the age, I hit SUBMIT again and the next page appears....

Please select your payment method below. You will not be charged during your trial period. You may contact us to request a cancellation at any time during your free trial. If we don’t hear from you, we’ll continue your yearly subscription for just \$19.95 without interruption.

Well, I wasn’t about to give them my credit card info because all I wanted was one FREE ecard without having to go through the hassle of contacting them to cancel (we all know most of us will forget to cancel) and once they have my personal info I wasn’t sure what they would do with it anyway. I must confess. I almost never look at the “fine print” when I am asked to select the check box “Yes, I agree to these rules and regulations”. Trying to be fair, I downloaded the Privacy PDF, which is 7 pages long and skimming through the document, I found this on page 4:

### **Rubber Chicken's USES OF PERSONAL INFORMATION**

If you have provided us your consent, we will use the information we have collected about you in five ways:

1. To send personalized, targeted information that we think our users will find relevant
2. To include targeted advertising within such messages
3. To send promotions and coupons based on the user’s interests
4. To contact the user for feedback and surveys; and
5. To send the user other information about RCC.

Guess it pays to read the “fine print” because it does say, “ If you have provided us your consent, we will use the information we have collected...”. I then have to read further to find out how to opt out of giving my consent. Now, how many of you would bother reading all this?

At this point I close the tab in the browser and decide that I’m not about to continue.

So, what does reading Privacy statement and sending an ecard have to do with anything?

This process of gathering personal information and then providing the email address of the recipient of the card is a form of advertising....Viral Advertising/Marketing to be specific.

## ***Viral Advertising***

So what exactly is Viral marketing?

Dr. Ralph F. Wilson, E-Commerce Consultant who has written *The Six Simple Principles of Viral Marketing* defines it this way,

“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. Like viruses, such strategies take advantage of rapid multiplication to explode the message to thousands, to millions.”

When sending an ecard you are inadvertently sending an advertisement for this ecard company. Your friend who receives the card loves it and decides to go to this website to send a "FREE" ecard to one of their friends. The company then hopes that this new consumer may pay to become a member and the “viral infection” begins and can spread quickly.

Viral Marketing isn’t new. In traditional advertising it is referred to as “word-of-mouth,” “creating a buzz,” “leveraging the media,” “network marketing”.

The Internet is full of many examples with Hotmail being one of the most famous. When Hotmail started it was missing the important ingredient to succeed - traffic. Being able to control information added to the senders email, because it is a free service, it added a footer signature that said,

"To get your FREE email account goto [www.hotmail.com](http://www.hotmail.com)".

As more and more emails were sent by existing account holders, more and more people signed up for the free service. Hotmail became so successful that Microsoft purchased it.

Well, you might be wondering what I decided about sending the ecard. I just couldn’t sign up knowing I would cancel so I found a photo I had taken in LA a while ago, altered it a bit and designed my own personal congratulations card.

Oh, BTW, I got an email a few hours later from Rubber Chicken asking me why I didn’t complete the membership process!