

Memes in modern branding

 By [Estee Cockcroft](#)

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From performing a nek nomination or the evolved RAK nomination, to being pulled into a company Harlem Shake we have all been exposed to memes in our daily lives, whether we are aware of them or not.

The term 'meme' refers to an idea or theme that is spread from an individual/group to the next with accelerated repetition and minor evolutions. Coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 in his book *The Selfish Gene*, memes have risen in popularity in the last five years thanks to the internet and social media serving as tools for rapid repetition and distribution. A meme can be an image with a few words, a sound clip, or a video clip, and it almost always involves some level of humour.

Today memes are powerful, dynamic, and fast moving. The Harlem Shake achieved one billion views on 24 March 2013. 40 days after its first upload according to Visible Measures. Similarly the "Keep calm and..." meme has spread to the four corners of the planet, but has too many variations to estimate views accurately. With such a powerful reach, memes and its study are on the minds of major brands.

Consider the potential reach of a successful meme that is linked to your brand. Soap, *Generations* has seven million viewers making it the most expensive advertising spot on South African television. The viewers of a successful meme are greater than that of the most expensive 30-second television spot on TV, the initial investment into producing a meme is usually small with no associated media costs, it thereby delivers a huge ROI.

Attractive as it may be, meme generation, or the evolution of existing memes is a tricky space to play in, and there are various factors that affect the success.

Timing

Whether generating a new meme or meme-jacking, the timing of your action is a paramount factor of success. Jump on-board with early adopters and your brand or company can be considered to be on the ball or part of the greater meme culture. However acting too early could limit your viral reach. A brand that did it well was Isuzu with its "Chuck drives an Isuzu" billboard that went up in Johannesburg at the height of the Chuck Norris facts craze. Considering that the lead time on billboard production is a month on average, and largely dependent on media availability, the success of this particular meme-jacking can be contributed to careful trendwatching, great planning and a quick response.

Authenticity

Memes are a cultural phenomenon and brands that are jumping on the bandwagon with the sole purpose of increasing sales will do more damage than those taking no action at all.

As a brand, you are sitting at the dinner table with real human beings and manners are extremely important as to not alienate your target market. Being authentic involves creating memes that are true to your brand, pulling in your staff to contribute to add a human element, and lastly keeping your goal of advertising subtle and secondary to creating humorous, fun content.

Boomtown got it right when developing a flash mob for Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in the height of the flash mob craze. Using the university choir to perform songs with lyrics that included the word "You", the flash mob managed to stay true to the undergraduate campaign's messaging- 'U can stand out from the crowd. For a better U, apply now.' Online ad value of R400,000 meant the NMMU flash mob generated exposure nearly 10 times the cost of production of the video, a great success story for the university.

Creativity

A new edition of an existing meme has to be different enough to draw attention without losing its essence. As with all branding there is a balance to be found between consistency and keeping it fresh. A great example of this is the Harlem Shake performed by the University of Georgia's swim team. Their Harlem Shake was performed underwater - a fresh take on the original, but elements such as the single camera angle, the lone masked dancer for the first 15 seconds and the increase in dancers at the bass drop was consistent with the original Harlem Shake.

In a fast-paced society, marketers are continuously looking for new channels to promote and create exposure for brands. Memes are a great way for brands to rise in popularity and infiltrate the sharing-culture that we find ourselves in, provided that contributions are well-timed, creative and true to their beliefs.

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