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## Mekanism: Engineering Viral Marketing

In early 2011, Iwan Harris, Mekanism's president, and Phil Caban, CEO, discussed the events of the past three years and the future of their firm. In 2009, many new clients had signed on with Mekanism, a digital social media production company. In the development of viral marketing campaigns, and the company enjoyed a 65% annual growth in billings. This growth was faster than they had hoped for, and stronger than their competitors' growth. Yet, in 2011, despite an increase in profits, the firm only grew 25% in billings with fewer new clients signing on. This change of events—added to the opportunity created from current clients requesting other complementary services to viral marketing—inspired Harris and Caban to consider converting Mekanism from a specialized production shop to a full-service ad agency.

Viral marketing was initially sought out mostly by small advertisers, due to its promise of reaching millions of consumers quickly and cheaply via word-of-mouth. After seeing the success of viral marketing, major advertisers also became interested in the engagement potential of viral content. Increased accountability and lower costs were two other major reasons clients experimented with viral marketing. Mekanism had developed a reputation for successfully creating and managing viral-based campaigns for ad agencies and their clients. In its early years, Mekanism's roster of advertising services had included other digital media content than just viral, but this one service had gradually become the firm's main revenue generator.

As more advertisers hired Mekanism directly for their viral marketing needs, an increase in requests to them to develop other promotion tools was also taking place. This opportunity required Harris and Caban to rethink the role viral marketing played at Mekanism and its value for major advertisers. The pivotal point occurred after Mekanism was hired by Pepsi-Lipson to create viral ads for the Super Bowl. The TV ad became the most viewed Super Bowl ad on YouTube the day after the Super Bowl. This success spurred Harris and Caban to consider producing other content for different media and, in the process, working only with brand advertisers instead of their agencies.

For Mekanism, becoming a full-service ad agency would mean a closer relationship with advertisers and would afford more opportunities to leverage content into television and other traditional media. On the other side, if Mekanism remained a niche creative shop specialized in viral marketing, it could focus on what had proven to be successful and attempt to fend off recent competitors. This decision was critical as it affected major areas of the company, in particular the type of clients served. Working for ad agencies was not ideal, but Mekanism didn't offer the wide range of services needed to fully manage an advertiser's account. Harris and Caban had to assess a decision to the rest of the company soon as employees in sales and creation were increasingly being requested by current clients to deliver a range of other advertising content in various media.

Professor Thoma Herrera and Research Assistant Adam Cannon prepared this case. 1988 cases are developed solely at the Harvard Business School and are intended to serve as a supplement to classroom instruction. It is not intended to be used as a substitute for classroom instruction. Copyright © 2012, Harvard Business School. All rights reserved. For more information, contact the Harvard Business School Case Studies Department, 7901 Business School Building, Boston, MA 02163, or go to <http://www.harvard.edu/casestudies>. This publication may not be distributed, photocopied, or otherwise reproduced, printed, or transmitted, without the permission of Harvard Business School.

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