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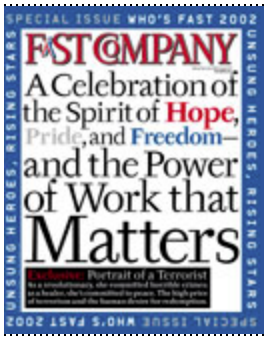

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What's in a Meme?

Maybe a lot -- if information truly evolves the same way life does, we're headed toward a brave new world of marketing.

by John Hoult

All hail the data king. Data scrolls through CNBC newscasts; it controls space travel; it expedites your Amazon.com delivery; and it constitutes the building blocks of life -- DNA. Author Matt Ridley calls DNA "the autobiography of a species" in the subtitle of his book *Genome* (HarperCollins, 2000). A genome, he argues, tells a story like a novel and acts similar to the source code for a computer. Even to the casual onlooker reading about today's massive genome maps, human DNA begins to look more mundane than mysterious -- a thick and complicated book of operating instructions. So if, as scientists and thinkers suggest, DNA looks and acts like other information, then does it stand to reason that other information evolves like DNA?

According to a new group of thinkers, the answer is yes. Nearly 30 years ago, evolutionary theorist Richard Dawkins proposed this theory: The fundamental components of ideas act just like genes, competing for brain space the same way organisms vie for breathing space. He called these basic idea-bits "memes."

Dawkins' reasoning opened a whole new field of thought called memetics. Various scientists and idea merchants picked up the meme idea and ran with it. Unleash Your Ideavirus -- the Fast Company cover story by Seth Godin -- applies the meme theory to 21st-century marketing strategies and concludes that infectious branding tidbits like Budweiser's "Wassup" tagline and Pet.com's sock-puppet mascot spread among the populace like voracious viruses. Godin proposes that marketing and memetic savvy, combined with the broadcasting abilities of the Internet, allow business ideas such as Hotmail and Evite to grow at a staggering rate that pre-Internet word of mouth alone could not achieve.

Susan Blackmore, a psychologist and author of *The Meme Machine,* (Oxford University Press, 1999) has pushed the meme idea about as far as anybody, but she says the basic idea is pretty simple. "All you need is some kind of information that can be copied in various forms with mistakes -- with variations," she says. "Most of the copies die out. The few that get passed on are successful. They go on and get copied and varied again. That's how evolution works."

Simple enough. But it's one thing to say an idea bears a resemblance to a virus, and quite another to say an idea is a kind of virus. A lot of people, scientists included, don't like the implications. Academics quibble over memetic

definitions, which remain vague. Others argue point-blank that memetic theory can't be proved. Both groups have a point. The definitions are subject to interpretation, and thinking leaves no fossil record.

Most of us, though, don't like the idea of memes because they exclude free will. In the meme scheme, a human becomes a breathing Xerox machine. Susan Blackmore writes that most of our likes, dislikes, and beliefs are only memes we've picked up along the way. Even the concept of "I" -- the sense of self -- is just a meme, not really ours at all. Blackmore admits to taking an extreme view. "It's more fun," she says. In the hyper-wired world, she imagines memes leaving their human hosts behind and going digital, eventually creating ideas and perhaps a new kind of consciousness beyond our comprehension.

Not everyone takes the meme idea so far. Amherst College's Paul Ewald studies the evolution of diseases and thinks of memes as a metaphor or tool of explanation. "Certain cultural attributes are passed on at greater rates than others," he says, suggesting humans have some control over the memes they pass on. Ewald argues that, for the most part, individuals steer clear of culture's harmful memes, like addiction, and instead select more beneficent ones to hand down.

Since Dawkins' first proposal, memetic theory has been widely applied. Whether a meme is a metaphor or a real entity, the theory does reinforce much of what we intuit about the creation and long-term sustainability of ideas:

- Ideas that move faster also change faster. To bolster creativity, get people talking across your organization.
- Diversity means more creativity -- the wider variety of idea generators, the greater possibility for a new innovation.
- We've entered a new landscape of learning. Ideas flash around the globe faster than ever. That should mean more new ideas than ever.
- A catchy idea will tear through a population, especially if that population hasn't seen anything like it before.
- The Internet is a new world. New creatures have hatched. Now, selective pressures like the need for profitability are bearing down. Evolutionary theory predicts this is when real innovation happens. Lots of companies will die, but some will find interesting, new ways to survive.

The Next Step?

Memetics promises marketers a more scientific way to reach consumers. "Advertising agencies do memetic engineering all the time," says Blackmore. "If you have this color and this shape, then you can sell to this kind of person. It's already being made more efficient." The big challenge for the future, according to Blackmore, isn't finding catchy tunes and phrases; it's engineering the environment for a meme to catch on.

Today's marketers take a page from the books of epidemiology. Find the trendsetters, Seth Godin's powerful sneezers, and infect them. If you get the timing right and achieve critical mass, you'll create a fashion, a fad, an idea epidemic. Finding that timing presents a big limitation -- as of yet, nobody's come up with a surefire way to make the timing fit the idea.

Blackmore envisions a future that transcends that barrier. Many organisms alter their environment to suit them. Beavers, for instance, build dams, making the lakes they like to live in and creating the marshy environment that fosters the trees they like to eat. With a deeper understanding of memetics, Blackmore thinks marketers and idea merchants will be able to do the same in the world of ideas. People will be able to engineer the mental landscape to favor

their idea, to sculpt the mind-set of the masses.

It's a pretty far-out idea, but some theorists say it's already happening naturally. Dawkins, a confirmed atheist, says he looks at various human belief systems -- cults, new-age therapies, even mainstream religion -- with suspicion. He argues that faith keeps people from asking essential yet troubling questions about the world -- that religious doctrine determines what ideas a person will or will not accept. Memetic theory suggests that religion may be the most potent marketing model of the new millenium. The question is, do we want it to be?

Some Limitations

The big problem with evolution, of course, is that no one controls it. Meme production and proliferation can't be micromanaged; the system is too complex. If and when scientists or marketers create idea-friendly environments, success is still not guaranteed.

For one, people develop a resistance to ideas. Ever notice how quickly marketing trends move among the young? Pokemon, Tickle Me Elmo, Barney. A memetic explanation of this rapid, rabid adoption of ideas is that children haven't developed the consumer immune system that adults have. Of course, as Paul Ewald point outs, information confers that immunity -- a kind of skepticism meme.

Also, evolution is random. Even in a perfect world any idea can fall flat, and human beings need to become better prognosticators for that to change. Many ideas fail or succeed for reasons difficult to forsee -- new technologies kill off older ones; styles and lifestyles change; attention shifts elsewhere.

More importantly, many evolutionary routes don't lead anywhere. Blackmore likens this dead end to the peak of a short and isolated mountain. "Evolution only climbs hills," Blackmore says. "It doesn't descend. If it gets to the top of a local hill, it won't be able to climb higher until the landscape changes." The QWERTY keyboard is an example of an idea that got stuck on a short peak -- until our mental landscape changes, we're stuck typing with this anti-intuitive device.

To follow through on the mountain climbing metaphor, memetics can't yet tell a business which idea will take it to the top. It only suggests that, if you find yourself looking around at higher peaks, better start at the bottom with a new idea and work your way up again.

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