

ful, don't despair. Dry those crying eyes and make a meme.

### Where's the Beef, Who's Your Daddy and What's a Meme?

Someone forwards you an email joke. Your boss tells you about a great new Thai restaurant. Your kid comes home from school singing the praises of the latest Nintendo DS. You've just been infected with three memes.

A meme is a virally-transmitted unit of cultural information. Memes are everywhere, and have existed throughout human history. Catch-phrases, melodies, icons, inventions, and fashions are typical memes. A chain-letter is a meme, as is the idea of a meme itself.

The most important thing about a meme, and the only way it can survive, is that it's compelling enough to pass on. No one wants to retell a bad joke, and nobody gets a tuneless song stuck playing relentlessly in their head after they hear it. Memes thrive because they're worth talking about.

The Internet is a natural habitat for memes. Why? Because the web has evolved into the world's biggest, fastest information exchange. Concepts can emerge, evolve, permeate and perish in days or weeks. The growing popularity of blogs, social networks and other frequently updated sites, combined with email and synchronous communications channels like instant-messaging and Twitter mean that a compelling idea can reach hundreds of thousands of people within hours.

In the online world, memes are the currency of word-of-mouth marketing. Word-of-mouth on the web is different from the real world in two important respects: it's persistent and amplified.

#### TOP TIP

For a reasonably comprehensive and current list of online memes—mostly produced accidentally by individuals, instead of intentionally by companies—check out the Wikipedia entry entitled "List of Internet phenomena".

#### TOP TIP

For a case study on how memes spread, check out Darren's article, "[The Meme Epidemic](#)".

If you tell your sister about a great new shoe shop, no one else hears that communication. But if you have a blog about high heels and you write about a new shoe shop, your mention of the shop lasts as long as you maintain the website. Regular readers access it browsing your archives and new readers arrive using search engines. More importantly, your voice is amplified from a one-to-one relationship to one-to-many. Instead of just telling your sister, you're telling an audience of five, 500 or 50,000.

### Making a Meme

Making a meme is a bit like speed dating. To make an impression, you need to be clever, inventive, and amusing. If your product isn't interesting on its own—like the iPod, Second Life or Michelle Kaufman's groovy modular homes—find something tangentially related to your product that's meme-worthy. It's the online equivalent of a publicity stunt, and when it works, it makes giraffes sing and penguins soar.

This is all a little theoretical, so let's take a look at some examples of online memes manufactured by organizations:

[Subservient Chicken](#) - A website where users make an actor in a chicken suit complete various actions by typing commands. Also, a viral promotion for Burger King's chicken sandwiches. It's been copied by dozens of companies, so you know it was a raging success.

[Baitcar.com](#) - Vancouver-area law enforcement agencies set up a series of 'bait cars' to catch car thieves. The cars are equipped with video cameras, and the most entertaining of the resulting videos are posted to Baitcar.com, which received 25,000 visitors in its first week.

[The Shining Redux](#) - A contest held by the Association of Independent Creative Editors led to a clever re-cut trailer for *The Shining*, turning the film into a feel-good romantic comedy. This project launched a web trend for creating genre-shifting movie trailers.

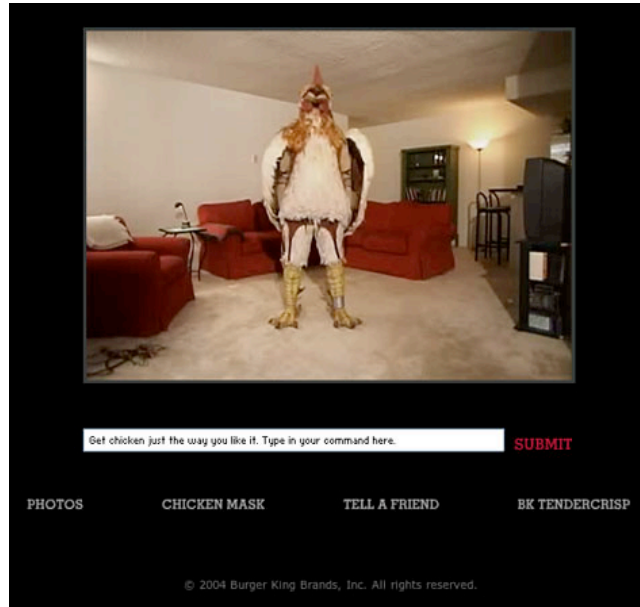
Now that you've seen some examples of memes, what makes a meme effective enough that people want to pass it on? There's no sure strategy, of course, but we see some common threads and recurring themes:

**Emotional Connection** - People need to respond emotionally to the meme. Humour (and in particular satire) works best, but poignant stories of love

and loss can work well, too. We're skeptical about strategies that are mean-spirited. These may work, but they depend on an audience that won't be offended by snarkiness. The fake Steve Jobs blog works in the technology space, but we're not sure that a fake Martha Stewart blog would resonate well with homemakers.

**Originality** - People love to be surprised. Take a creative approach to a traditional idea by changing its medium ([this photographic rendering](#) of a Seurat painting), scale (artist Ron Mueck makes giant, creepily-accurate sculptures of humans), tone (the aforementioned re-edited version of *The Shining* trailer) or amount (a Sony ad that let loose 250,000 rubber balls bouncing down the streets of San Francisco).

**Brevity** - Shakespeare said it was the soul of wit, and he's right. People need to 'get' your meme in a matter of seconds. A great meme will hold an audience's attention for longer than mere moments—consider how long we spend browsing a site like [Post Secret](#)—but you need to convey the gist of the idea as quickly as possible.



**Timeliness** - Many memes respond to a particular event in mainstream or industry news, and rely on the audience drawing a connection. Here's an example [of a Flash movie](#) that parodies Garth Brook's deal to sell his music exclusively through Wal-Mart. Embrace the fact that most memes are short-lived, and look for relevant news and pop culture trends for inspiration.

**Transmittable** - This is the simplest requirement, but one that marketers often overlook. Make sure it's easy for people to 'infect' their friends and colleagues with your meme. Ensure that site visitors can easily copy and paste

## Getting to First Base

the link to the meme. For example, ensure that it's not buried in the middle of a Flash-based site. Ideally, build a meme that includes transmission as part of the idea. The recent promotion for "No Direction Home", the Bob Dylan bio pic, enabled site visitors to replace the text on the flash cards in Dylan's famous video for "Subterranean Homesick Blues". They could enter a message, and then email it to a friend.

The image shows a promotional website for Bob Dylan's "No Direction Home" with a red, distressed background. At the top, it says "DYLAN SEND SOMEONE A MESSAGE" with links for "THE ALBUM / THE REMIX / THE VIDEO / DYLAN07.COM". Below this is a section for "DYLAN OUT NOW" with a "CLICK HERE TO BUY" link. A small navigation bar lists various publications. The main feature is an "ADD YOUR MESSAGE" form with 10 numbered input boxes (1-10) arranged in two columns. Instructions state: "TYPE YOUR MESSAGE IN THE BOXES ON THE RIGHT. IF YOU RUN OUT OF SPACE, TAB TO THE NEXT BOX." To the right of the form is a preview window showing a scene from the movie with a man holding a sign, labeled "SHEET 1 OF 10". Below the preview are "PREVIEW MESSAGE" and "SEND MESSAGE" buttons. At the bottom, there is a section for "EVERYTHING EXCEPT COMPROMISE" with a link to buy the DVD, and a footer with "DESIGNED BY TEN4", "WWW.LEGACYRECORDINGS.COM", "WWW.DYLAN07.COM", and "PRIVACY POLICY".