

When British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' in his landmark book *The Selfish Gene* back in 1976, he could not have envisaged how appropriate

it would be to the way we are now engaging in social interaction. In short, a meme is "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation", with the transference from one mind to another taking place via writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena. Typical examples include melodies, catchphrases and fashion.

It's fair to say that social media is the most contemporary form of cultural transmission, with platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and blog spots transforming the way we interact with friends and family and indeed work colleagues and new ideas crisscrossing cultural and geographical divides every second of the day. What's also apparent is that social media has emerged as an exciting and unprecedented way for savvy business operators to engage

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The Internet and mobile phones have long been central components of our everyday lives and this level of connectedness presents amazing opportunities supported by pioneering technologies designed to boost our access to knowledge while conserving our time and energy.

“The big seismic shift that social media has brought about is this 'power shift' from brands and marketers to people,” says Nikki Stammers, Engagement Planner at Sydney digital ad agency Whybin/TBWA Tequila, which specialises in viral >>





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marketing, online advertising and integrated content solutions (see www.wtbwa.com.au).

“Word of mouth used to be chatter between two people over the garden fence; chatter that disappeared into the ether as far as brands were concerned. Now, likeminded people can connect around the world and chat and have conversations. The results of these conversations and collective responses are indelible marks, forever discoverable on the web. Suddenly, the voice of the consumer is a force to be reckoned with like never before.”

According to Stammers, the social web is helping consumers to define what the word 'brand' means. “Savvy marketers will treat their passionate consumers as partners rather than passive recipients,” she explains. “This shift is something that cannot be ignored by business.”

Reality shift

The Commonwealth Bank is one Australian brand that has fully embraced the concept of social networking as a means of connecting with its clients on a deeper level. The bank is getting close to launching its innovative iPhone application - or app - which helps to significantly streamline the property buying and selling experience.

Designed to revolutionise the property search process and help consumers to make informed decisions, the app utilises augmented reality technology - described by Wikipedia as “a

term for a live direct or indirect view of a physical real world environment whose elements are augmented by virtual computer generated imagery”.

In the bank's case, rich data - including past sales history on more than 95 per cent of Australian properties, recent sales and current property listings - will be mapped on to a real world view through the camera phone.

Users can also switch to a list or a bird's eye view to gain insight into properties matching their search criteria. Properties on their dream house list can then be tracked in the user's favourites and - thanks to the inclusion of detailed suburb profiles - demographics, median price, property hotspots and capital growth, trends can be accessed.

“The new iPhone application will be an industry first in Australia. We are leveraging new technology and continually innovating to deliver convenient, relevant and real time services to make buying a home easier,” explains Mark Murray, General Manager Consumer Marketing at the bank. “Homebuyers can [via the app] easily access a host of customised information, tools and insights on every home in Australia - for free.”

The idea is to think of the app as your own personal real estate agent, property analyst and home lender - in a pocket sized version that doesn't cost you anything. It will not only save you valuable time but will give you the ability to get clued up on real estate in a flash.

To give it some extra clout, the technology is being supported by two industry heavyweights - property portal www.realestate.com.au, and data provider, RP Data.

Full speed ahead

On the subject of apps, another innovation influencing the way we communicate is Bump™, from US based Bump Technologies. Launched last year, this cool and clever app

“The launch of a phone application that helps to significantly streamline the property buying and selling experience is getting closer.”

makes transforming information from one mobile phone to another as simple as choosing what you want to exchange, holding your phones and gently bumping hands. You can literally share photos, exchange contact details and become Facebook friends in a matter of seconds!

By eliminating the need to manually input information, Bump is destined to eventually render the business card redundant. And while it only allows the transfer of contact information at present, it will no doubt be developed further.

So, what's next? Where is the social media phenomenon leading us?

Stammers claims there are two big shifts already under way within the world of social media. One is the advent of location based social networking, with mobile phone services such as Foursquare providing you and your friends with new ways of exploring the place you live in.

"This is interesting because it moves social networking away from being a purely online activity to something which actually connects us in the real world to likeminded people and our local community," says Stammers. "This is a potential opportunity hotspot for businesses who are smart enough to capitalise on the move."

The second is the first real step toward Web 3.0 - the predicted third generation of the World Wide Web, which is widely purported to include the semantic tagging of content. "Using Facebook's 'Like' plug-in, this will allow people to select content to engage with, based on the preference and filter of their peer network. There are a few early adopter brands that have implemented 'Like' to great effect, one being [denim brand] Levis. We'll start to see the 'Like' button take over in the next few months," Stammers predicts.

It may come as no surprise to learn that Dawkins regards memes as having the properties necessary for evolution. He has noted that as various ideas pass from one generation to the next, they may either enhance or detract from the survival of the people who obtain those ideas. When it comes to modern day business, it might just be that a willingness to reach out to us all via all available technological platforms could mean the difference between survival and struggle. •

FACE THE FACTS

- **9 million Australians regularly use social networking sites.**
- **Almost 9 out of 10 Australian Internet users look to other users for opinions and advice about brands and products.**
- **26 per cent of social networkers use mobiles to network.**
- **A new blog is created every second, says Technorati, the blog search engine and publisher of the annual State of the Blogosphere report.**
- **Most popular social media destinations:**
Facebook: 41 per cent
MySpace: 24 per cent
Gmail: 15 per cent
Twitter: 8 per cent
(Percentages of all traffic on a list of popular social destinations at www.mashable.com, March 2010.)
- **iPhones in South East Asia:**
iPhone OS is most dominant in Australia, Singapore and Hong Kong, with a respective March 2010 market share of 88 per cent, 89 per cent and 78 per cent. The three countries are responsible for 82 per cent of the region's iPhone traffic, according to a 2010 Mobile Metrics report on South East Asia from AdMob, which serves ads for mobile websites and applications.
- **App download trends:**
iPod touch users download an average of 12 apps a month, 37 per cent more than iPhone and Android users, with webOS users downloading fewer total apps per month, says a January 2010 AdMob Mobile Metrics survey of iPhone, iPod touch, Android and webOS device users.

SOCIALLY ADEPT

To fully appreciate the power of social networking platforms, poster boy Ashton Kutcher may have made his name by being actor Demi Moore's significantly younger other half, but the US actor has proved he is so much more than a pretty face.

Indeed, having fully grasped the commercial benefits of social networking, Kutcher was named in the prestigious Time magazine's 2010 ranking of '100 Most Influential People in the World'.

Last year Kutcher sent out a challenge to Twitter users - his objective was to beat broadcaster CNN in the race to acquire one million followers. He won and has since been acknowledged as the king of the micro

blogging site. Interestingly, Kutcher's ability to read the vast potential of social media has seen Catalyst Media, the company he originally co-founded as a film and television production house, turn its attention to developing messaging that builds consumer networks for brands.

As Kutcher explained at the MIXX Conference and Expo 2009 in the US, his company operates as a studio for social media to develop consumer networks for individual brands. "It [social media] is an unknown frontier... We want to lead the movement into that space. You can't use traditional advertising models inside of the [social media] spaces. What we are trying to do is build bottom up strategies where we

can reach out to the consumers and get their insights into how they want to work with the brands.

"We take the insights of consumers and marketers and bring them together in content beds, which really allows people to feel as though they own the brands... You have the ability to deliver a piece of messaging from your company and the response will immediately tell you whether consumers like it."

If you have an interest in brand building and direct reach, it's worth monitoring Kutcher and the direction his company is taking. For a start you can follow him on Twitter - his user name is C_AshtonKutcher and his current number of followers stands at close to five million.