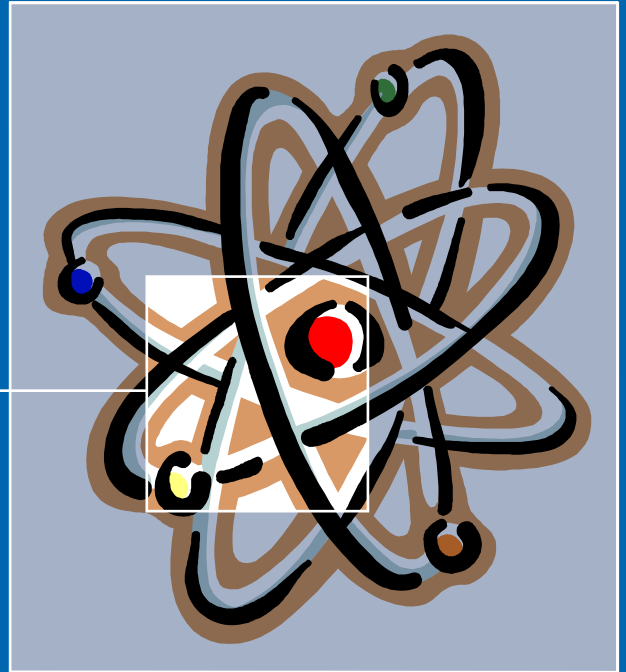


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# Memetics

# Got memes? Using memes for marketing and more

What do the Dancing Baby, Tebowing, Gangnam Style and the Most Interesting Man in the World have in common? And while we're at it, do you know what the fox says? This isn't a tricky riddle—the commonality is that they are all memes that went viral. They are pop culture phenomena that became woven into daily conversations and culture, sometimes across the globe.

If you aren't sure how to define a meme, then you probably aren't aware of memetics, either. Memetics is the theory of mental content based on an analogy with Darwinian evolution. In simple terms, it's the study of cultural information transfer. Accordingly, a meme is an idea, behavior or style that spreads from person to person within a culture. It carries cultural ideas, symbols or practices from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena. When a meme goes viral, it means in a short amount of time it becomes wildly popular as it works its way into everyday life and conversations. And we are talking about serious numbers—a viral meme can command a million or more followers and shares in less than a week.

Believe it or not, memes are the newest marketing trend. Why would a company want to create a meme for marketing and social media platforms? Whether you are creating a meme or piggybacking on one, it's powerful when it works. A successful meme means more traffic to your fan page or website, and let's face it, more traffic equals more money. Internet memes have the power to capture the attention of millions, so finding a way to tap into that power to market your business could give your marketing campaign or strategy a significant boost. Plus if your meme goes viral, the payback can be huge. But, there's a catch—you have to know what you're doing if you want to be successful.

How can you effectively use memes for marketing and to increase social media usage? What are some tips and practical guidelines that organizations should follow? This Blue Paper® explores the concept of a meme and walks you through the ins and outs of developing one that is effective and profitable. Who knows, maybe you're company will develop the next hot concept that skyrockets traffic and sales.



# Memetics: A brief summary

As mentioned, the term memetics refers to the study and implementation of memes. The word “meme” was first introduced in 1976 by evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins. A meme (rhymes with team) comes from the Greek word “mimema” meaning “something imitated.” Dawkins described memes as being a form of cultural propagation, a way for people to transmit social memories and cultural ideas to each other.<sup>1</sup>

The Internet is the most common place to spread a meme. However, memes can also take off through mainstream media. If you’re old enough, you might remember Wendy’s infamous “Where’s the beef?” campaign in 1984. The campaign was extremely successful and quickly made its way into every-day pop culture. Wendy’s capitalized on the marketing opportunity that became a national catchphrase with marketing materials and commercials. In fact, Wendy’s recently tried to reintroduce it into the market with mixed success.<sup>2</sup> Another non-Internet meme was Bill Clinton’s famous declaration that “It’s the economy, stupid” during his presidential campaign. Variations of the phrase appeared across pop culture, including on television shows like *The West Wing*<sup>™</sup> and *Weeds*. Even today the phrase is commonly used across various cultural mediums.

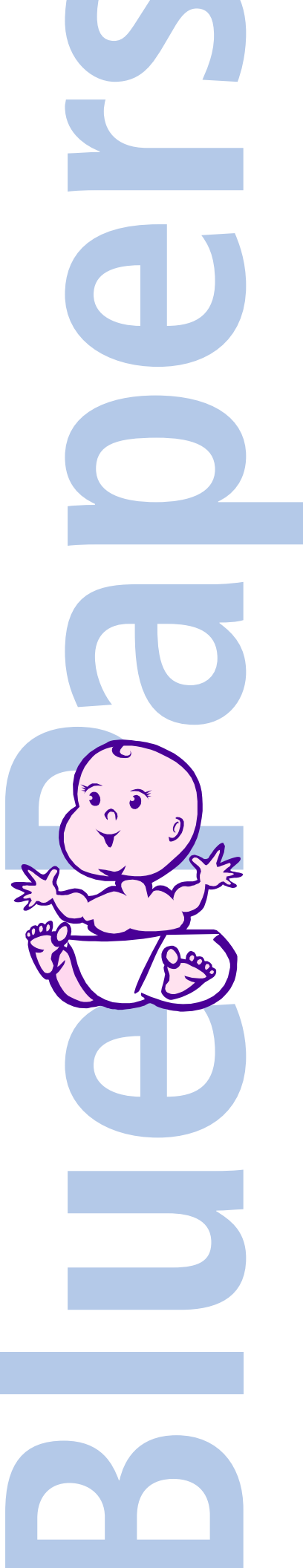
One of the first Internet memes that went viral was the [Dancing Baby](#) in 1996. It was initially released to demonstrate the 3D capabilities of a software product for an animation company. The Dancing Baby animation spread quickly on popular Web forums, websites, commercials and eventually mainstream television. It was featured on CBS®, CNN®, and the comic drama series *Ally McBeal*®. The Dancing Baby was further integrated into mainstream media with commercials and advertisements and eventually influenced a song (remember the Ugachaka?).

Today, thanks to its ability to reach millions in a matter of seconds, the Internet is the most popular venue to share memes. Whether you receive it through your inbox or see it on social media, a meme can quickly become viral. Recently, the meme [What does the Fox Say?](#) had 100 million views after only 35 days.<sup>3</sup> And do you remember the dance sensation [Gangnam Style](#)? This meme hit 100 million views in 51 days. Clearly, the potential reach is impressive—just imagine if your company was able to hit the jackpot with a similar meme or capitalize on an existing one.

<sup>1</sup> “What Is a ‘Meme’? What Are Examples of Modern Internet Memes?” *About.com Internet for Beginners*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Jan. 2014. <<http://netforbeginners.about.com/od/weirdwebculture/ff/What-Is-an-Internet-Meme.htm>>.

<sup>2</sup> Elliot, Stuart. “After 27 Years, an Answer to the Question, ‘Where’s the Beef?’.” *The New York Times*. N.p., 25 Sept. 2011. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/26/business/media/after-27-years-an-answer-to-the-question-where-s-the-beef.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/26/business/media/after-27-years-an-answer-to-the-question-where-s-the-beef.html?_r=0)>.

<sup>3</sup> “What Does the Fox Say.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia Foundation, 15 Jan. 2014. Web. 03 Feb. 2014. <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What\\_Does\\_the\\_Fox\\_Say](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Does_the_Fox_Say)>.



There are several different categories of memes. These categories include:

- photo and video memes,
- word memes,
- image (macro) memes, and
- miscellaneous marketing memes.

**Photo memes** include anything where a person is imitating a position or action that's familiar. Two examples are Tebowing and planking. Tebowing, for instance, referenced Denver Broncos® player Tim Tebow. The action involves getting down on one knee and placing one's elbow on the knee and fist against the forehead, similar to the famous Rodin sculpture. This photo fad went mainstream and in no time people were tweeting and posting pictures that recreated the pose in random places. Another photo fad was the planking craze in 2011, which captured people assuming the yoga planking pose in unusual places. One of the more recent trends includes [owling](#), where people pose for pictures by crouching like an owl.

**Video memes** are often posted on YouTube® and shared using social media. Like other memes, they can encompass a variety of themes. As mentioned, one of the first video memes was the Dancing Baby in 1996. But who could forget the video memes of the honey badger, the [laughing quadruplets](#) or the UK sensation [Charlie Bit my Finger?](#)

More recently, the [Harlem Shake](#) meme that was released on YouTube in February 2013 sparked a number of different versions by companies including Google®, Pepsi®, Facebook® and McDonalds®, to name a few. Although the trend was brief, it was an easy way for companies to connect with consumers; thousands of Harlem Shake videos were made and uploaded to YouTube every day at the height of its popularity. These videos were easy to make and usually involved only a few willing participants that wanted to sing and dance. The Harlem Shake went global and appeared across multiple geographies in many different languages.

**Word memes** are usually found on Twitter® and can include a hashtag, which is a word or phrase with a pound (#) sign in front of it. Twitter hashtags can quickly become trending topics, meaning multiple Tweets contain the word or phrase. People usually add their own twist to the word or phrase as they retweet it across social media platforms. Do you recall when Charlie Sheen unleashed the phrases "winning" and "tiger blood?" Both terms quickly became popular phrases on social media and appeared in countless tweets and status updates (e.g. #winning and #tigerblood.) Sheen's strange ranting's became integrated into every day scenarios and prompted videos, spoofs, songs and more. Companies capitalized on



the phrase by selling T-shirts, buttons and even hats. It was a hugely marketable endeavor—even the Red Cross® jumped on the bandwagon.

That's right, the Red Cross used the phrase in an official tweet. It said: "We may not collect #tigerblood, but we know our donors & volunteers have fierce passion for doing good! #RedCrossMonth."<sup>4</sup> The tweet received a gigantic response and media outlets quickly picked up on the oddly appropriate use of a cultural moment. The tweet even resulted in a small increase in blood donations.



Another type of meme is the image, or **macro meme**. An image meme is slightly different from a photo meme in the sense that image memes are familiar images (such as a photo or cartoon) with different captions. Unlike photo memes, which are pictures of different people in a familiar position or environment, a macro meme uses a well-known image with different captions. Think of the picture of the [Most Interesting Man in the World](#), which features an older, debonair gentleman with different captions. He is well-known for the tagline "I don't always drink beer, but when I do, I prefer Dos Equis®" but there are multiple images where the tagline varies using the familiar format.

Finally, another type of meme includes miscellaneous **marketing memes**. This is when a company asks loyal fans and potential new customers to engage in an activity and document it. The original behavior or idea is the same, but each person adds his or her own personal touch. A good example is the McDonalds "Shamrocking" campaign. The fast food giant asked customers to document how they drink a Shamrock Shake® and post it online.

What makes a meme popular? There's no recipe to success per se and it can be difficult to predict what will be a hit. However, successful memes have similar ingredients that make them take off. Good memes are those that are:

- easy to consume,
- sharable,
- familiar,
- funny, and
- make people feel like they are "in" on something.

Some of the most popular memes are ones with a simple image and a few words of text printed on them, making them easy to understand and consume. They also have social media buttons on them that make it easy to share. Familiarity is another ingredient to effective memes. In other words, the best memes are those

<sup>4</sup> Sniderman, Zachary. "How Non-Profits Are Tapping Internet Memes & Pop Culture." Mashable. N.p., 30 Aug. 2011. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://mashable.com/2011/08/30/pop-culture-non-profits-memes/>>.

that are easy to understand and identify with. Humor is a key ingredient, too. Nearly all successful memes have an element of humor which people are eager to share with connections online. And when a meme gains momentum, people feel like they are part of an inside joke, which makes them want to share it with those that are like-minded.<sup>5</sup>

But even if you have all these elements, there's no guarantee your meme will take off. Other factors like timing, social relevancy and current trends influence how and what will become popular. You can, however, improve your chances by following certain guidelines. Although memes are mainly for fun and entertainment, there is a lot of marketing potential. When used effectively, businesses can create buzz around products or services and gain substantial exposure in a short period of time.

## Rules for a “memetastic” experience

If you are planning to capitalize on memes, there are some basic guidelines you'll want to follow. For example, according to experts, a successful meme must:

- resonate with pop culture,
- be timely and relevant to your audience,
- evaluate the investment against timing and relevancy,
- adopt a defined sharing and distribution plan, and
- be retired when momentum is lost.

First, in order to deploy a successful meme, you have to be in touch with pop culture and know what is hot at the moment. Maybe you don't care what the fox says and you don't want to dance gangnam style, but if you don't know what these are, then you aren't keeping up. Both of these memes ([What does the Fox Say?](#) and [Gangnam Style](#)) became hotter than a summer in Miami, and in no time they prompted spoofs and takeoffs. If you aren't in touch with pop culture and what people are talking about then you won't be able to create a successful meme. Also, while building a meme requires you to be in touch with what's trending, it is also important to be proactive and identify elements of your product or business that might be meme-worthy.

Secondly, timing is everything, especially with memes. If you find something that is hot and relevant to your business, you need to work quickly. What is popular today might be passé tomorrow, and this is especially true if you plan to spoof



<sup>5</sup> Quinn, Jana. “7 Things Marketers Should Know About Memes.” *Quality Logo Products Inc RSS*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Feb. 2014. <<http://www.qualitylogoproducts.com/blog/7-things-marketers-should-know-memes-faq/#ixzz2sCjHizZG>>.

or piggyback on an existing meme. Take Oreo®, for example. Within hours of the Mars Rover landing last August, Oreo released an ad showing a cookie with orange-colored cream and two distinct tracks that resembled the Mars Rover.<sup>6</sup> This approach was successful because of the timing; without the Mars landing an orange creamed cookie is not nearly as impactful. Keep in mind that memes come and go quickly, and you need to make sure the timing is right. If you launch a meme that's already come and gone, it will only make your customers think your brand is out of touch.

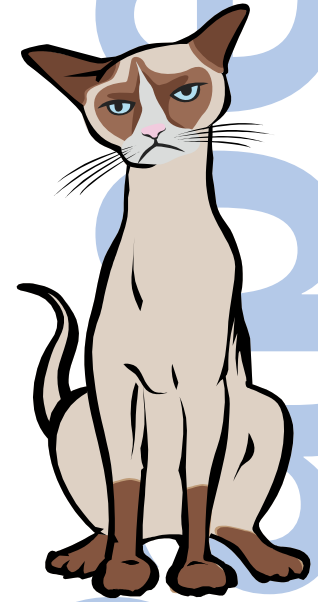
And that brings up another point: If a meme isn't relevant to your audience, it doesn't matter how hot it is because it won't translate to success. Think of who you are trying to reach and whether or not your customers and brand are a good fit. The Harlem Shake, for example, was a mainstream sensation and a number of copycat videos and twists appeared, so it was probably a safe bet for any organization to mimic. But if your demographic is older and not as tech-savvy, for instance, there is a low probability they'll understand the now iconic "[Grumpy Cat](#)" or phrases like #winning and #TigerBlood. Know your audience and what they are following by examining Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest® and Facebook trends.

McDonalds provides a case study of a meme gone wrong when it failed to attract the proper audience. Last year, McDonalds encouraged Twitter subscribers to share their dining experiences by using the hashtag #McDStories. Business Insider described it as a "dangerously vague hashtag" because it left the door wide open for interpretation.<sup>7</sup> The result was disastrous, as customers began to share mainly negative experiences. One Tweet said: "ordered a McDouble ... something in it [chipped] my molar" while another reported being hospitalized for food poisoning as a result of eating at McDonalds. The campaign was pulled within hours.

Finally, ensure that you've budgeted appropriately before you tackle meme creation. Before you invest in a meme, you need to make sure the investment will be timely and aligned with the scale of the project. Some memes can be made with extremely low overhead costs. For example, the Harlem Shake can be made on the cheap; all you need is a video camera or smart phone. Others might require a significant investment, and you should weigh that cost against timing and relevancy. For example, if you are unsure if the meme will be around in a few weeks, it doesn't make sense to invest a lot of money into the project. Memes that require a significant investment up front are often risky, so make sure you stick to a budget and measure the value it might provide against production costs.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, Kathleen. "How to Harness the Power of Internet Memes for Your Business (Infographic)." *Entrepreneur*. N.p., 10 June 2013. Web. 02 Feb. 2014.

<sup>7</sup> "Leveraging Memes For Your Own Viral Marketing." *Marketing Land*. N.p., 26 Nov. 2013. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <http://marketingland.com/leveraging-memes-for-your-own-viral-marketing-63919>.





Also, you need to pay attention to how you will share and distribute your meme. What is the distribution plan that will connect with customers as quickly as possible? Social media channels are powerful tools for sharing, and platforms like Facebook, Pinterest® and Google+® work well because people can immediately see the image or video in their news feeds. Social bookmarking sites like Reddit®, Digg®, Delicious® and StumbleUpon® can also help memes spread quickly. You should always include social share buttons around your meme to obtain maximum visibility. In addition to standard channels, memes can be added to blogs, newsletters and even print media. The idea is to distribute the content to as many people as possible using all the tools at your disposal. Investing the energy to get the meme to the right audience is critical to success.

Another critical success factor pertains to knowing when to retire a meme and move on. Once a meme loses its popularity it is time to let it go. If you continue to use a meme that has lost energy and momentum, your company is at risk of appearing out of touch with pop culture. Memes are only relevant for a limited amount of time, and keep in mind new memes appear almost daily. What was hot a few months ago might be a faint memory. But the unending stream of memes means plenty of opportunity, so keep your content fresh and relevant so you can maintain steady traffic and exposure.

## Memejacking ... don't worry, it's legal

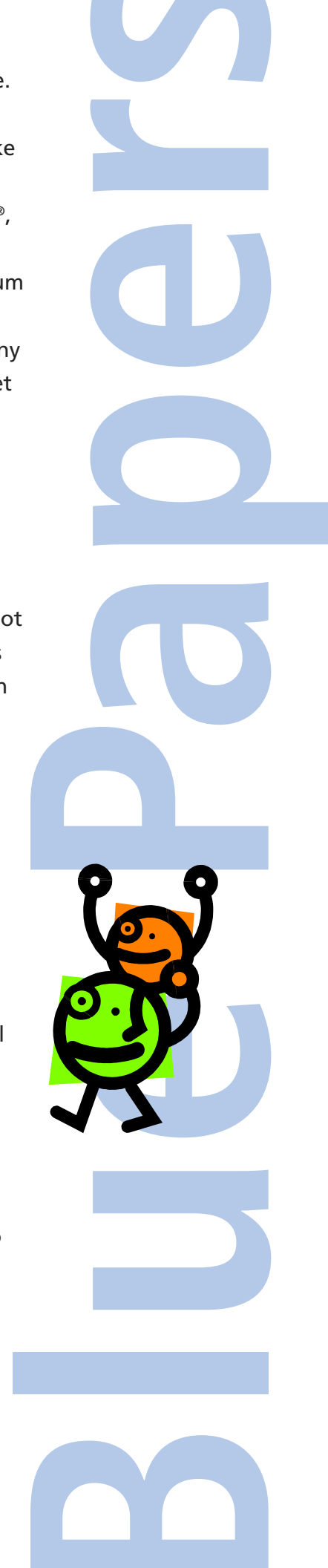
Memejacking is the term that is used when you take a popular meme and make it your own. It is a way to capitalize on a fun, engaging and wildly popular meme that is already integrated in pop culture. Rather than creating something from scratch and crossing your fingers that it takes off, with memejacking you are piggybacking on something that is already successful. And because popular memes are already shared with a large population, chances are a replication will increase the likelihood that yours will gain social media traction.

Another benefit to memejacking is that it can be quick and easy to create. With memejacking you're taking content that is already available and proven to be successful. You have fresh ideas at your disposal, and for the most part, memes can be replicated to suit your needs rather quickly, especially when compared to other marketing endeavors.

Who could forget when Mitt Romney sparked a controversy during the presidential debate by saying that although he loved Big Bird® he would cut public funding to PBS if elected.<sup>8</sup> The comment led a frenzy of tweets and

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<sup>8</sup> Kaplan, Avi. "Meme-Jacking for Social Good." *Rad Campaign*. N.p., 7 Mar. 2013. Web. 18 Feb. 2014.





parody's online. PBS® jumped on the bandwagon, and memejacked the phrase with impressive results. The station leveraged the momentum of the meme and the outpouring of public support by tweeting quotes from Big Bird and taking out advertisements that outlined the importance of the channel's reach, impact and cost to taxpayers. The response was timely and effective and helped garner support for PBS across multiple channels.

Another commonly memejacked phrase piggybacks on the campaign that simply asked: Got Milk®? Got Milk? is licensed on a range of consumer goods including Barbie® dolls, Hot Wheels®, baby and teen apparel, and kitchenware. The trademarked line has been parodied by groups championing a variety of causes. Many of the hijacked memes use the same format as the Got Milk? campaign but add another twist or cause in the tagline. For example, during the Iraqi war, the slogan was imitated by artist David Rosen with the phrase "Got Democracy?" This is a good example of adding a twist to a meme in order to share a different message.

But before you jack a meme (or memejack) you should adhere to some basic guidelines. For one, you have to jump on it quickly. Ideally, you'll want to jump on a meme right after it's spread wildly, but before it's already been hijacked by others. Finding the right timing is crucial, if others beat you to the meme it will start to appear stale.

To stay on top of popular memes, check out social bookmarking sites like Reddit® or StumbleUpon® to see what is trending. These sites are known to showcase up and coming memes before they take off on Twitter and Facebook. It's also important to stay up to speed on the latest trends and current events; even reading the headlines daily will help you determine hot topics that can spark potential memes. If you need help identifying trends check out the tool [Google Trends](#). It can tell you what's hot and what people are talking about online.

It's also imperative that you actually understand the meme before you copy it. While this might seem obvious, you might be surprised at how many companies don't research what a meme means and implies before running with it. You don't want to risk offending your audience if you don't really understand the underlying connotations of a meme. Check out the website [Know Your Meme](#) to make sure you fully understand what you are copying and determine if a meme is the right fit for your intended audience.

Similarly, you should always ask if the audience will truly appreciate the meme you are hijacking. If the demographic or target audience is not familiar with the



meme or doesn't find it funny, your efforts will be lost. Just because it's been popular among the general Internet audience doesn't necessarily mean your target audience will appreciate it.

Of course, anything you memejack should be relatable to your brand, too. You can't force it—a successful memejack skillfully incorporates brand elements that fit with the meme. Ideally, the meme will have something to do with your brand, industry or product. According to a Facebook study, posting content about subjects that relate to your brand generates the most engagement.<sup>9</sup>

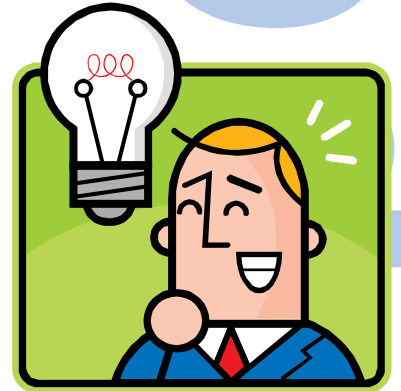
Finally, when you hijack a meme, you need to make sure you stick to the original format, style and overall components. If you vary too much from the original format it is unlikely to resonate with the audience, or worse yet, it won't even be linked to the original meme. But have fun with it, the best examples of memejacking have an entertainment value and set a tone that is funny or witty.

If you want to memejack, you might consider visiting one of the many meme generators such as Meme Generator and quickmeme. These tools make it extremely simple to copy a popular meme and be creative with your spinoff. The key is to adhere to the basic principles outlined above and stay true to the original format.

## Need help creating a meme?

If you need help creating a meme, there are several free or low cost resources available online. Check out some of the reliable meme generators, tools and Photoshop® techniques, including [Imgur](#), [Livememe](#), [Quick Meme](#), [Meme Dad](#), [Imgflip](#) and [Photoshop](#). Mashable® also has a step-by-step guide for [creating memes](#) and explaining how to use these resources.

There are other resources you might find helpful as you navigate the world of memes. SEOmoz®, for example, has an excellent article on ways to [create and promote](#) a marketing meme. You should also check out [Know Your Meme](#), which is essentially an encyclopedia of Internet memes. It can help you find a catalog of memes, popular memes, and the history behind the various memes. You can also use the [Meme Generator](#) to find the most popular memes.



<sup>9</sup> "Memejacking: The Complete Guide to Creating Memes for Marketing." Mashable <<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33363/Memejacking-The-Complete-Guide-to-Creating-Memes-for-Marketing.aspx>>.

If you are creating your own meme, Moz® blogger Takeshi Young lists five basic tips to follow. These include:

1. **Know your subject.** Make sure you do your homework and fully understand the meme.
2. **Study the experts.** Browse through the 50 most popular memes and get an idea of what works before you create a meme.
3. **Make several drafts.** Brevity is key; play with the wording and produce several drafts to ensure you get it right.
4. **Ask for feedback.** Get input from others; they might have suggestions for alternatives that are funnier than the original.
5. **Have fun.** Be fun and creative; don't take memes too seriously, they are meant to be silly.<sup>10</sup>

As Young illustrates, it's important to keep the meme and the process fun. It's also a good idea to get feedback and make sure your meme resonates with multiple people. And finally, don't be afraid to take advantage of the tools available to increase your chances of success.

## Memes for marketing magic

How have companies taken memes and turned them into marketing magic? A good example is found in Wonderful Pistachios® which used the Honey Badger sensation for an advertising campaign. In case you missed it, the Honey Badger featured a tenacious honey badger scouring for food despite encountering obstacles like a king cobra. Using documentary-style footage, the "nasty" honey badger journey was narrated by a man named Randall. It was posted in January 2011 and has accumulated over 45.8 million views, and counting.



Wonderful Pistachios® capitalized on the Honey badger by creating its own video. In the video, which is even narrated by Randall, you see the honey badger crack open a pistachio by using the notorious king cobra. The ad was hilarious and timely as it subtly linked pistachios to one of the most effective memes of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Wonderful Pistachios wasn't the only company to capitalize on the honey badger. The World Wildlife Fund® (WWF) used the honey badger to help people learn

<sup>10</sup> Young, Takeshi. "How To Use Memes to Build EASY Backlinks & Traffic." Moz. N.p., 15 Mar. 2012. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://moz.com/blog/how-to-use-memes-to-build-easy-backlinks-traffic>>.

<sup>11</sup> Vaughan, Pamela. "10 Popular Memes Masquerading as Marketing Campaigns." 10 Popular Memes Masquerading as Marketing Campaigns. N.p., 7 June 2011. Web. 03 Feb. 2014. <<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33197/10-Popular-Memes-Masquerading-as-Marketing-Campaigns.aspx>>.

more about wildlife. The WWF also took advantage of the craze by selling honey badger merchandise. It sold a [Honey Badger Adoption Kit](#) via its online gift center that sold out.<sup>12</sup>

Another example of a successful meme was created by the National Women's Law Center. The organization created a popular [someecard](#), which is a Hallmark®-type greeting card with text, to highlight the wage gap between men and women in the U.S. It wanted to communicate the fact that American women earned only 77 cents for every dollar earned by men in comparable positions. The meme read: "Does the wage gap mean that women get to leave work 23% early today?" This is an example of a photo meme—and it was highly successful in creating awareness.



Do you remember the [Success Kid](#) meme? It began when a mother posted a photo of her 11-month old son on a beach to her Flickr® account. In the picture, the toddler was clutching a fist full of sand with an expression that prompted a slew of sentiments of success and frustration. He is also commonly known as the "I Hate Sandcastles Kid."

The British media company Virgin Media® used the photo in a billboard ad campaign with the caption "Tim just realized his parents get HD channels at no extra cost." The campaign perfectly captured the expression of the tiny tot while leveraging their product at the same time.<sup>13</sup>

## Got memes?

Memes aren't going away in the near future, so it's a good idea to get in on the action. Whatever type of meme you create should follow the general guidelines outlined in this paper. Do it correctly and your organization will be the talk of the town, attracting more users, traffic, and ultimately revenue. It's no laughing matter—whether you create your own meme or ride the coattails of an existing one—they might hold the key to your future.

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<sup>12</sup> Kaplan, Avi. "Meme-Jacking for Social Good." *Rad Campaign*. N.p., 7 Mar. 2013. Web. 18 Feb. 2014.

<sup>13</sup> Vaughan, Pamela. "10 Popular Memes Masquerading as Marketing Campaigns." *10 Popular Memes Masquerading as Marketing Campaigns*. N.p., 7 June 2011. Web. 03 Feb. 2014. <<http://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33197/10-Popular-Memes-Masquerading-as-Marketing-Campaigns.aspx>>.