

[A different way of selling clothes](#)

[Gap's animated online stripper latest viral ad to get attention as firms seek new ways to reach buyers](#)

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In the world of viral advertising, millions of people can strip a computer-animated model down to his boxers, order a man in a chicken suit to dance around his living room and request a frothy beer from a blond barmaid, all without realizing that they have just been lured into a marketing campaign.

Companies have increasingly turned to viral ads -- ads that spread like viruses through word of mouth or e-mail forwards -- as television and radio continue to lose their audiences to TiVo and iPods. TiVo allows viewers to skip through commercials while the iPod lets users listen to hours of music without constantly being interrupted by ads.

“Advertisers have to find another way to deliver their message,” said Peter Sealey, adjunct professor of marketing at the Walter A. Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley. “Because of the decline in traditional media, they have to make themselves more interesting.”

San Francisco retailer Gap Inc. recently came up with the viral ad where viewers can create an image of themselves by adjusting the physical traits of an animated model, right down to his or her weight, skin tone and even jawline (www.watchmechange.com). Viewers have the option of sculpting the model's hair into a Mohawk, Afro or mullet. They can give him or her a unibrow and an unseemly gut.

They can also pick out outfits for the model, who will then begin gyrating to club music and do a striptease down to his or her underwear before disappearing into a fitting room and coming back out wearing the clothes of the viewers' choosing.

The Gap logo flashes at the beginning of the ad, and then only appears as a navy blue square in the corner of the computer screen as a reminder. The ad does not prompt viewers to buy Gap clothing -- at least not outwardly.

“We wanted to do something interactive and fun, something attention-getting that we hadn't tried before,” said Rebecca Weill, a spokeswoman for Gap, which recruited Crispin Porter + Bogusky, an advertising firm in Miami, to design the concept.

The firm was also responsible for coming up with Burger King's viral ad (www.subservientchicken.com) in which a man dressed up in a chicken suit responds to commands typed by the viewer. Beer.com saw a surge in hits on its Web site after creating the Virtual Bartender, in which Playboy model Tammy Plante pours a beer and dances on a bar at the viewer's request.

Although no one knows how effective viral ads are, they are certainly good at generating buzz. When Burger King's site went up last year, people stayed on it for an average of nine minutes. The company said that the site has had 14 million visitors and more than 400 million hits.

Gap would not disclose how many hits its site has received so far, but the response has been good enough for the company to come up with another viral ad for its Banana Republic brand (www.FindtheArtintheEveryday.com). The site shows an aerial view of schoolchildren forming different patterns -- like a face and a sailboat -- to Gary Jules' cover of the Tears for Fears' song “Mad World.”

Like all viral ads, www.watchmechange.com depends on the viewer to spread the word about the Web site, allowing the ad to take on a life of its own rather than having Gap make a direct sales pitch to customers.

“We didn't want to hit people over the head with obvious branding,” Weill said. “We didn't want it to be a constant reminder.”

The subtle promotion is part of Gap's larger campaign to show off its remodeled stores in Denver and eventually San Diego, New York and Hartford, Conn. Weill said the viral ad is intended to convey a message of change.

But whether viewers take away that same message is hard to know. By their very nature, viral ads try to be entertaining rather than obvious.

“When the ad and the entertainment is combined, you have to be subtle about it because otherwise it's pure commercialism,” Sealey said.

Measuring the effectiveness of such ads is also difficult. Millions of people can linger on an ad for several minutes, but that does not mean they will run out to a Gap store and buy an outfit or pop into Burger King and order a chicken sandwich.

“They are certainly effective in generating publicity,” said Jordan Warren, president and chief executive officer of Eleven, an advertising

agency in San Francisco. “Whether those marketers can translate those impressions into bottom-line sales is still a question.”

Viral ads can also draw negative attention. A Ford Sport Ka ad, for instance, received complaints after it showed a cat being decapitated by a car sunroof. An ad for Volkswagen Polo, in which a suicide bomber blows himself up inside the car, also sparked an outcry. Both Ford and Volkswagen have denied any involvement, saying that the creators of the ads had come up with them on their own without authorization from either company.

Nonetheless, viral ads are proving their place in the retail industry as companies continue to seek out creative ways to grab consumers’ attention.

“The greatest thing is to have word of mouth,” Sealey said. “Advertisers are desperate to get people to talk about their product.”