Humor,
Marketing,
and the Internet

**How technological change has given humor
renewed purpose**

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What if, despite all the changes, the true measure of great digital work were its emotive power?

I'm sure you'll agree that it's a very exciting time be a part of the marketing industry. It seems that each new day ushers in a groundbreaking new style of marketing, a new approach or a new technology that just wouldn't have been possible a few years ago. Not even the terms we use to describe, debate and judge the work—"participatory," "social," "interlinked" and "connective"—were in existence a few years ago. Everything about digital marketing is new.

But what if the most important attribute of truly great digital work weren't something new, but something retained from the past? Something important that had been lost or forgotten in the midst of all these changes? What if, despite all the change, the true measure of great digital work were its emotive power?

The link between emotive power and business growth is clear. Science tells us that emotion, not rational thought, is the gatekeeper for consumer behavior.

This paper is focused on humor alone, the mainstay in our bag of emotive tricks. Most brands feature humor in their brand attributes—perhaps as "a twinkle in the eye," a "playful nature," or something similar.

More specifically, what follows is all about humor in the digital age of marketing: its renewed benefits; a glimpse at a brand that manages to be funny on the web; an investigation into how social technologies are impacting the way that we joke; and finally, a few pointers on how to ensure that your brand is in a position to take advantage of humor.

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The Benefits of Humor
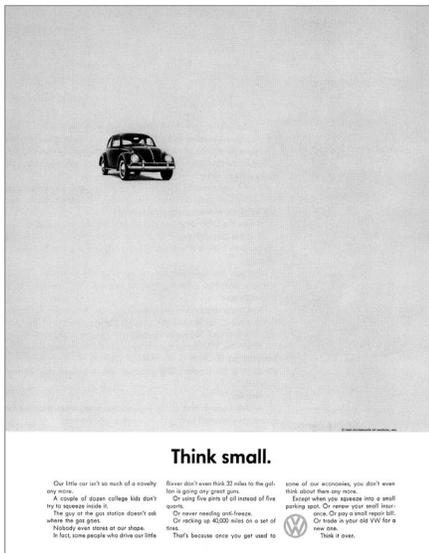
Humor has been a vital part of marketing for a long time: The memorably witty "Think Small" print ad that DDB created for Volkswagen was made some five decades ago. However, with the changes in communication technology, humor carries a number of new benefits that have made it even more vital.

Humor Helps Extend Your Reach. The first benefit of humor is the most well known. As we're all aware, everyone on the web has the ability to quickly and easily share content with others. Humor puts your brand in the best position to benefit from that connectivity. It has the ability to earn large audiences through the amplifying effect of social connectivity. If you make your users laugh, your relationship with them will benefit and they will probably pass your creative on to their friends to make them laugh too, causing your message to spread virally.

Humor Reduces Dependence on Incentives. We're always doing our best to encourage our customers to engage with our brand. We fight tooth and nail to entice them to click here, there, and everywhere. There are many ways to coax them along, but humor is a great way to get a response without depending on giveaways or sacrificing margin. It's a nice alternative to out-and-out bribery. If you make sure they're enjoying what they're doing and can keep them laughing, you'll have enough of their attention to keep the experience flowing beautifully.

Humor Can Be Used to Avert Potential Detractors. Humor's ability to diffuse annoyance is vital at a time when genuine customer service is scarce yet consumers are able to broadcast their grievances to the planet. Brands are increasingly measuring their worth by what people are saying about them. Fred Reichheld of the Harvard Business Review has touted the Net Promoter Score (NPS), a simple customer satisfaction matrix, as "the one number you need to grow" in business. Humor, when used with sensitivity, has a redeeming quality that can help to lighten the mood and assuage grievances.

Humor Reduces Dependence on Production Values. Effective digital strategy is more than just moving what you've done from one screen to another. We're entering an era when your brand experience will need to be adapted to suit many different devices— and the experience across these devices will need to be coherently interlinked. Factors like speed, personalization and relevance to the user will become increasingly important. We'll be looking for simpler, more direct ways to express brand identity—like with a quip within a text message.

A Brand with a Sense of Humor

One brand that recognizes the importance of humor in the digital era is Google.

Without humor Google would be a completely different company. Its mission "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful" is arguably conducive to quite dry work.
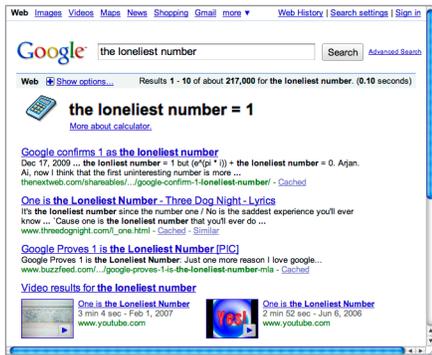
Searching Google for "the loneliest number" will make the calculator answer "1." Similarly, searching for "recursion" returns "Did you mean: recursion?"

Google has built its empire on being very performance oriented, efficient, fast, tech based, and reliable—and is facing a whole new set of challenges today. To quote Interbrand's *Best Global Brands 2009*: "As the brand grows it has to deal with the inevitable mistrust and ugliness ascribed to being a very large, diversified, and very profitable company."

Google has injected fun and humor into its personality to help counter these perceptions. But how does it do it?

Google has executed dozens of enormous pranks—like the April Fools' Day 2009 prank, during which YouTube was upside-down. But Google's success isn't about size. In fact, it's quite the opposite: it's about being granular. It's the way that the Google personality is so closely knitted into its products. A keen sense of humor lurks just beneath the surface.

Knowing that jokes are rarely as funny secondhand as they are firsthand, and that taking one of many tiny jokes in isolation doesn't give a full sense of their inexhaustible sense of humor, let's look at a fairly typical Google prank: a feature hidden in a rarely used part of Google Chrome, a "Goats Teleported" column that appears only when a certain combination of keys are held down.

Google treated this feature as if it were a software bug, announcing its existence by filing a bug report in the official Google Code forum. Programmers flocked to the forum to play along with the goat teleportation joke—flooding it with concerned comments about the health and safety of the goats, customs fees and quarantine questions, one programmer wondering if it is "possible to wear a goat suit and be teleported," and another feigning annoyance that his bedroom was filling with everyone else's goats.

Google's hidden feature triggered tributes from the public in various forms including, bootleg merchandise.

This example is emblematic of the three attributes that really set Google's approach apart: the humor is unexpectedly pervasive (it seems to be coming from the engineers and designers); the humor is stripped down to its bare bones, so the delivery feels effortless and spontaneous; and the tone of voice toggles between neutral and playful, as needed. These should be the attributes that define a brand with a sense of humor in the Internet age.

New Technologies, New Forms of Humor

Humor is a malleable concept that has been changing form, content and style in response to social, cultural and technological trends since media's very beginnings. New communication technologies not only influence humor, they make new styles of humor possible. Every major new communications technology in modern history has ushered in a new genre of humor. Newspapers, for example, because they are published and distributed rapidly and frequently, have made it possible to satirize current world events via cartoons. Television gave us the sitcom. The telephone provides the safe distance from which to make prank calls.

So, what does humor look like in the Internet age?

As it happens, there is literature available on this topic. Back in 2007, Limor Shifman of the University of Oxford published a study in the *International Journal of Communications*. He analyzed a huge volume of Internet-based comics and categorized them by topic. With the help of earlier studies, Shifman compiled a list of joke topics* and measured the prevalence of each. The most relevant topics were, unfortunately, off limits in the world of marketing communications: sex (taboo), gender (taboo), and animals (unusable). Shifman's study had a secondary purpose, which is more useful for our interests: to find 'new' forms of humor. He found two that are now enjoying popularity on the web: manipulated photos and interactive humor

that "allows users to participate in the joke-telling process."

Based on the understanding that these new forms of humor are attributable to recent technological advancements (the ability to manipulate photographs, the ability to interact electronically), it seems reasonable to assume that starting with technology- driven product breakthroughs and working backward to discover comical uses of each would be a way to find new and notable forms of humor.

After observing the social bookmarking site reddit.com over the past few months, we drew up a table of what was discerned: the new capability (i.e., what we can now do because of new technology); the resultant behavior (i.e., how people take advantage of that capability); and a real-world example.

Technology-Driven Capability	Resultant Behavior	Real-World Example
Anonymity Opens the door to new forms of identity play	Creating a new identity for yourself	The announcement of fake "breaking" news stories with the hope that they will be broadcast before fact-checkers pick up on the hoax
	Assuming someone else's identity	A fake Twitter account was opened on behalf of Tupac Shakur, a long dead celebrity
	Regression	Believe it or not, there are people that spend all day trawling forums pretending to be a kitten
	Oversharing	Some sites allow people to anonymously share outrageous confessions, personal text messages, and so on
Connectivity Opens the door to styles of humor only made possible by mass participation	Infiltration of situations in real life	Flash mobs
	Infiltration of online destinations	Greenpeace's competition to name their whale was flooded with visitors from reddit.com who stuffed the poll with votes for "Mister Splashy Pants"
	Obscure/absurd common interests	Reddit's competitive obsession with bacon and narwhals
Wider access to creative tools	Manipulated photos	A photo that probably wasn't intended to be funny is given a harsh caption
	Memes	The 'Play'em Off, Keyboard Cat!' videos on YouTube
	Making the recipient the butt of the joke	Customized videos that make the recipient the butt of the joke
Interactivity Requires the user to perform an activity that is additional to reading, watching or hearing	Bait-and-switch pranks	Linkjacking: a link inexplicably leads to a Rick Astley song despite the link text promising something else
	Hidden features (also known as Easter eggs)	For a time, Googling "worst band in the world" would return the result "See results for Creed"

*The topics were: sex, gender, animals, products and companies, mass media, children and teenagers, politics, computers and technology, sports, specific people, ethnicity, transportation, habits, workplace and professions.

Conclusion and Action Points

Humor is an enormously important and beneficial aspect of brand marketing that has been used quite successfully on the web by companies including Google. So, how do we execute it well? In addition to the thought starters provided in the table above, here are a handful of action points to serve as a guide.

Strategic Planning: Be Bold
By now you've grasped that technological change is changing the game, and fast. You might even have seen large organizations, once-vital professions, or indeed, entire industries permanently wiped out by the digital revolution. With all that going on around us it's only natural that we start taking digital seriously and implement fairly defensive digital strategies. There may even be a whiff of fear. And it's an easy progression from fear or defensive strategies to "safe" but uncreative (and unfunny) work. Bear in mind that progress is not possible without failure. Many digital strategists use analogies like "swinging for a home run" or "drilling for oil"—the outcome is uncertain until the attempt has been made. Be realistic about the likelihood of a project succeeding and take calculated risks, as opposed to limiting creative.

Briefing and Production: Understand the Social Context
If they're not doing so already, brands should undertake social media monitoring and trust social media mavens. Ensure that efforts are made to understand the kinds of topics that gain traction. It is much easier to steer an existing conversation into a fresh direction than generate interest from nothing.

Test user friendliness. Humor requires you to keep your users sufficiently relaxed to enjoy what they're doing with you. Ensure that your products are tested thoroughly to eliminate frustration in the user experience. Keep in mind also that people are most comfortable and relaxed using digital tools that they are most familiar with.

After Launch: Know that Statistics are Only Half the Picture
Everything is measurable now, and it is very tempting to manage by statistics. Blinkered adherence to optimization and best practices could eventually leave your business with a cold and dry online presence. While I would agree that you should capture data wherever possible, and that statistical measures make great KPIs, you need to be watching the right statistics. Depending on your digital strategy you might want to consider something like the aforementioned *Net Promoter Score* or the *Three-factor Model of Enjoyment Experience*, a scale measuring the enjoyment of web experiences published in *The Journal of Interactive Marketing*.

It's a very exciting time to be in digital marketing. Those brands that embrace change will enjoy new heights of creativity, inspiration, effectiveness and insight. Even our sense of humor, a part of our nature that we don't really question, is moving with the times. We do know that humor is here to stay and that we can expect plenty more of it. Humor, like the Internet, connects us all.

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