

# Creating "Memes" While Creating Advertising

**BETSY D. GELB**

Professor of Marketing  
and Entrepreneurship  
University of Houston

"Self-replicating ideas" that move through time and space are called "memes." To the extent that advertisers take into account their existence, they may get more than they pay for or, by contrast, may unleash negative ideas that also live on. . . . and on. . . . and on. . . .

CAN ADS BE DESIGNED to make more likely the replication of the message they convey—to enable their message to "live on" elsewhere after the advertising no longer is broadcast, published, or mailed? Yes, they can, according to theory that postulates the existence of "memes": self-replicating ideas that move through time and space without further effort from the source.

Therefore, any communication that produces its own repetition, possibly in a new form, is by definition a "meme" (pronounced "meem"). A brand name, an image, a phrase, or a linkage of two or more concepts can be seen or heard again, then again, then again, without additional dissemination or effort by the original advertiser.

As an example, "Where's the Beef?" comes to mind. Originally a Wendy's hamburger restaurant copy line, the question was reborn as 1984 political rhetoric, a sneer by one political candidate at the alleged lack of content in the platform of his opponent. In casual conversation, the phrase was repeated as a way to communicate skepticism concerning the worth of a concept or plan—and with every repetition, became better known, and thus more likely to be reused. Another example? The milk mustache, all too familiar to any mother who has watched a mischievously grinning child display a white upper lip in imitation of the Milk Council's televised reminder that adults drink milk too.

The notion of a meme broke into popular consciousness when biologist Richard Dawkins (1976)

noted that animals act to perpetuate their genes even at the cost of their own lives. Birds, for example, lead predators away from a nest even if they thereby make themselves "bait." Thus, one could infer that genes carry a "mission" toward reproduction, and in support of that mission they precipitate behavior by their "carrier" that makes reproduction more likely.

The transition from biological theory to social theory came from the philosopher Daniel Dennett (1995). Seeking an explanation for why some ideas operate as genes do, to self-perpetuate, he noted: Memes "have in common the property . . . that [they] tend to make their own replication more likely by disabling or pre-empting the environmental forces that would tend to extinguish them."

Among Dennett's examples of how memes preempt environmental forces are chain letters. Specifically, the warning that tells the recipient not to break the chain preempts the inertia that might lead someone to simply neglect to send the letter along to others. Reportedly a chain letter begun by one overzealous volunteer raised \$251,000 for the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York—although the hospital told the press that the letter went out without its knowledge or approval. Computer viruses offer another illustration of a meme, since they are designed to frustrate the software that would scan for and delete them.

In a parallel to advertising language, Dennett (1995) refers to "meme vehicles" (pictures, books,

sayings, and the like) and notes that memes "leap promiscuously from vehicle to vehicle, from medium to medium" as they "spread around the world at the speed of light, and replicate at rates that make even fruit flies and yeast cells look glacial in comparison." Applying such "leaps" to advertising raises the obvious possibility that budgets to deliver an idea to many eyes and ears may stretch significantly by using memes. If audience members themselves spread images and ideas to others, the sponsor has to pay for fewer additional exposures.

To think about how an advertising message (in the broadest sense—brand name, brand image, or statement about an advertised product category or brand) can be perpetuated, a brief additional discussion of memes will be offered. Then we will move on to consider a few obvious past and current advertising memes.

#### HOW MEMES WORK

A clear, if bizarre, explanation of memes appeared in the *New Yorker* in 1997 (Gladwell, 1997) as an analysis of the mass-suicide Heaven's Gate cult. The April 14 "Talk of the Town" column noted:

According to the theory of memes—which is the study of infectious ideas—there are two primary ways for an up-and-coming religious group to get its message out. The first is through "proselytic transmission"—i.e., knocking on doors and winning over converts. The second is through . . . "quantity parental transmission," meaning that you encourage your converts to have as many children as possible. . . . The strange thing about Heaven's Gate is that it was no good at either one. Applewhite . . . failed to stir up much interest; in the end he stopped knocking on doors entirely. And if you consider the castration business, the last

thing he seems to have been interested in was propagation.

Applying the alternatives of "proselytic transmission" or "quantity transmission," it appears that advertisers can create an infectious idea that figuratively "knocks on doors" and/or can place the idea in front of an audience as open to suggestion as children are to the ideas of their parents—and preferably many such individuals. Singing the national anthem before a major league baseball game appears to exemplify a meme with both properties. It overcomes any objections that might arise by allying itself with patriotism, an attractive concept. And as a game-opener, the national anthem is so ubiquitous that everyone expects it: "quantity transmission." To the extent that its lyrics stir continued patriotism, furthermore, it thereby perpetuates a rationale for its own repetition.

#### MEMES IN ADVERTISING

What has all this discussion to do with advertising? A great deal, potentially:

A *product* can become a meme. Seattle Film Works, a large mail-order film processor, turns film it develops into the customer's choice of negatives alone, prints, slides, or pictures on disk for computer viewing. They will post images of the customer's prints on their web site, then e-mail the customer a roll number and access code for immediate viewing. Their prints show roll number and print on the back, for easy reordering. Their product becomes a meme, however, because they return every order with free film—which must be processed at Seattle Film Works. The other benefits get the customer "in the loop," according to a spokesperson for the company, overcoming any objection to the nuisance of mail-and-wait versus visiting one's local film processor.

An advertising image can become a

meme. The milk mustache glorified in the "Got milk?" ads exemplifies the idea: kids see each other enjoying the joyous rebellion of having a *reason* to look messy. They delight in imitation, thus leading to further imitators.

An advertising slogan can become a meme. Novel use of words raises the odds, according to one author (Cook, 1995), who sees a new use of language as promoting "cognitive refreshment." Possibly, then, a slogan like "Where's the beef?" replicates because of novelty (how many gray-haired crones are brand spokespersons?), vividness, and enough media weight to be familiar to a large segment of the population. In other words, Wendy's applied both methods of "transmission" recommended by meme theory, as did the Bud Light "Yes I am" campaign that began with a hard-to-pronounce name of a basketball coach and eventually was parodied by President Clinton.

Dennett (1995) notes, however, that producing a relatively large number of copies of a potential meme contributes little to the likelihood of its replication through time. Using the works of Mozart as an example, he points out that they continue to be played not because many copies were published but because new versions *are* published, and played, and recorded, and enjoyed, leading to the additional publication, playing, and recording by generation after generation. Applying the lesson in advertising, it appears that purchasing the highest level of creative work gets a boost from the concept of memes, and if the dollars must be taken from the media budget, the advertiser may more than make up the loss in paid exposures through self-replicating "exposures" if the creative team comes up with a meme.

What should that creative team consider? It seems clear that novelty, vividness, and mass familiarity are not sufficient for the creation of memes; however,

they are in general helpful. After that? Meme theorists are attracted to the idea of usefulness as a cue to the likelihood of replication, but interpret that concept broadly. The concept may be helpful, though; in our society we need to communicate the idea that something goes on and on and on . . . how useful that we can convey that idea *simply* by reference to the Energizer bunny. And better still if a commercial message has the good luck to catch the interest of a writer for a late-night television show, allowing the "leap" from one vehicle to another.

Then once the meme is part of common communication, it *can* replicate, with new applications based on its role as "part of the language." Our grandchildren may sport milk mustaches, and so may their grandchildren, all thanks to the Milk Council's meme.

Interestingly, however, the physical scientists, social scientists, and philosophers who write about memes neglect advice about how to create them. The field is new enough that they focus on how memes work, how they differ from genes (they can be combined more different ways), and how they are modified (Tracy, 1996). Thus, any conclusions concerning deliberate creation of memes can only be inductive.

Meme theory should, however, lead an advertiser to consider not only how to cre-

ate a meme but how to avoid doing so. Otherwise, advertising may unintentionally set in motion an idea that in replicating will reflect negatively on the sponsoring company or product. Can an ad be misinterpreted to prompt ridicule or associations with ideas that will *reduce* consumption? If so, once the unfortunate development is discovered, the advertising will of course be stopped. And will that solve the problem and halt the replication of the damaging idea? Of course not. Meme theory can therefore provide a justification for rigorous advertising testing.

Product and store names offer a case in point. A convenience store chain, "Stop 'n' Go," clearly benefits from a name that presents its advantage over supermarkets. However, the chain also sells gasoline at many outlets. Presumably its management is less than pleased that "stop 'n' go gasoline" is now a term occasionally heard for a product with such low octane that it precipitates what was once called "hesitation." Could management have realized that such a double entendre would, as memes do, have a life of its own? Certainly, research might have brought such a possibility to light.

For both positive and negative reasons, then, the existence of memes is worth considering. Dennett (1991) even contends that each element of language can be a meme, and that human consciousness is

"a huge complex of memes." Every word, picture, name, image, or combination of those that a sponsor presents to an audience has the *capacity* to live on, although few will come to the attention of society as successful memes. Even the possibility of self-replication, however, offers a sobering argument for well-executed, well-researched advertising. **JAR**

#### REFERENCES

- COOK, GUY. "Genes, Memes, Rhymes: Conscious Poetic Deviation in Linguistic, Psychological, and Evolutionary Theory." *Language and Communication* 15, 4 (1995): 375-91.
- DAWKINS, RICHARD. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- DENNETT, DANIEL. *Consciousness Explained*. New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1991.
- . *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- GLADWELL, MALCOLM. "The Long Goodbye." *The New Yorker*, April 14, 1997.
- TRACY, LANE. "Genes, Memes, Templates, and Replicators." *Behavioral Science* 41 (1996): 205-14.