



CONTAGION - MAKING SENSE OF A NEW MARKETING EPIDEMIC

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Advances in viral marketing and social media have made buzz the hot topic of 2010. This paper reports on the development and validation of a new research approach, which taps into the causes of contagiousness. It shows that there is a lot more to contagion than either word-of-mouth or emotional engagement.

INTRODUCTION

What's the buzz?

The last decade has perhaps been the most exciting in the history of marketing and advertising. We've seen our traditional view of the consumer as a rational, autonomous individual overturned by new thinking from neuroscience and sociology. We now readily accept the power of unconscious and emotional forces, and believe that social influence (peer to peer) is at least as important an influence on what the customer thinks as the messages that marketers broadcast via traditional media.

Indeed, there's been no going back since brain imaging first gave us a glimpse of a world beyond our conscious awareness. Emotion – once a largely ignored field of cognitive psychology – has become accepted as a major spring of consumer behaviour. So much so, that many advertisers now view the creation of emotional engagement as their primary objective.

In parallel there has been a much-increased interest in the *social mechanisms* by which ideas spread – particularly as the ubiquity of social media has made 'buzz' such a seductive strategy. Books such as Keller and Berry's *The Influentials* (2003) have focused marketers on the power of word-of-mouth and, in particular, the commercial value of recommendation by highly influential individuals within society.

But are engagement or social influence *enough* to explain the success of some of today's advertising campaigns? In their recent study of IPA effectiveness case studies, Binet and Field (2007) identified campaigns, which...

"...work by getting the brand talked about and generally making it more famous...These campaigns often generate strong emotional responses... They usually become more talked about, not in a functional way, but by virtue of the attitudes and point of view they project for the brand."

Although accounting for only 9% of the IPA databank, these so-called 'fame' campaigns stand out as the most effective in terms of generating strong business results.

Figure 1:



Yet fame is an elusive quality to describe or explain. In the UK, one of the most talked-about campaigns of the last two years - for Cadbury's chocolate - shows a gorilla playing the drums to a Phil Collins soundtrack. Another features a furry, monocle-wearing meerkat who talks in a faux-Russian accent about a price comparison site for car insurance (CompareTheMarket.com). Another – for mobile network provider T-Mobile – features flash mobs.

Such campaigns are certainly different and engaging, yet there seems to be something *different* about this type of advertising; something that encourages people to talk about it and to share it with others.

Something *contagious*.

GETTING CONTAGIOUS: FROM PEOPLE-CENTRIC TO IDEA-CENTRIC

Following the 'Herd'?

One of the most important prompts to discussion of how marketing ideas spread was the publication of Gladwell's *The Tipping Point* (2000). Subtitled *How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, it likened exponential trends such as the mid 90s Hush Puppies revival and mayor Giuliani's 'zero tolerance' New York street crime purge to epidemics. (Incidentally, it also provided a tipping point for this type of book!)

Gladwell's theory drew mostly from the work of social network theorists, who believed that many of the social trends they observed were the work, not of invisible forces, but of highly connected and influential individuals within society. As early as the 1950s, sociologists Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) hypothesised that advertising works through a two-stage process: firstly, advertisers broadcast messages, which are then picked up on by "opinion leaders" who proselytise their peers. Target those opinion leaders, they argued, and you'd quickly convert the rest of the population.

Gladwell (2000) popularised this concept in *The Tipping Point*. His "Law of the Few" states that, "The success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts." These are the "Connectors", who "link us up with the world ... people with a special gift for bringing the world together." They are "a handful of people with a truly extraordinary knack (... for) making friends and acquaintances". It is these Connectors who govern the flow of social information.

Gladwell (2000) also suggested many other factors that can 'tip' a trend. He described other influential types: Mavens, who love to amass information and help others make decisions, and charismatic, persuasive Salesmen of ideas. Furthermore, in order to spread, an idea or product had to be "sticky," and appear in a fertile social context.

Keller & Berry (2003) identified approximately 10% of the population as being naturally influential. Despite the fact that they are not the richest or best educated, they are highly influential because they are well informed and their opinions trusted. Keller claims that they are twice as likely to be asked for their advice and opinion as the average citizen, although this varies widely according to subject.

Unsurprisingly, marketers have seized on the suggestion that rare, highly connected people can change the way we think. It is an exciting notion, and one that takes a highly complex phenomenon - the spread of ideas through society - and reduces it to a simple proposition: reach the influencers, it suggests, and you reach the world!

The idea that behaviour spreads like disease through populations by network connections is now a widely accepted one, and has given birth to a 'new' type of marketing: Word-of-Mouth (WoM).

And it makes sense – or at least common sense. It's an application of the “will they talk about it down the pub?” test and it's even been developed into a single figure ‘killer’ metric – The Net Promoter Score (NPS). In *Herd*, Mark Earls (2007), argues that WoM is not just “the icing on cake”, but the *whole* cake, because it is the expression of how well peer-to-peer ('herd') influence is working.

But the 'social influencer' model is not without its detractors. Duncan Watts has tried, unsuccessfully, to repeat the famous Stanley Milgram “Six Degrees of Separation” study, which so inspired Gladwell.

"It just doesn't work," Watts told journalist, Clive Thompson (2008): "A rare bunch of cool people just don't have that power. And when you test the way marketers say the world works, it falls apart."

Social influence and word-of-mouth do seem curiously literal and prosaic ways of describing something that we often struggle to express – except in metaphors – and their emphasis on recommendation and persuasion sometimes make them appear suspiciously close to the traditional advertising models that they claim to supplant.

There's also the problem of separating cause from effect. The furore surrounding the release of the MMR child vaccine in the UK in 2001 is a prime example of how the two become confused. This controversy was undoubtedly fuelled by the desire of frightened and worried parents to share their concerns with others. Yet the reason that it blew up and spread so quickly was the truly alarming (and completely untrue) claim that that “MMR causes autism”.

It is one thing to say that contagion *happens* because of word-of-mouth, but quite another to say that contagion is caused by it. Can the answer to

the question, “Why did this idea spread?” really be: “because people had conversations”?

Clearly contagion cannot happen *without* conversations, and it is not always possible to predict what course they will take. Indeed, the creators of contagious campaigns often claim they did not *set out* to make social media or viral campaigns. Here’s Amelia Torode (2009), head of strategy at UK advertising agency VCCP, writing about their hugely successful campaign for insurance price-comparison site CompareTheMarket (the campaign which featured a meerkat character as brand spokesman for an imaginary site called “CompareTheMeerkat.com”):

“This work was not designed to be a social media campaign, but we believe it will be the social media case study of the year. It was not designed to be a viral campaign, but it has gone viral in a very successful way. It is also not a digital idea, although the campaign would fall flat without www.CompareTheMeerkat.com.”

This is not false modesty, but rather makes the point that it was *people having conversations* who made “Meerkat” into a social media success story. Had the agency deliberately tried to create a social media idea, the results might not have been so good. It is easy to become dazzled by the novelty of digital marketing, or social media, and fall into the trap of designing campaigns to fit.

Torode (speaking to Campaign, 2009) firmly believes this is not what clients need:

“Increasingly, clients are looking for social *ideas* (my italics) rather than social media ideas. Ideas that are inherently participative, spanning traditional and social media”.

Thinking of “Meerkat” in this way – as a social *idea* – is helpful because it makes us consider why he is so contagious. Specifically, it prompts us to ask *why* this idea creates a social (as opposed to purely individual) response - one that encouraged us to become its messenger and to share it with others. The concept of a social idea thus forces us then to ask why some things are contagious, as well as how they spread.

And (as we shall see) it makes us consider how ideas connect with our brains and how they ‘encourage’ (or perhaps even impel) us to share them. In other words, to ask why some ideas seem to engage the *social*

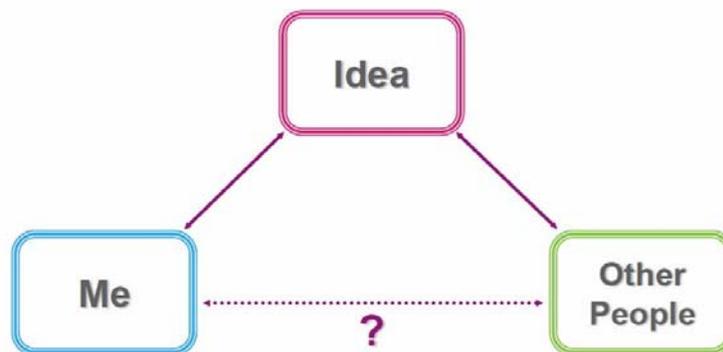
brain - the capacity that humans have developed to empathise and to connect with others.

Going from people-centric to idea-centric

Most of the models we've discussed so far emphasise what *people* say, what they do and what they pass on to others. Maybe there's a difference of emphasis (as to whether some individuals have more influence than others) but the focus is on the interaction *between* individuals and, crucially, on the conversations they have.

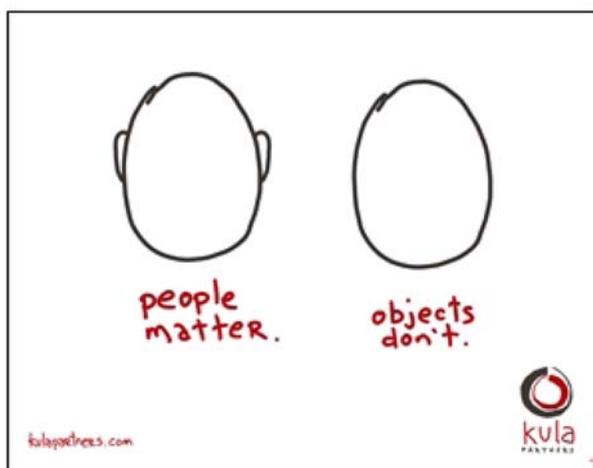
Yet we need to remind ourselves that there are three components in any social interaction: there's me, there's you and there's an idea that we might discuss or pass on to one another.

Figure 2:



It's not that ideas don't matter in people centric models - it's just that they matter much less than what people say about them. A typical blog post from Mark Earls (2010) warns us that "it's all too easy for us to get distracted by character of the things we make - by their stickiness and the contagiousness - and imagine that it's these kind of qualities (and thus ultimately our efforts) that determines ... how far and fast they spread through a given population." Fig. 3 illustrates this point of view.

Figure 3:



Now, if contagion is about what people do with ideas, then contagiousness is surely about the effect that ideas have on people. That might seem a subtle distinction, but it's an important one because it makes us think about *why* an idea takes root and spreads.

Talking about the contagiousness of ideas is not a throwback to the 'age of interruption' - it is *not* the same thing as saying that communication works though interruption and persuasion. Why? Because (as we shall see) the means by which ideas engage people are often emotional and unconscious. Indeed, it is the people-centric models - with their emphasis on (conscious) advocacy and recommendation - that are closer to the old view of how communication works.

If we consider contagion from the point of view of what *ideas do to people*, two new possibilities emerge:

- That contagiousness is a quality that an idea *possesses*.
- And, more radically, that some ideas may have a life of their own" - *independent* of the minds that spread them.

Darwinists such as Richard Dawkins (1976) and Susan Blackmore (1999) have suggested that ideas are, like genes, selfish replicators – units of cultural transmission (“memes”) that are imitated and which spread though communities. Like genes, memes contain information, which is transmitted and copied, although not through physical transmission; we can't see a meme, even with the most powerful brain imager.

Of course it is not ideas that replicate, it's people who copy (and modify) ideas and who pass them on - be it through social networks or simple conversation. So why bother to separate ideas (memes) from the people who spread them? Because strong memes, it is argued, more or less impel individuals to copy them – suggesting something irresistible; something contagious that *we are not even aware of*.

How memetics helps us understand contagiousness

What's different about memetics is, as Aaron Lynch (1996) points out:

“ It takes the much explored question of how people acquire ideas and turns it on its head: the new approach often asks how ideas acquire people ... To date social sciences have taken a people- acquiring ideas – perspective...”

A sociologist might study a church and ask what sort of (social) advantages would attract newcomers and cause it to grow. A memeticist would look at the church's *creed* with an eye to how it furthers its own replication.

This is a fundamental re-orientation that might be expressed thus:

Stop thinking in terms of autonomous individuals who go shopping in the market place of ideas, and start thinking about ideas that go shopping in the marketplace of people...

Richard Brodie's *Virus of the Mind* (1996) offers a good working definition of a meme as “a unit of information in a mind whose existence influences events such that copies of itself get created in other minds.”

If we accept the premise that memes have one purpose only – to *replicate* – then it follows that: *a successful meme is an idea that gets copied a lot.*

Just consider the most successful political slogans of recent times:

“Yes we can”

What does this say? Perhaps *everything* a successful political message should say – empowerment, confidence, authority, collective endeavour, positivity and change. But, do we really need to deconstruct it to

appreciate its power? And, most importantly, how many times has it been repeated, copied and broadcast?

Here is how Brodie (1996) explains 'mind viruses':

- A virus of the mind is something out in the world that infects people with memes, which influence the infected people's behaviour so that they help perpetuate and spread the virus.
- Mind viruses can evolve naturally or be created consciously. A virus is anything that takes external copying equipment and puts it to work making copies of itself.
- A virus' mission is to make as many copies of itself as possible. The virus is not alive nor does it have a point of view, it's just that looking at life from the point of view of the virus gives us insight into what's interesting about them and how they spread.
- Viruses issue instructions by giving us memes that affect our behaviour. They spread when the events stemming from the behaviour reaches an uninfected mind.

Brodie (1996) also advances a plausible argument that the original strong memes were those that worked on our "push buttons" – our basic emotional drives. He argues that when our buttons are pushed it's difficult not to pay attention to them - *even if our conscious self intervenes and stops us obeying them.*

But, asks Susan Blackmore (1999): who exactly is this "conscious self" who gets to choose whether or not we obey memes?

"If we take memetics seriously there is no room for anyone or anything to jump into the evolutionary process and stop it, direct it or do anything to it. There is just the evolutionary process of genes and memes playing itself endlessly out – and no one watching..."

So the key point of memetics is this:

It's not so much that people spread ideas because they're engaged with them – rather that ideas engage people and encourage (impel) them to spread them.

In other words, there is no 'decision' that we make that determines which memes we will pass on - that is determined for us by how strong the meme is.

It follows that...

If we can choose (consciously) not to pass something on or repeat it, then it is probably not a meme – it's just an idea

The whole (conceptual) point about memes is that we pass them on – without thinking too much about it. That is their purpose. That is their power.

Memes – Get Outta Here!

It's only fair to point out that memetics (which has been around for a few years) is not yet widely accepted as a *theoretical explanation* of why ideas spread.

On the face of it, it does seem like huge Darwinian hubris to assume that the laws of biology explain why ideas spread. All Dawkins actually suggested (in *The Selfish Gene*) was that there might be a *parallel* between natural selection in the biological world and the spread of ideas in the cultural one - not that natural selection could *substitute* for cognitive and social psychology, human ecology and history.

Both Stephen Pinker (1997) and Alistair Mc Grath (2005) argue that it requires a huge leap of the imagination (*What's wrong with that?*) to take a fundamentally biological theory and apply it to the spread of ideas and the development of cultures, and that Darwinism is really quite poorly adapted for the purpose.

There is actually no evidence that memes exist...

Dawkins himself admits (In his preface to Blackmore's *Meme Machine* 1999) that " we don't know what memes are made of, or where they reside. Memes have not yet found their Watson and Crick,...(they) presumably exist in brains and we have even less chance of seeing one than seeing a gene."

And, it is not (truly) scientific...

What is the mechanism by which memes are transmitted? How does a meme cause memetic effect? How could we ever set up experiments to identify and establish the structure of memes let alone their effects?

Can Memetics meet Karl Popper's criterion for a science: that it should produce hypotheses that can be disproven? Does the meme concept count as a validly disprovable scientific theory? Probably not, so memetics thus remains a science in its infancy, a protoscience to proponents, or a pseudoscience to its detractors.

Why memes matter

Gerald Zaltman (2004) offers the following advice when faced with an unlikely or unfamiliar proposition:

“Suspend your judgement to avoid prematurely dismissing an idea; instead, ask yourself, “If this idea were true, would it change how I think or what I do?”

Let's go back to Aaron Lynch's (1996) justification of the memetic approach:

“ (memetics) takes the much explored question of how people acquire ideas and turns it on its head: the new approach often asks how ideas acquire people.”

My suggestion then is this: follow Zaltman's advice and put your scepticism aside; try Lynch's proposition on for size – if not as a full ocean-going theory, then as a conceptual framework, as a *point of view* on contagiousness. If you do, a number of interesting thoughts and possibilities may emerge:

- That ideas may exist independently of the people who spread them (although people may modify them)
- That contagion occurs through ideas recruiting (i.e. attracting) people (although it is people who come up with the ideas)
- That we don't follow/copy each other. We actually follow/ copy the idea
- So while it *looks* like it's the people doing the work, it's really the *idea* that is doing it.

We could put it this way:

We follow ideas; we identify with ideas; we want to be associated with ideas.

The intellectual benefit of taking the *memetic* perspective – that ideas acquire people - not the other way around – is that we can start to think about what would make an idea contagious. This is what memeticists call “*taking the meme’s eye view*”.

Taking the meme’s eye view of contagiousness

So, if I was a meme, what would I do to make myself contagious?

For a start, I’d figure that my best chance of ‘infiltrating a host’ is to go *under the radar* of their conscious rational response – because I know from Binet and Field (2007) that emotion is the most powerful communications strategy - creating a propensity to act, probably even before the conscious mind has had a chance to get involved.

If memes exist, they have to come from somewhere. And that somewhere has to be *within* us – in our brains, in our biology. So it seems reasonable to speculate that the strongest memes (ideas) are those most closely linked to our basic biological drives – to our emotions. And that’s probably why, as Daniel Goleman says, “the subtle power of memes to make us act often eludes detection” - because (like emotions) they don’t require our conscious attention.

So emotion is likely to be critical to success - but what sort of emotion works best? Negative emotion is likely to get attention but will it generate contagion? Some advertising that plays on negative emotion *is* able to generate brand awareness and get itself talked about, although the “have you seen this, it’s sooo awful?” strategy is always a risky one. Negative emotion can, however, be highly successful in the right context. For instance, charity advertising frequently uses negative images of poverty, abuse and violence to provoke a contagious response.

Positive emotion is a safer route for most brands simply because it *attracts*. In other words, it is more likely to encourage people to *follow* or want to *belong to* the source of the emotion – the idea. But does positive emotion *guarantee* a contagious response? People may feel warm towards a campaign, or identify with it, but this need not compel them to *share it* with others.

The difference between engagement and contagion is this:

Contagious ads require a social response in addition to the individual emotional one.

Two hypotheses follow from that:

- Contagion is not exactly the same as engagement
- Engagement is not necessarily a guarantee that contagion will occur.

BUILDING A MODEL OF CONTAGIOUSNESS

Introducing the Social Brain

For an idea to become contagious, it surely needs to spark a social response in addition to the individual emotional one. To understand (and indeed to measure) this, we need to move the focus away from individual (rational) response towards considering the social and cultural impact that ideas have. And to do this we need to draw on a *range* of disciplines:

- *Memetics* (as we have seen) encourages us to focus on how ideas engage and recruit people: on what makes them contagious and how they by-pass of our conscious rational response.
- *Cognitive Neuroscience* (1) tells us that the consumer's emotional, unconscious mind is just as important as their conscious rational self. And that our own (verbal, rationalised) explanations of why we like something are often misleading.
- *Social neuroscience* (2) suggests that our brain has developed in response to the complex societies in which it has to operate - and that individuals have developed a capacity to empathise and to assess the attractiveness of an idea to others.

The 'social brain hypothesis' is proposed by Dunbar (2009) as an explanation of why primates' brains are larger and consume more energy than other vertebrates. Primates evolved large brains to manage their

unusually complex social systems and that is why there is a quantitative relationship between brain size and social group size.

The idea that our brain evolved to enable us to live in social groups is an intriguing (and obvious) one, and the ‘social brain’ (3) has emerged as a way of talking about the sum of the neural mechanisms that control our interactions with other people, as well as our feelings about them.

The discovery of mirror neurons – neurons that fire when both an animal acts and when the animal observes the same action in another – provides the basis for a neurological explanation for some key social skills, particularly *empathy* (4). Goleman (2006) even speculates that “memes one day may be understood as mirror neurons at work”.

We share so much of our DNA with others and live in similar environments that it would be improbable, to say the least, if our emotional response to things was often not the same as that of many other people. We are able to empathise with others (to understand their emotions), and we can drift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ mode without thinking too much about it.

The whole point about contagion is that it encourages us to go *beyond* ourselves – to evangelise or to simply share an idea with others. It seems highly likely, therefore, that this process engages our empathetic capacity to anticipate other people’s emotional response. As social animals, we have evolved a unique capacity to anticipate the responses of others to what we say and what we do.

Goleman (2006) describes contagion as “a remarkable neural event: the formation between two brains of a functional link... brains “couple” with the output of one becoming input to drive the workings of the other...”

No one has yet mapped the precise neurology of the social brain, so it is as much a hypothetical construct as a physiological reality. Yet we *experience* its workings every time we interact with others. And we see its effects constantly in the spread of (contagious) ideas through society.

Semi Zeki (2009) argues that neuroscientists should go *beyond* physiology in their investigations into how the brain works. What he means is that we sometimes need to take an imaginative leap and consider what the brain produces – the things it *creates* - as well as its neurology. In particular he argues that many underlying brain concepts

(either inherited or acquired) find realisation through artistic and literary expression. Books, plays and paintings allow us to communicate (often abstract) ideas – usually through *metaphor and representation*.

Why does language invariably revert to metaphor when we try to describe how ideas spread? Contagion is itself a metaphor and there are many more where that came from. Why do we need to *represent* it in terms of something else? And does this perhaps provide an important clue about how to measure it?

Why we use metaphors to talk about contagiousness

Cognitive linguistics (5) tells us that, while we usually think of a metaphor as a set of words, they actually exist *beneath* the (conscious) linguistic surface. Metaphors are essentially concepts, which represent one image or idea in terms of another, and do not even have to be expressed linguistically. We humans understood basic emotions, such as fear and affection, long before we were able to describe them linguistically.

Unsurprisingly, we use metaphors a lot when we talk about our emotions and our non-rational motivations. Indeed they seem to be essential when we cannot literally describe what we're feeling - which is most of the time!

Let's consider the metaphor, *Affection is Warmth*. This is a perfect example of how a metaphor works. There is an idea that we're trying to express (affection) and also an idea that we're *using* to represent it (temperature). In the jargon of cognitive linguistics, affection is the *target* (the idea we're trying to communicate) whilst warmth is the *source* (the idea we're using to represent it).

The two domains – target and source – reside in different parts of the brain but, if the two are linked, the metaphor will trigger meaning automatically, without the need for conscious, cognitive processing. So, even though affection is not (literally) the same as temperature, we readily accept it as a metaphor – one so powerful that we process the meaning without even stopping to consider it.

Penn (2008) has demonstrated how the power of metaphors can be harnessed to construct an online tool (Metaphorix®), which measures emotional engagement through visual animations of primary metaphors - into which the respondent projects himself via a self-selected avatar.

When we talk about *why* ideas succeed (whilst others fail), we frequently use metaphors. For example, we talk about the “power” and “force” of ideas - as if ideas are entities possessed of physical energy. We also describe them as if they were people: “sexy”, “attractive”, “vibrant”, etc. It seems very likely then that a cognitive linguistic analysis of these metaphors will help us to understand more about contagiousness.

Firstly, we need to identify the dimensions that tap directly into our thinking about why ideas engage us - the concepts that go straight to the heart of what contagiousness is about. These are the *target* ideas (domains) – the key concepts that we are trying to represent. There are at least five broad (target) ideas that seem important in our description of contagiousness:

- Buzz
- Belonging
- Attraction
- Dynamism/Energy
- Numinosity (awe)

Whilst this list is by no means exhaustive, an analysis of the discourse on contagion (including this paper) would identify them as frequently recurring concepts.

We next need to investigate how these five concepts are expressed metaphorically. This means looking for the *source* ideas that underlie them so we can better understand *what* they signify and, most importantly, how we can represent them.

Buzz

Buzz is, essentially, a product of contagion – the effect of contagious activity and, because it is close to (but not the same as) the thing it is trying to describe, our use of language here is on the borderline between figurative and literal. Hence “The room is buzzing” (which may be almost literally true) transfers to the idea of *being* buzzy.

We claim (metaphorically) to “hear” or “pick up” a buzz. We even talk about there being “something in the air” when ideas start to spread. And really contagious ideas often are said to have their “water cooler moment” - even by those who don’t work in offices, or ever go near one!

Belonging

This seems a core quality, because contagious ideas seem to create a sense of shared ownership: of the idea *belonging to us* and of *us belonging to the idea*. This is perhaps illustrated by the idea of religious *community* - of belonging to a body of believers who share a faith. The Christian tradition of Communion, is often translated as "fellowship", meaning an especially close relationship of Christians, as individuals, or as a Church, with God and with other Christians.

Driving past my local church yesterday, I saw a sign: "*A place to belong*". Note: not "a place to belong *to*"

Belonging is often expressed metaphorically in terms of links, connections, ties (as in "family ties"), or even bonds (as in "male bonding"). A recent campaign for UK beer brand Carling (which featured different male bonding scenarios) actually transformed the brand logo in the end shot into the word "Belong". This also goes some way to explain why marketers value so highly the idea of 'identification' with brands - because it implies a (metaphorical) merging of the consumer with the brand.

Belonging is often supported by metaphors of *containment*: of being "in" or "out" - often of a *circle*, which is the universal symbol of containment : as in "family circle"; "circle of friends", etc.

Attraction

Closely allied to belonging is the (metaphorical) idea of attraction as a "force". Contagious ideas are often said to have the power that *attracts* people to their cause. We frequently talk of being "drawn towards" something by an "irresistible" force, or of being "repelled" by things we abhor.

One of the most common force-metaphors is *magnetism*, as in a "magnetic force" or "a magnetic attraction".

Dynamism

Contagious ideas are often said to "have a life of their own", of being possessed of some inner energy that *propels* them through society. It is sometimes expressed as irresistible energy that builds and then, once it has reached "tipping point", bursts forth on an unsuspecting public.

Key metaphors here are momentum, movement (particularly upward), keeping pace and running as in “running for office”, “really going somewhere”, “going nowhere”.

Upward and downward movement also provide important metaphors as in “moving on up” “it’s on the up” “it’s a roller-coaster” etc.

Tiredness and lethargy are used as metaphors for ideas that are failing - that seem to have “run out of steam”, “run their course” or that “can’t stand the pace”.

Numinosity (awe)

Truly contagious ideas seem to have a quality that goes beyond the rational and way beyond the literal – a quality that even metaphors sometimes struggle to do justice to. And sometimes this leads us into quasi-mystical or religious modes of expression. We often express brand devotion in similar terms to the way we describe religious *faith*. Here’s Brian Appleyard (2009) writing about Steve Jobs and Apple:

“Apple is not a company, it is a belief system...new products are unveiled at ‘prayer-meetings’ when Jobs himself appears, the Pentecostal fire descending on the heads of the faithful...the machines are not sold, they are bestowed.”

Not every brand can spark a fire – Pentecostal or otherwise – but the power of truly *inspirational* or “numinous” ideas such as Apple is frequently manifested in our desire to belong to them: to identify with them; to be *part of something special*. And, if ideas inspire us, we often become evangelists for them - *we spread the word*.

Charismatic people such as Steve Jobs are often said to have a special quality, which is sometimes expressed metaphorically in terms of electricity – as in “he made an electrifying speech”. Or they’re said to have a quality that “lights up the room”.

Similarly, the bestowal of knowledge (and divine inspiration) is often expressed in terms of light, enlightenment or illumination. As in: “Let there be light” “Let the sun shine in”, “He is the Light of the World”, etc. The converse (i.e. ignorance) is represented by darkness, as in “in the dark”, the Dark Ages etc.

It is this combination of awe and enlightenment (borrowing from religion) that we call *numinosity*.

Bringing contagion to life – Metaphorix®

So much of our thought is based on images - not words. Indeed, most stimuli actually reach the brain through the visual system, and so we constantly translate verbal information into visual imagery. Hence if we read or hear a word, what we generally see (in our mind) is a visual *representation*, not the word itself.

Metaphors lend themselves to visual expression *because* they are inherently conceptual: they are about representing one thing *in terms of* another. If the visual metaphor is instantly recognised, it will create meaning automatically, without the need for conscious reflection. Visual metaphors thus provide a powerful route into the non-rational - avoiding the need for thinking or cognitive processing on the part of the respondent.

Online provides the perfect medium through which to measure the contagiousness of ideas. Conquest has spent the last year developing an online tool, which breaks contagion down into its component parts - each informing a visual metaphor representative of a particular aspect of contagiousness, such as Buzz, Belonging or Numinosity.

- The visual animations leverage the key insight that people are often better judges of how others feel than they are of their own feelings. Respondents use the animations to show *what they think other people will feel about an idea*.
- The respondent's interface with each animation is intuitive and seamless - they see no verbal scales or numeric calibration - but their response is translated into hard quantitative data.

The next sections report on results from a two-phase programme of testing to evaluate the ideas outlined in this paper.

VALIDATION OF THE METAPHORIX® APPROACH – PHASE I

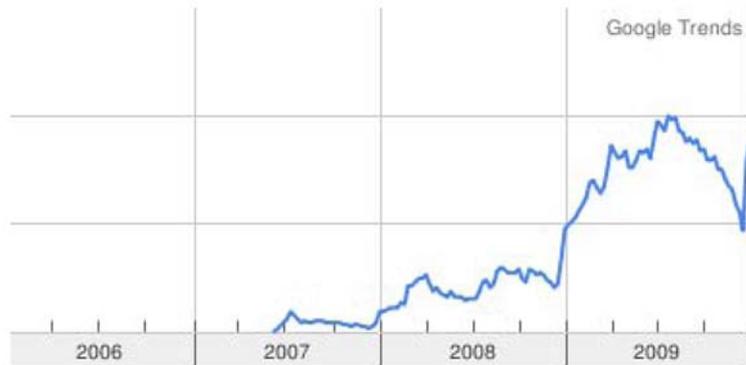
The objectives of this first phase of testing were:

- To validate the new measures in terms of how well they express the target ideas identified as key to contagion.
- To see how well these measures identify, and aid our understanding of, an existent, highly contagious campaign.

Testing focused on what is, arguably, the most contagious campaign in the UK during 2009 – “comparethemeerkat” from the online insurance comparison site, CompareTheMarket. This campaign is widely hailed as a social media success story featuring a lead character (Alexsandr the Meerkat), who boasts more than 450,000 fans on facebook. The campaign catapulted the brand into first position (from fourth) in its category for spontaneous brand awareness, as well as driving significantly increased brand consideration. And, as Fig. 5 (from Google Trends) demonstrates, these movements were reflected in tangible business results: the campaign vastly increased site traffic, as the contagiousness of the idea took effect.

Figure 5:

Search Volume Index for ComparetheMarket.com



A quantitative survey was conducted online by Conquest during December 2009 – whilst the campaign was enjoying a resurgence. The sample comprised 253 UK insurance policy holders, with representative demographic quotas set on age and gender. The CompareTheMarket campaign was evaluated alongside two other well-known commercials from within the category.

Each respondent was asked to evaluate 2 of the 3 commercials in detail. The order of testing the ads followed a rotated block design to ensure each ad was tested first and in combination with each other ad equally.

Respondents were first asked if they had seen the advertising and then answered a series of non-verbal questions – both advertising and brand specific - which included the new Metaphorix® animations and also some Metaphorix® measures of engagement. This was followed by more traditional verbal questioning - designed to elicit stated attitudes towards the advertising.

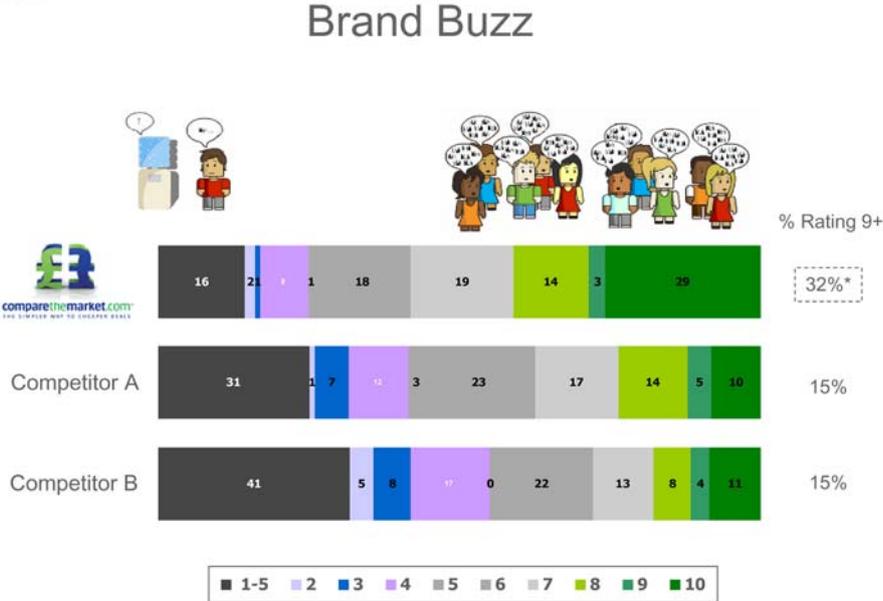
Did the new measures help identify the contagiousness of CompareTheMarket?

Compare The Market is known to be an extremely impactful campaign, enjoying high levels of visibility. And, in order to check for the differential effects of media exposure, recognition of CompareTheMarket's advertising was evaluated against the two competitor campaigns. The results indicate that the two competitive campaigns actually enjoyed similar levels of recognition:

- CompareTheMarket ad – 83% recognition
- Competitor A ad – 76% recognition
- Competitor B ad – 89% recognition

Yet, despite having a similar level of visibility, CompareTheMarket stood out clearly from the other two brands by virtue of its high score on the new Buzz measure. The contagious effect generated by the campaign is particularly evident in the strong endorsement of the brand at the upper end of this scale (see Fig. 6). Compare the Market generates significantly (at the 95% level) more high-end Buzz (as measured by the top two boxes of the measure) than the two other well-established brands within the category.

Figure 6:



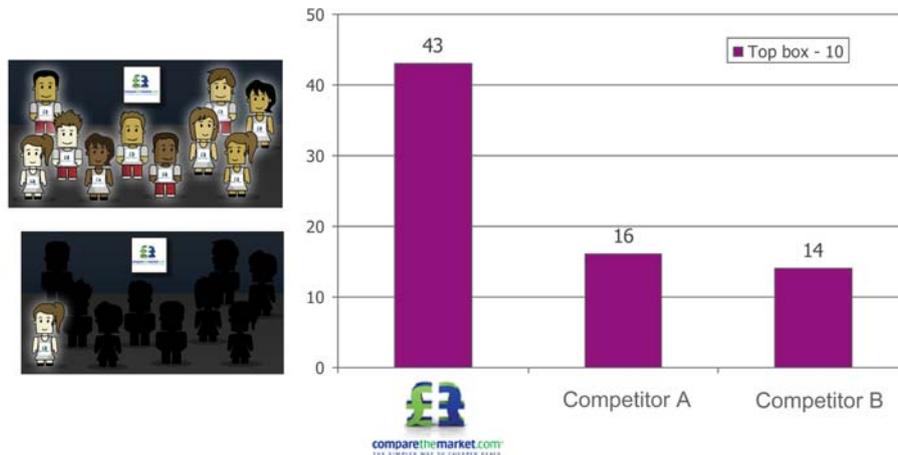
Q2
Base: Compare The Market (167), Competitor A (170), Competitor B (169)

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It is perhaps unsurprising that CompareTheMarket scores so well on Buzz, but it is extremely encouraging that the new measure works so well to identify it. Furthermore, response on some of the other new measures suggests that this campaign has a quality that goes beyond just talkability. This was evidenced most strongly by the brand’s performance on Numinosity (see Fig. 7) which, although highly correlated with Buzz, showed significantly more positive differentiation vs. the two competitive brands.

Figure 7:

Brand Numinosity



Q6
Base: Compare The Market (167), Competitor A (170), Competitor B (169)

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CompareTheMarket's performance on these measures suggests that the brand has achieved a "social" resonance in a very short period of time. Prior to this campaign, Competitor A was a much better known brand, enjoying higher levels of consideration, whilst Competitor B was at a similar level to CompareTheMarket. For CompareTheMarket - a hitherto fairly obscure insurance comparison site - to achieve such strong Numinosity and Buzz indicates the contagiousness of the advertising idea.

From this early stage testing, it was also clear that people were able to instinctively use the new animations to express how contagious they believed each brand to be. There was a reassuringly high degree of correlation in how they rated a verbal attribute of "Made me want to talk about it with other people" with the levels of Buzz measured around the brands.

VALIDATION OF THE METAPHORIX® APPROACH – PHASE II

The second phase of testing evaluated a wide range of new or very recently aired campaigns, with the aim of identifying those with the *potential* to be contagious in the future. The test was thus designed to evaluate both the potential contagiousness of the advertising and its possible impact on the brand.

The sample comprised 978 UK respondents interviewed online, during January 2010. The test evaluated 12 very different campaigns from across four very different categories:

- Confectionery
- Technology
- Soft drinks
- Public Information campaigns

Three commercials were selected within each category to reflect a range of advertising approaches - including engagement and rational persuasion - and at least one of the commercials within each category was included because it was judged to be potentially contagious.

The research used a robust test and control approach. One cell received no exposure to any advertising whilst another was exposed to the advertising. The samples for each cell were matched in terms of brand usage, as well as on key demographics, namely age, gender and region.

The test structure therefore allows the effects of the advertising on key brand measures to be inferred by comparison of scores from the exposed sample with those from the unexposed one.

Six hypotheses about contagious advertising

The findings from the second phase of the testing programme revealed a number of ways in which the Metaphorix® measures offer a way forward in the detection and explanation of contagious advertising. Six key hypotheses emerged which are summarised below:

- Respondents are able to use the new measures (imaginatively) to identify the contagiousness of campaigns that have not yet aired.
- Contagious advertising has a quality that goes beyond advertising engagement.
- Contagious campaigns share a sense of Numinosity, Energy and Excitement
- Involvement, inspiration and empathy seem to be key qualities of contagious advertising
- Contagious advertising has the capacity to energise brands by making them more numinous
- Contagious advertising is likely to be associated with positive shifts in brand engagement

Respondents are able to use the Metaphorix® measures to identify the contagiousness of new campaigns

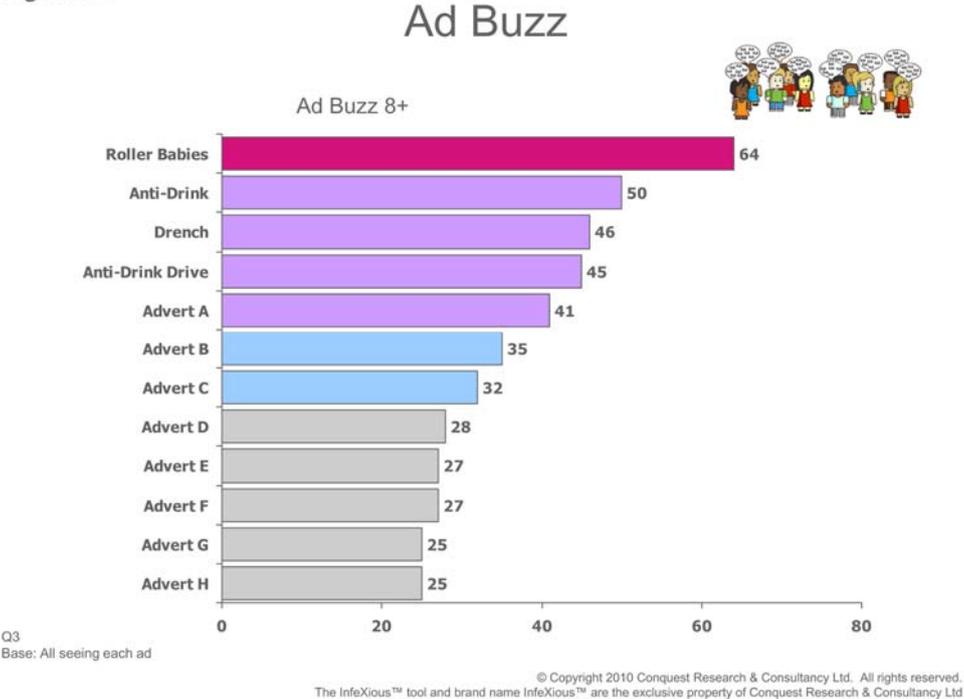
The previous phase of testing had highlighted Buzz and Numinosity as distinct qualities of a brand that had already achieved great social-media success.

In the second test, the focus was on new or very recently aired advertising. And, despite the campaigns not yet having had much opportunity to be actually talked about, there emerged a wide spectrum of levels of Ad Buzz (see Fig.8) – particularly at the top end of the scale. The top three box ratings ranged widely - from 25% up to 64% - with the new commercial for Evian (Roller Babies) showing a particularly high contagious potential.

It appears that respondents are able to identify some types of advertising as having more potential to spread than others, and are able to use the Buzz measure (imaginatively) to predict the future buzz of campaigns that have not yet aired.

This is because the visual animations leverage the key insight that people are often better judges of how others feel than they are of their own feelings. Respondents use the animations to show *what they think other people will feel about an idea*.

Figure 8:

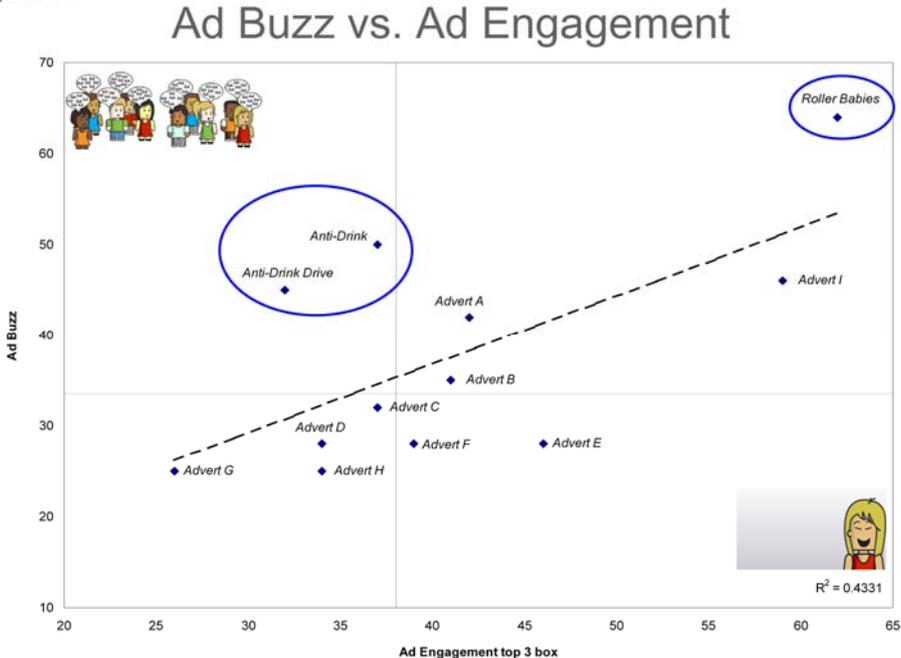


Contagious advertising has a quality that goes beyond advertising engagement.

Importantly, the results from this test suggest that contagiousness and advertising engagement are not always the same thing. A comparison of performance on the two dimensions (see Fig. 9) indicates that some campaigns achieve high Buzz scores *without* strong engagement. A very important illustration of how the two qualities may diverge is in public information campaigns. Fig 9 shows that two such campaigns (one for drink-driving; the other anti binge-drinking) were judged contagious without generating high levels of warmth. It is likely that their deliberate use of negative imagery created involvement with the (social) issue without generating positive engagement with the advertising content.

However, outside of this category, results suggest that the use of negative emotion may be a risky strategy, as there is no other clear example of a campaign which generates contagiousness without also achieving a high level of engagement. Engagement is thus likely to be a common quality of contagious advertising, but this does not mean that engagement and contagiousness are identical. Thus the new Evian “Roller Babies” commercial generates both Buzz *and* engagement, but there are some campaigns which are emotionally engaging, but which are not seen as contagious. So, whilst it seems that contagious ideas are also likely to be engaging, it also appears that engagement is not a *sufficient* condition for contagion to occur.

Figure 9:



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Contagious campaigns share a sense of Numinosity, Energy and Excitement

The foregoing discussion suggests that people are able to use the Buzz measure imaginatively to predict which commercials will be talked about. Respondents seem well able to *differentiate* between commercials in terms of their contagious potential and clearly separate this aspect from their personal emotional engagement with the advertising (although the two things are correlated).

Of all the new Metaphorix® measures, Buzz is the most visually contiguous with the thing it is representing, because it actually depicts people talking about a brand or a piece of advertising.

If we accept word-of-mouth as being the end-product of contagiousness, then it is reasonable to treat it as the *dependent* variable, and use regression analysis to establish which other measures (both verbal and non-verbal) are driving it. Fig 10 summarises the key drivers of Buzz:

Figure 10:

	Drivers of Ad Buzz
Excitement 10	23.6
Ad Numinosity 9+	18.9
Engagement 8+	13.1
Belonging 10	11.9
Told me something new (verbal)	5.5

It is clear from Fig. 10 that, based on the commercials tested, the two most important (non-verbal) predictors of contagiousness are Excitement and Numinosity. In particular, the top, or top two box scores on these measures proved particularly powerful predictors of Buzz. Advertising Engagement is also an extremely important factor but, as we have seen, it is not always a guarantee of contagiousness.

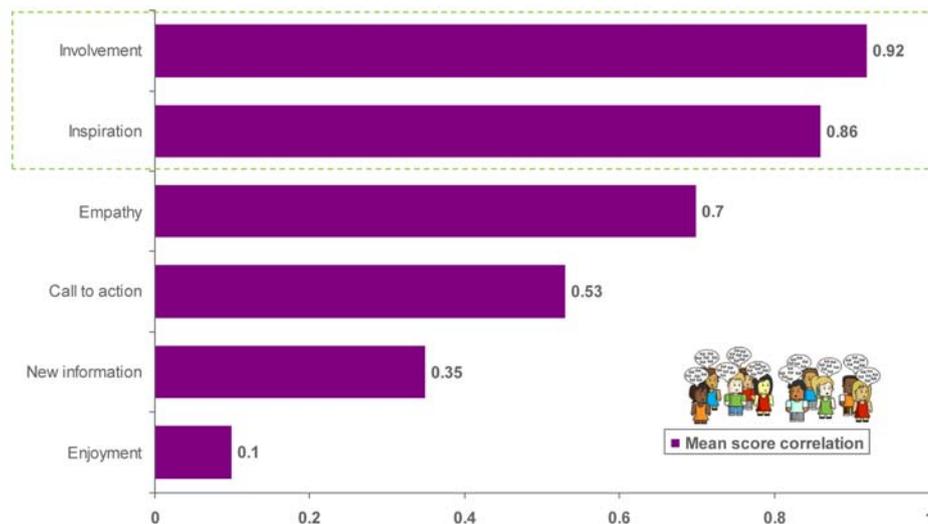
'Belonging' is also an important predictor, but at a lower level than the two lead factors. The Belonging animation uses 'tribe size' as a representation of the potential of an idea to recruit and attract followers. Although less important overall than either Excitement or Numinosity, it is

twice as good a predictor of Buzz as a rational measure such as “told me something new”.

Inspiration and involvement seem to be key qualities of contagiousness

In addition to the non-verbal measures, the survey also included a series of verbal bi-polar measures. These measures gave some important clues as to the qualities required of advertising ideas if they are to become contagious. The results are summarised in Fig.11.

Figure 11:
Correlation of Verbal Bi-Polars with Ad Buzz



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‘Inspiration’ is clearly a very important factor, emerging as the second highest correlation. This is perhaps unsurprising given the strong predictive power of Excitement and Numinosity – measures which are designed to pick up the intangible and non-rational capacity of some advertising to (metaphorically) ‘create a fire’ under their brand.

The highest correlation overall is with ‘involvement’ - in the sense of being *drawn into* the idea - clearly indicating the importance of identification and the need to ‘belong’ as key qualities of contagious ideas. This is consistent with the hypothesis that contagious ideas have the capacity to attract and engage.

Unsurprisingly, empathy is another highly important dimension - conceptually linked to belonging and the ability of some ideas to recruit people and connect with them. Contagion is essentially a social process predicated on human empathy and, without it, it appears that ideas may fail to connect and fulfil their contagious potential.

Enjoyment is poorly correlated with Buzz, which seems curious as we observed earlier that that Engagement (measured via a non-verbal measure of facial expression) is an important driver of contagiousness. This finding perhaps reflects the essential difference between *underlying* emotional engagement and *stated*, or rationalised enjoyment. Entertainment and enjoyment are cognitive (i.e. thought-through) states of mind and differ from emotional engagement, which is essentially pre-cognitive. And this study clearly suggests that the latter is a more important requirement of contagious advertising – particularly in respect of some of the public information campaigns.

It also appears that contagiousness of advertising is not highly correlated with delivering new news - suggesting a clear distinction between contagious advertising and advertising which is designed to persuade (rationally). Nor is contagiousness strongly correlated with an immediate call to action. What this perhaps suggests is that people engage with or feel attracted to the advertising idea, rather than the rational information content that the advertising provides.

Contagious advertising has the potential to make brands more contagious

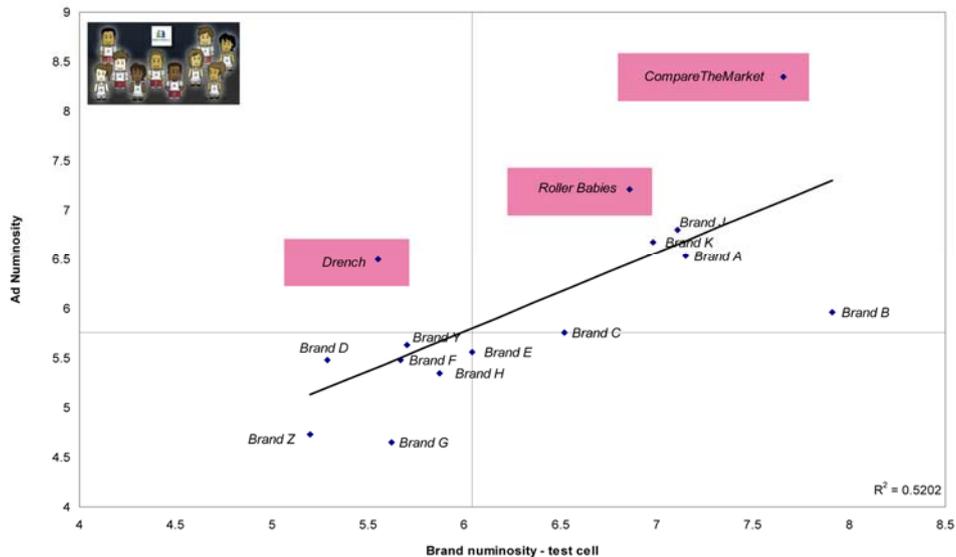
“Meerkat” transformed CompareTheMarket from a brand that few were talking about into one which is highly contagious - an effect most strongly demonstrated by its high Numinosity scores. What is most interesting however is that, as Fig.12 shows, the advertising idea is more numinous than the brand. This suggests that a contagious advertising idea can ‘light up’ a brand – making it appear more numinous and attractive.

Fig.12 shows that whilst most campaigns seem to mirror the *current* numinosity of their brand, some advertising is more numinous than the brand it is advertising. This suggests that contagious ideas can project qualities on to the brand that it may hitherto have not possessed.

Drench is an example of this, but it is not only less familiar brands that can benefit from this transfusion of Numinosity. One of the campaigns

which appears to 'light-up' its brand in this way is the Roller Babies commercial for Evian, which is an extremely well known brand.

Figure 12:
Brand Numinosity vs. Ad Numinosity



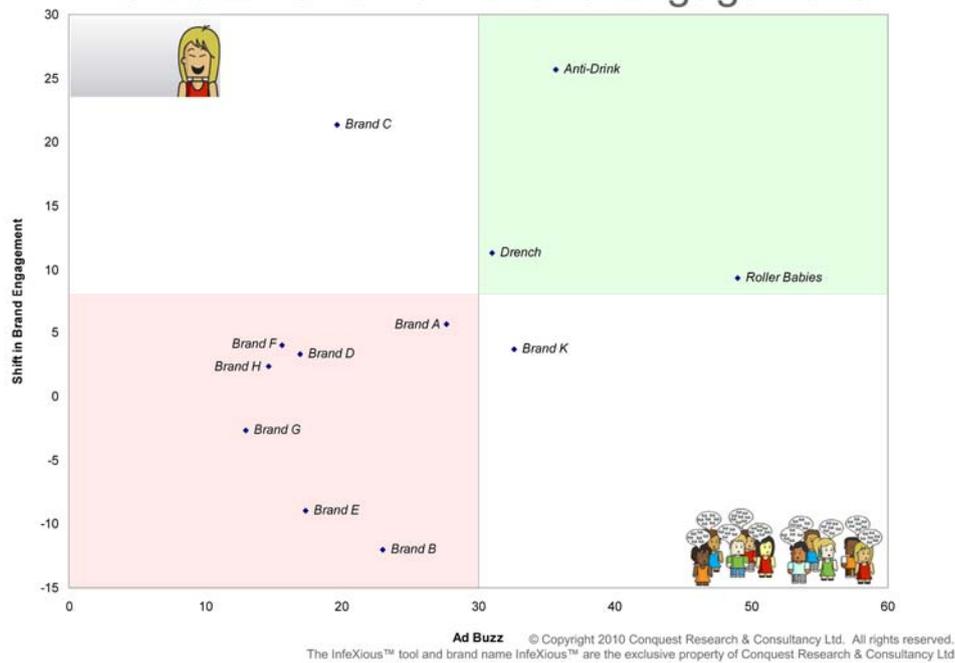
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Contagious advertising is likely to be associated with positive shifts in brand engagement

Is there a positive relationship between contagiousness and brand engagement? Fig. 13 suggests that whilst far from a linear relationship, the advertising that had the strongest impact on brand engagement also has a high level of Buzz. Conversely the advertising that creates below average levels of Buzz is mainly associated with no positive (and in some cases even negative) shifts in brand engagement. Importantly, *none* of the ads with high Buzz levels had a detrimental effect on brand relationship.

Figure 13:

Ad Buzz vs. Shift in Brand Engagement



The results from the two-phase validation study provide a range of exciting hypotheses about the nature and causes of contagiousness. It should be emphasised, however, that these are preliminary hypotheses, and that a further programme of validation and testing is planned for the Spring 2010.

CONCLUSIONS

Many see contagion as a primarily sociological phenomenon – something that happens because of the conversations which people have with one another and the influence that some have over others. In this people-centric view, social media takes a leading role by facilitating rapid and extensive social interaction.

Whilst this is a plausible (and very useful) description of *how* ideas spread, it is less helpful as a theory of *why* they do so. Mark Earls urges to look in the *spaces* between individuals but, when we do, what we find are *ideas*. Ideas being discussed; ideas being exchanged; ideas being modified and copied.

Memetics is helpful, therefore, because it forces us to look at the phenomenon from the perspective of the idea. It makes us ask what is it that makes ideas contagious. And, when put together with neuroscience

and newer thinking about the “social brain”, memetics provides a powerful framework in which to construct a model of why ideas become contagious.

Social neuroscience suggests that contagion taps into the capacity we have to empathise with and to connect with others, and the new Metaphorix® measures leverage the key insight that people are often better judges of how others feel than they are of their own feelings.

Results from the validation study suggest that, by using this approach, respondents are able to employ their imagination to identify the contagiousness of advertising ideas that have not yet aired. People use the animations to show *what they think other people will feel about an idea*.

Although closely linked, it appears that contagiousness and engagement are not the same thing. Contagious ideas are different because they produce a ‘social’ response (in addition to the individual one) - one that encourages us to *share* the idea with others.

Contagious advertising therefore has to have a quality that goes *beyond* advertising engagement – a quality best captured by measures of Numinosity, Energy and Excitement. In metaphorical terms, it’s about ideas that *capture* our imagination, which *spark* and *light a fire* under the brand they advertise. Thus, unsurprisingly, inspiration and empathy also seem to be key qualities of contagious advertising, whilst (rationalised) enjoyment, delivering new news and providing a call to action are less important.

Excitingly, the results suggest that contagious advertising has the capacity to ‘light-up’ brands by making them more numinous and attractive, and is also likely to be associated with positive shifts in brand engagement

What this work suggests is that ideas count, firstly because they engage individuals but, more importantly, because great ideas can create a social response. Thus the challenge for marketers and advertisers is to create great *social* ideas - ideas that inspire us to share them with others, and ideas that work across all the myriad (social and traditional) media opportunities that exist today. As John Woodward (2009) says “...what really matters is to use contagious ideas to change the conversation in an enduring way”.

NOTES

(1) See, for example, Damasio, A. (1999). *The Feeling of What Happens*. A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc, San Diego, CA; Le Doux, J. (2002). *Synaptic Self*. Penguin Books, London; Zaltman, G. (2003). *How Customers Think*. Harvard Business Press, Boston.

(2) The earliest reference to “social neuroscience” is in a 1992 article by J. Cacioppo and Gary Bentson in *American Psychologist* 47 (1992) There are now dozens of scientific laboratories dedicated to the field. *Social Neuroscience* – the first journal dedicated to social neuroscience - was first published in June 2006 by Psychology Press.

(3) The phrase “social brain” has come into common usage in neuroscience within the last few years. For instance, an international science conference on “The Social Brain” was held in Goteborg, Sweden, March 2003 and the same year saw the publication of the first academic collection on the subject. See Thomas Insel and Martin Brune et al: *The Social Brain: Evolution and Pathology* (John Wiley 2003).

(4) See, for example, Pfeifer J.H. & Dapretto M. (2009) “Mirror, Mirror in my Mind”: Empathy, Interpersonal Competence and the Mirror Neuron System in Decety. J. and Ickes. W. (Eds). *The Social Neuroscience of Empathy*. Cambridge: MIT Press (2009)

(5) For a perspective on cognitive linguistics see, for example, Kövesces. Z. (2000). *Metaphor and Emotion: Language, Culture and Body in Human Feeling*. Cambridge University Press. Also see Lakoff. G. and Johnson. M. (1999). *Philosophy In The Flesh*. Basic Books, New York, NY.

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About the Author

David Penn is MD and founder of leading edge UK agency Conquest. He has a wealth of experience in marketing and research spanning both client and agency. David is widely regarded as a thought leader in brand and communications research, and has published and presented some groundbreaking work on emotional engagement. Recent papers include:

Getting Animated About Emotion.

Paper presented at ESOMAR Congress, Montreal, September, 2008.

Metaphors Matter.

Paper presented at the ARF Conference, NYC, 2008

Brain Science: In search of the Emotional Unconscious

Chapter in the ESOMAR Handbook of Market Research (5th Edition, 2007).

Beyond Neuroscience: Engagement and Metaphor.

Paper presented at 50th ESOMAR Congress, Berlin, September, 2007.

A New Enlightenment: Why the next 50 years will be different.

Paper presented at Research 2007, MRS Jubilee Conference, England.

New Rules of Engagement

Keynote Speech at WARC Annual Advertising Research Conference, London October 2006.

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How brain science can help us call a truce in the 'Recall Wars'

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