

# WHEN VIRAL ISN'T A DIRTY WORD



## ENVIROFACT

Paper cups are often impregnated with toxic dyes which make them difficult to recycle. The plastic lining in disposable paper cups means they are not recyclable.

In the current digital environment, traditional marketing strategies are being quickly superseded by the tidal force of social networking trends. Australia's Abigail Forsyth caught on early and her innovative Keep Cup is now riding its wave of success.

When Forsyth first launched the KeepCup, a reusable barista standard cup, she chose a relatively small platform, selling the cups at a designer's market in Melbourne, Australia. Her business aspirations at the time were humble, hoping to work on the cups as "a nice little project" while she raised her children.

Having managed a take-out food store with her brother, she was aware of all of their wastage and began the path to creating a reusable take-away coffee cup to ease her sustainable-wise conscience. Two years later in 2009, with the help of two grants and some industrial designers, she sold the first set of KeepCups at the small market event – selling 1,000 cups in just six hours.

"People didn't even know what it was and they were buying it just because they liked the colours. People were telling me this was something they wanted to do, or something that they had been looking for," she recounts. "That was just such a fantastic moment – knowing that we provided a solution for something and that people wanted it."

They knew then that they had a market and started selling the cups online as well as to some major Australian coffee roasters and corporations. At this point, Forsyth had more or less reached her goal in creating a viable reusable coffee cup, easing her guilt in the amount of wastage the coffee industry was creating.

What happened next, however, was certainly not what she had expected. In her online searches, she found people as far the United States and Europe talking about the KeepCup on blogs, Facebook and Twitter. As with anything digital, the communication was clearly traceable and she could see the direct link between these online discussions and sales of her product. In one instance, they could trace back a conversation to a single blog that generated 10 orders from the United States within half an hour.

Forsyth's initial marketing strategy, or some might arguable say lack of, was indicative of the new-age environment in which the product was launched. Fortunately she quickly caught onto the online discussions and took advantage of the publicity.

"It has really been quite viral. It is something that just happened, but we leapt on board when we needed to," explains Forsyth.

Since this accidental start, Forsyth has taken a more purposeful approach to social networking, actively engaging in discussions where she can. In this respect, she warns other businesses that it is



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Abigail Forsyth,  
Founder Keep Cup

important to be cautious in your approach to the newest online environments.

"You have to be careful how you're pushing your own agenda," Forsyth says. "In social media it's easy to spot disingenuous communication. You have to be genuine and that will make people seek your product out."

Another huge step the company took last November was to launch its first office in the UK. Taking from their experience in the Australian launch, Forsyth explains that their first step was to seed themselves in the "third wave" espresso community. In winning them over, Abigail hopes to spread admiration of the Keep Cup in a similar viral fashion to her home turf, with limited help from more traditional marketing strategies.

Similarly, they've also launched the KeepCup in the United States at Coffeefest in Seattle, and received a positive response. In the US, however, Forsyth explains that this is a different environment altogether, where conglomeration has reached its peak and business is dominated by commercial giants.

"The big chain stores dominate over there, unlike Australia and New Zealand," she says. KeepCup is currently seeking the endorsement and support of third wave independent roasters in the US.

This energy to expand overseas has come as less of a purposeful push and mostly at the behest of customers, the kind of user-generated demand that's largely been a product of their online path to success. Essentially, when they receive an inquiry, they look for an overseas partner and just follow where the demand is.

"It's like a tank rolling towards you," she says, "Unless you climb in and start driving it, it's going to run you over."



The credit for Forsyth's success extends beyond the blogosphere, and as with anything, relies on the adequacy of her product in either meeting an existing demand or creating one.

In this sense, the KeepCup has managed to do both. It is more than just a useful gadget to cut down on consumption, but in Australia has become a kind of accessory. Forsyth knew that paramount to her success would be whether the final product was aesthetically pleasing. She knew that for the cups to catch on they had to be something people wanted to use, like an iPod or a SIGG water bottle.

"We had a good idea of the aesthetics, we wanted to echo a paper cup but also be a little different," Forsyth explains. "[The KeepCup]'s reason for being is sustainability, but it's the patterns and colours that people love and it might not be why you buy it, but certainly why you enjoy using it."

The product itself hasn't changed much from this initial design. They've done some minor fine-tuning like switching from a semi-gloss to a matt finish and plan to launch a 4-ounce piccolo KeepCup in April 2011. GCR