

Research: The Emotions that Make Marketing Campaigns Go Viral

by Kelsey Libert and Kristin Tynski | 9:00 AM October 24, 2013

We're all well aware of the fact that marketing is shifting from a landscape where marketers can utilize mass media to speak *at* consumers, to one where marketers are simply part of the crowd themselves. The bullhorn of radio, television, print and other one-way interruptive marketing approaches are quickly losing efficacy. So how do you get your brand noticed?

A recent article by Mitch Joel argues that brands must **publish more content**, that the old standbys of frequency and repetition that worked so well in decades past are still worthwhile today. Truth be told, he's right. Publishing more content, even if the content isn't viral or noteworthy, can be a great way to maintain or even grow existing large audiences.

But what if your brand or company doesn't have an active audience of avid content consumers already? In this case, piles of mediocre content certainly won't do the trick. If you don't already have a large built-in audience, you must attract them from elsewhere. Viral marketing is hands-down one of the best ways to do this.

What Can Viral Marketing Actually Do?

Break through the noise

With **5.3 trillion display** ads shown online each year, **400 million tweets** sent daily, **144,000 hours** of YouTube video uploaded daily, and **4.75 billion** pieces of content shared on Facebook every day, posting a few blasé blogs on the corporate website just isn't going to cut it. You're going to need something that cuts through the clutter.

Create massive brand exposure and free press

Successful viral campaigns regularly produce 1 million+ impressions, with standouts garnering 10x to 100x that number, often crossing over into the mainstream, and picking up free exposure on television and radio and in print media. For instance, in 2012, the viral campaign "**Kony 2012**" for the Invisible Children organization garnered nearly 100,000,000 views, and was covered by most mainstream news organizations. The campaign has more than 2,000 results in **Google News**.

Generate high levels of social engagement, sharing, and brand interaction, which can lead to sharp increases in digital brand advocacy.

When **Dove's Real Beauty sketches** campaign went viral, it garnered nearly **30 million views in ten days**. Additionally, it single-handedly added more than 15,000 YouTube subscribers to Dove's channel over the following **two months**, not to mention substantial increases in followers on Twitter and Facebook as well.

Massively improve organic search rankings

In our own experience at [Frac.tl](#), two successful viral campaigns ([Dying to Be Barbie](#) and [Before & After Drugs: The Horrors of Methamphetamine](#)) were responsible for very sharp increases in organic search traffic to our client's site. Viral content contributes significantly to primary signals Google uses as part of its ranking algorithm (authoritative links and social engagement).

This [graph of the six-month ranking improvements](#) for our client, [Rehabs.com](#), reflects a 750% increase in site visits as a direct result of these viral campaigns. The hump at the beginning occurred at the launch of the [first viral campaign](#) which looked at the before and after images of individuals addicted to methamphetamine, with subsequent campaigns like ["Is a Barbie Body Possible,"](#) resulting in the sustained increase.

Increase brand engagement

When users engage with brands via content they choose, rather than content they're given, they are more engaged with the content and the brand.

How Any Business Can Create Successful Viral Content Marketing Campaigns

Lesson 1: Create a Viral Coefficient > 1

Breaking through the noise and going viral is the direct result of having a viral coefficient above 1. For the sake of simplicity, viral coefficient can be thought of as the total number of new viewers generated by one existing viewer. A viral coefficient above 1 means the content has viral growth and is growing, and a coefficient below 1 means that sharing growth is diminishing.

So how do you create content that people will share?

Step 1: Write a compelling title

Your title is what attracts new viewers. The more people you can get to consume your content, the more chances you have for getting people to share it. If you can't get the initial click, your content is dead in the water.

Step 2: Use strong emotional drivers to make people care and share

As [Thales Teixeira](#) noted, it is important to create maximal emotional excitement quickly. Hit them hard and fast with strong emotions, but remember to keep the branding to a minimum. Heavy use of branding can cause many viewers to disregard the content as spammy or salesy, resulting in loss of interest, abandonment, or even backlash.

When your content is in video form, be sure to give people an emotional roller coaster. This should be done by "pulsing" the emotionally heavy hitting points in your content with breaks or gaps. It is helpful to think of it as "cleansing of the emotional palate." By creating contrast between the high levels of

emotionality and areas of less emotional activation, the audience won't find themselves becoming bored, satiated, or overwhelmed with too much of the same.

Step 3: Create content that strikes the correct emotional chords

While there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that strong emotions are key to viral sharing, there are a **scarce few** that indicate which emotions work best.

To this end, one of the best ways we've found to understand the emotional drivers of viral content is to map the emotions activated by some of the Internet's most viral content.

In order to understand the best emotional drivers to use in the content we create, we looked at 30 of the top 100 images of the year from imgur.com as voted on Reddit.com (one of the top sharing sites in the world). We then surveyed 60 viewers to find out which emotions each image activated for them. We used Robert Plutchik's comprehensive **Wheel of Emotion** as our categorization. What we found was compelling:

1. Negative emotions were less commonly found in highly viral content than positive emotions, but viral success was still possible when negative emotion also evoked anticipation and surprise.
2. Certain specific emotions were extremely common in highly viral content, while others were extremely uncommon. Emotions that fit into the surprise and anticipation segments of Plutchik's wheel were overwhelmingly represented. Specifically:
 - Curiosity
 - Amazement
 - Interest
 - Astonishment
 - Uncertainty
3. The emotion of admiration was very commonly found in highly shared content, an unexpected result.

Here are a few sample images from the survey (And here are the **full results of our research** in heatmap form along with their corresponding images.)

Image 1: My waitress decided to call me Jackie Chan to some of her co workers thinking I was out of earshot.

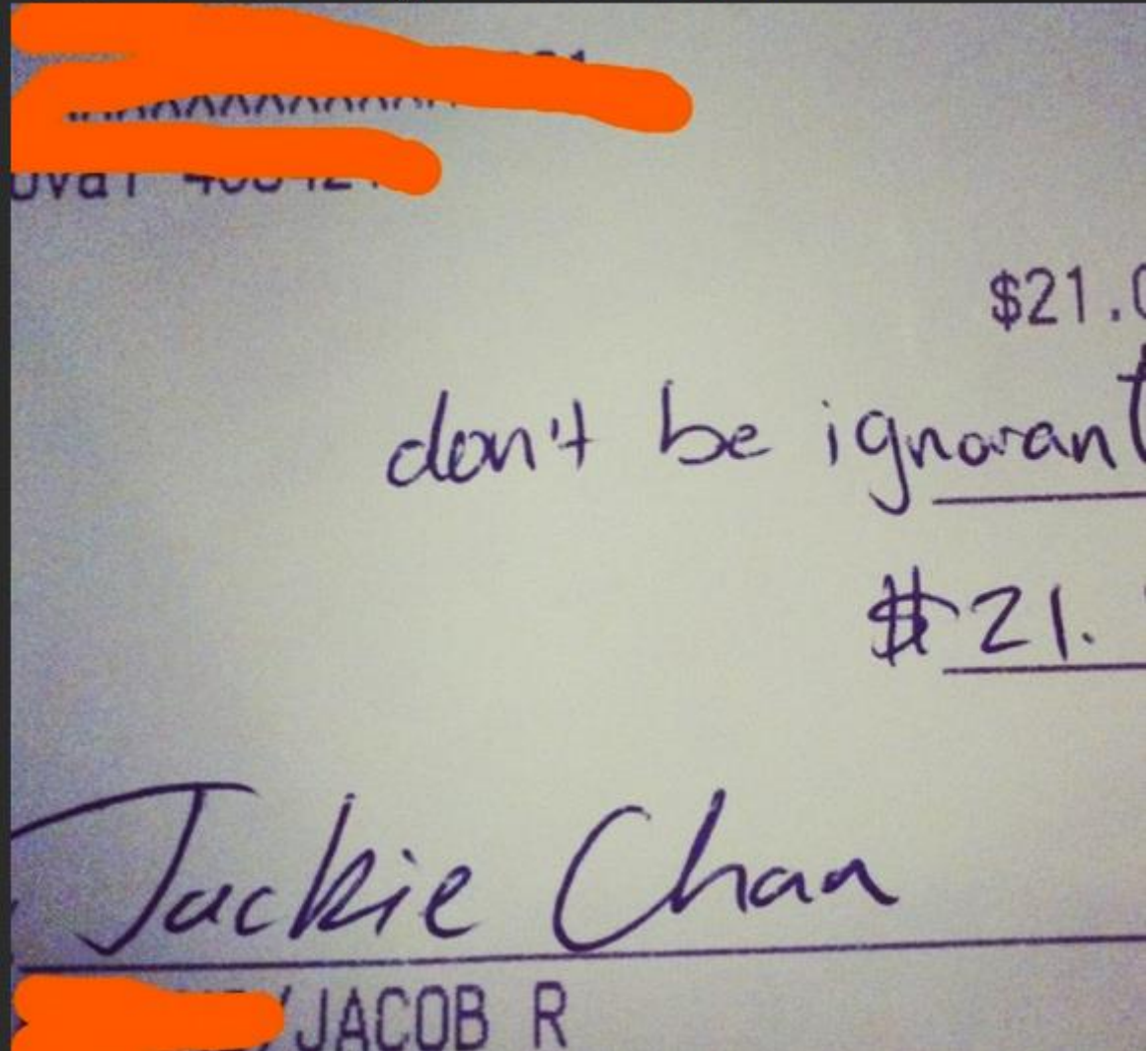


Image 1 Chart

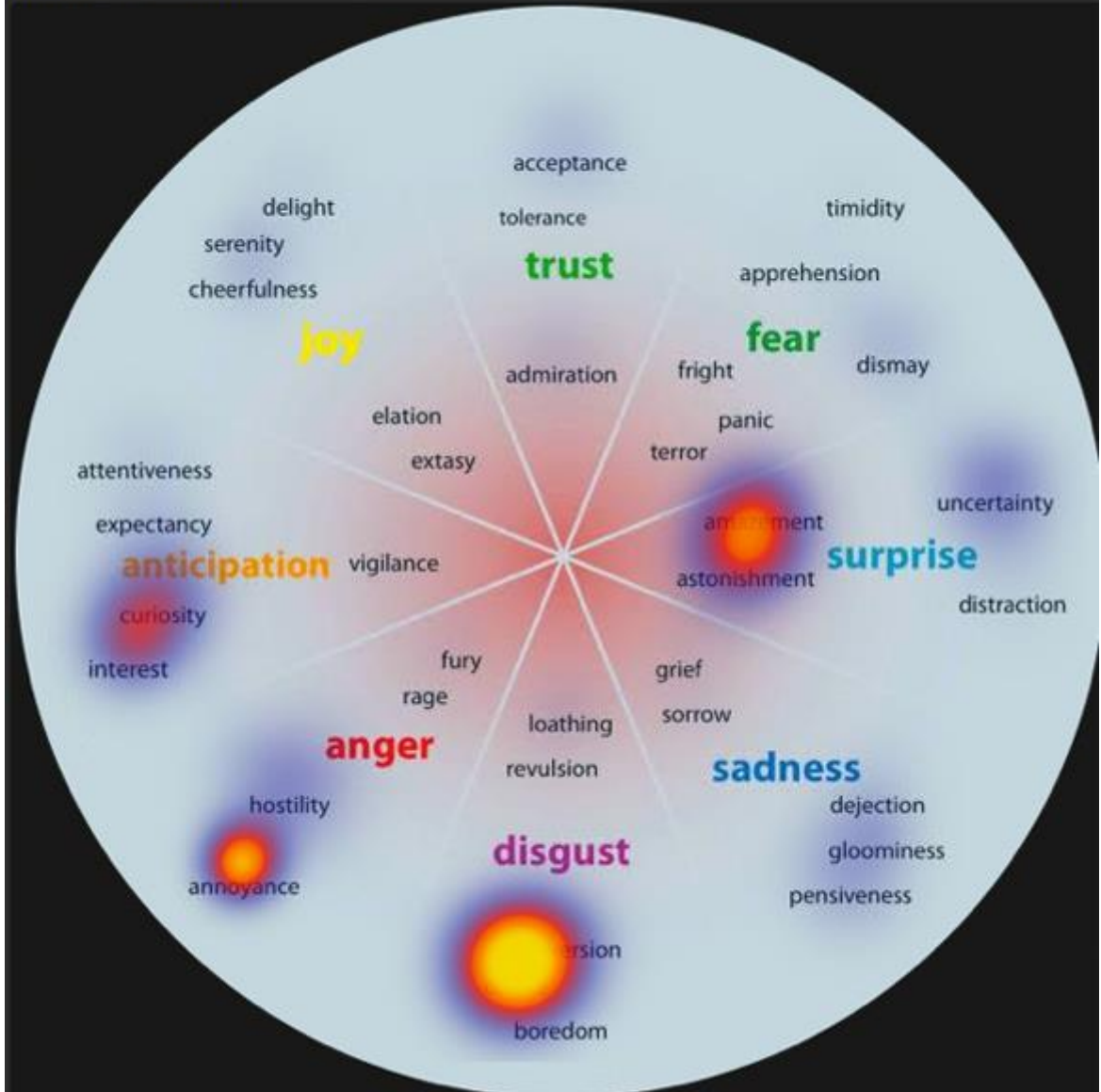


Image 13: Found on friends Go Pro Camera after surfing in Rockaway Beach, NY



Image 13 Chart

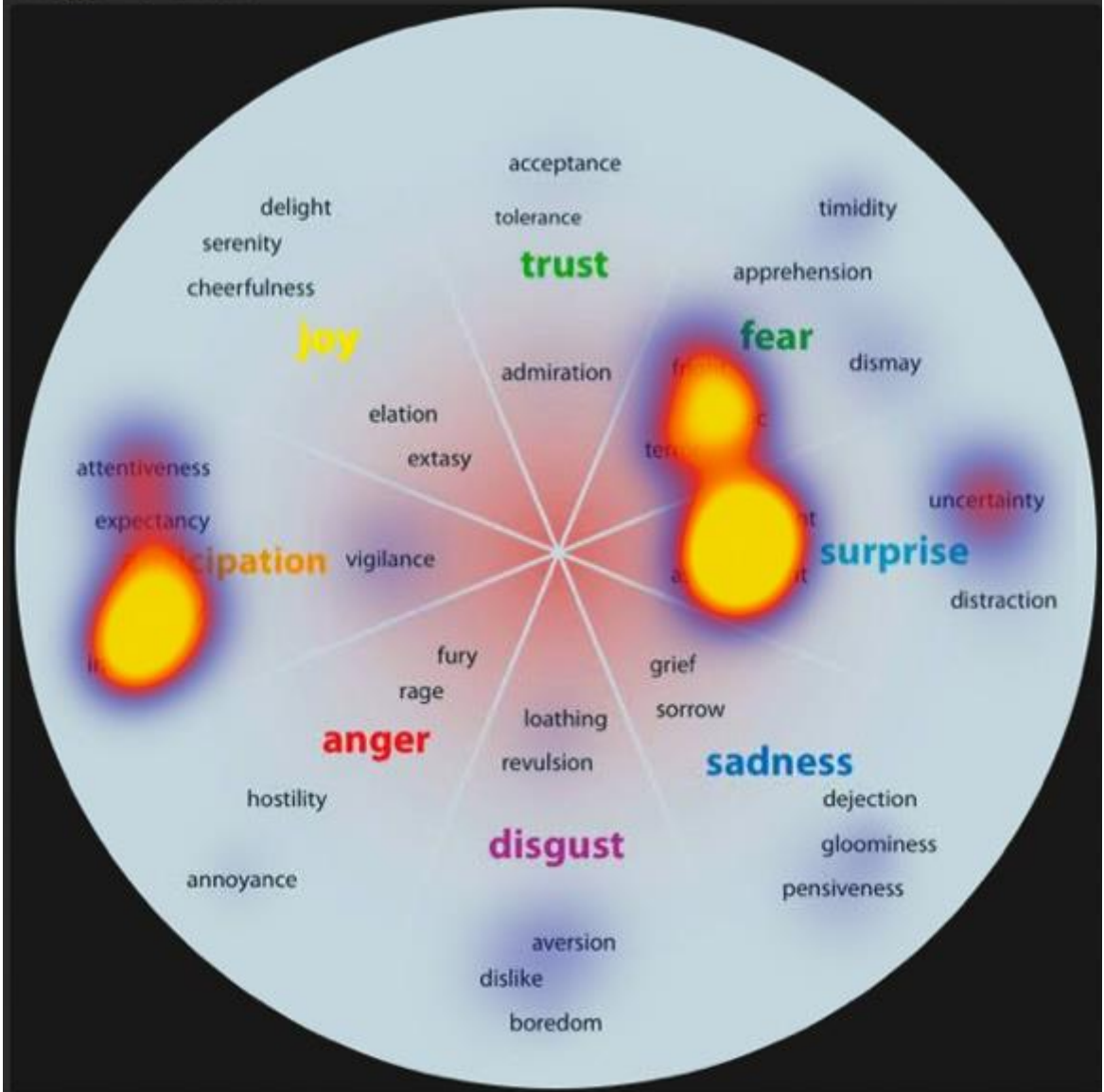
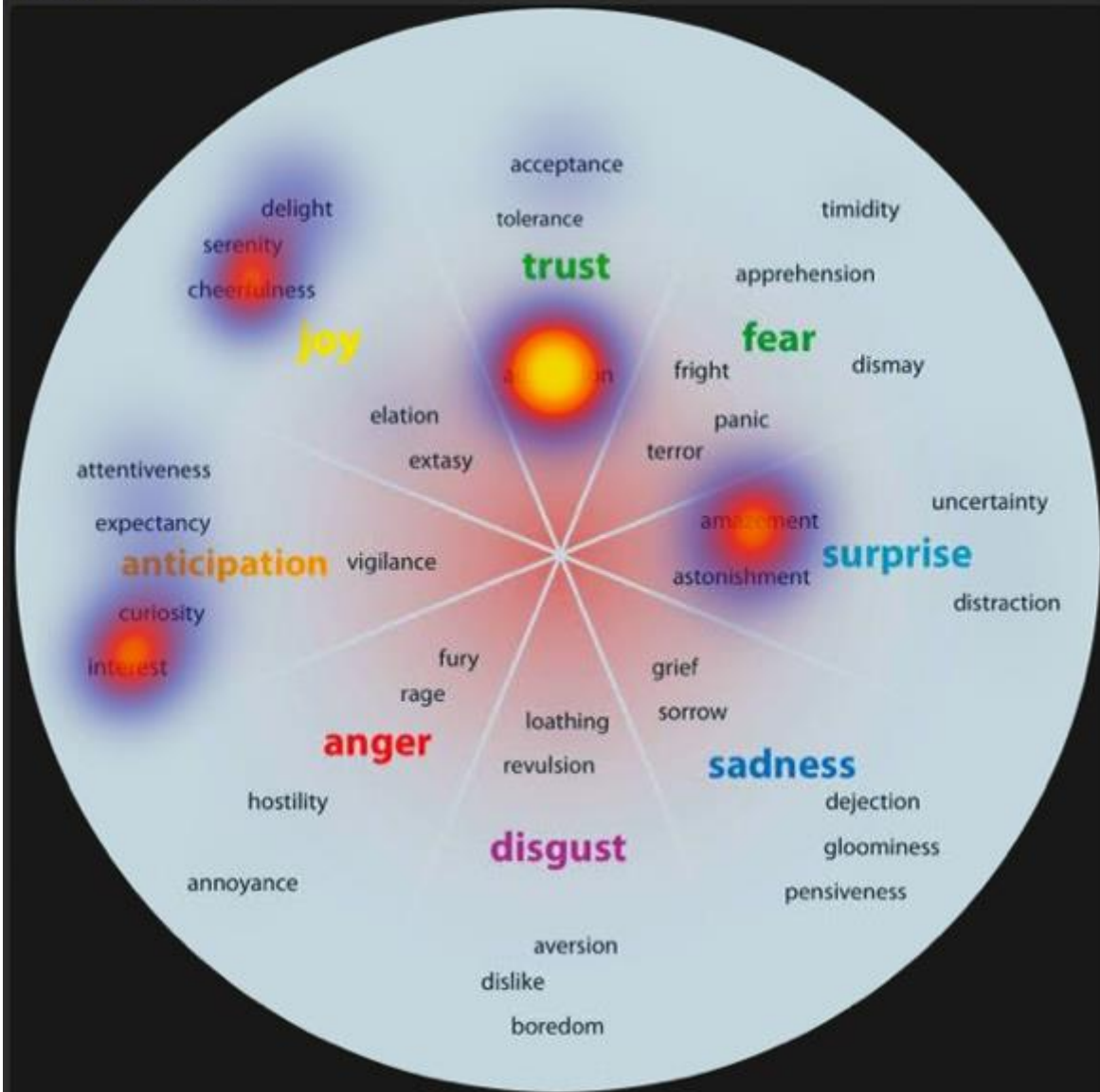


Image 25: Brilliant and thoughtful parents handed these out to everyone on my flight.

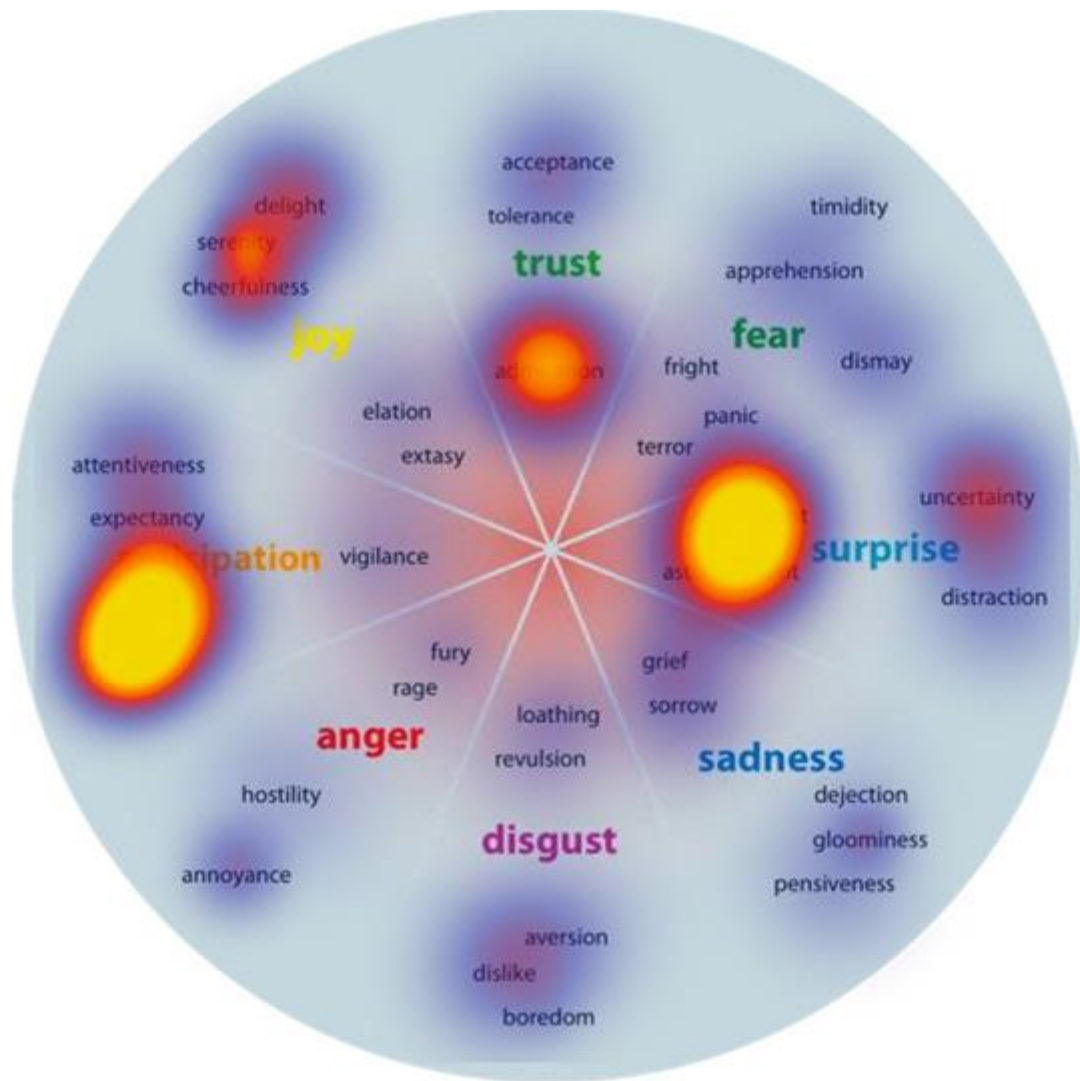


Hello!
We're twin baby boys on our first flight and we're only 14 weeks old!
We'll try to be on our best behavior, but we'd like to apologize in
advance just in case we lose our cool, get scared or our ears hurt.
Our mom and dad (AKA our portable milk machine and our diaper
changer) have ear plugs available if you need them. We are all
sitting in 20E and 20F if you want to come by to get a pair.
We hope you have a great flight!

Image 25 Chart



Below is a heatmap of the aggregate emotional data, representing the totals compiled.



Lesson 2: Tie Your Brand to an Emotional Message

If strong emotional activation is the key to viral success, how can brands best craft highly emotional messages with their content?

First, think carefully about how your company, product or service is related to a topic or topics that taps into deep-seated human emotions within your target demographic.

The goal is to find the link to an issue that plagues your consumers and relates directly or even tangentially to your brand or product. At the same time, you must make sure that the topic you choose also positively reflects the position of your brand. Using the example of the **Dove Face Sketch** campaign mentioned above, it is clear that its viral success was the result of its ability to tap into a deep emotional reaction to commonly felt feelings of inadequacy and low self esteem. Dove created a positive emotional reaction by creating solidarity through their campaign. Their content delivered the message “Many women don’t see themselves for how pretty they really are — let’s change that.” Dove’s content engaged strong emotions – even difficult emotions – but managed to win by presenting a more important overarching idea.

Lesson 3: Consider the Public Good

Consider that one of the best ways to create an emotionally compelling piece of viral content that also works well with your brand is to tie your brand to a message for the public good. Brainstorm how your brand might be able to create content that does a public good or that creates awareness, but at the same time activates strong emotional drivers. One excellent recent example was a highly emotionally **evocative video campaign** from AT&T created to drive awareness for the dangers of texting and driving. AT&T hired famed filmmaker Werner Herzog. The short film has been viewed more than two million times.

Another example comes from a viral ad made for the Metro Trains rail service in Australia. The campaign, titled **“Dumb Ways to Die”** has created massive awareness through an unexpected, funny, and emotionally jarring video. Since its launch, the video has been seen by more than 56 million people. (You can read more about it [here](#).)

To be sure, we are entering an era of marketing that is much more ambiguous, subtle, and not nearly as heavy-handed as it has been in the past. The good news is that there is ample opportunity for those who understand that engaging with audience means touching their hearts and contributing tangibly to their world.

Marketers are no longer in charge of what people see. If you want to get people's attention, contribute something worthy of consumers' time and emotional investment.