Creating an ad campaign that goes viral is every company’s best dream. Viral campaigns reach a wider cross than more traditional advertising methods can through word-of-mouth and social media, often resulting in fame and a huge profit for the company.

Most advertisements that gain this level of popularity achieve it because they’re clever and make the consumer think about whatever is being portrayed in a new way. But, a company shouldn’t use manipulation to convince its customers to buy its products or care about the plights of other people—consumers should care about other people without direction from an advertiser.

Some viral marketing stories result in triumph. Recently, Plan, a Norwegian non-profit organization created a fictional blog about a 12-year-old child bride engaged to a 37-year-old man in order to raise awareness about child brides around the world and elicited sponsorships for other girls who would otherwise be coerced into these types of marriages. The blog featured posts authored by Tia (the girl) about everything from picking out a wedding dress to no longer attending school and questioning what sex would be like. Since the posts were unabashedly frank, they shocked readers of the blog and provoked a flurry of responses. The non-profit’s campaign was quite successful: they gained a readership of around 500,000 people before the story even blew up via media coverage—not too bad, considering Norway’s total population is five million people—and the exposure has almost certainly resulted in an increase of sponsorships for potential child brides.

But being shocked by something that later turns out to be false and done for the sake of arousing sympathy through those same false pretenses is an ugly way of raising awareness, and could taint the same awareness that it grants to readers. In the case of this campaign, responses have been real and positive—that there are news stories published by major news outlets yet that react to it in the negative manner usually reserved for controversal campaigns. Additionally, the outcry shown for a white child bride from a first-world European country and the resulting sensations on the petition that Plan created—which elicited an astounding 488,000 signatures of the initial goal and reached an estimated 3.6 million people—is really telling. Plan states on their website that 500,000 girls will be forced into marriage in the next 10 years, and the practice of child brides has been around for a long time. It’s an issue that many people are aware of, but choose not to take action about because it doesn’t directly influence them. There isn’t a good solution for our general desensitization to these causes. Of course, if we ignore that marketing like Plan’s brings to our attention. A lot of it has to do with how readily available information is now. When large volumes of information from all over the world floods our awarenes, it’s overwhelming and forces a reader to have to pick and choose what they can pay attention to. This same thing happens around Christmas and Easter each year, when every major retailer asks for donations from casual shoppers, and often results in a negative re- response, because consumers feel like they’re being asked to donate to too many causes at the same time and aren’t able to afford it or aren’t willing to donate multiple times.

But tricking readers, especially for a social justice cause through shock value advertising, can only work so many times before consumers either stop believing advertisements and information for social justice causes, or vehemently reject causes that they feel other- wise fund and raise awareness for.

Companies need to be upfront about when an advertisement is fake and aim to be more straightforward. Even if relying on readers elicits a positive response, eventually there will be an over-saturation of viral and shocking advertising. There’s already a proliferation of videos with clickbait titles on websites like Upworthy, and there are more being posted every day. Straightforward messages that are to the point, that funding meth- ods that are transparent and acces- sible are the more ethical solution, and could possibly pay off more in the long run than a shock cam- paign will in the short-term.

**Shock value an ineffective part of viral ad campaigns**

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**Protecting children not the real purpose of proposed tobacco ban**

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**Shock ADDITIONS** Marketing campaigns like the Norwegian child bride campaign must be more transparent.