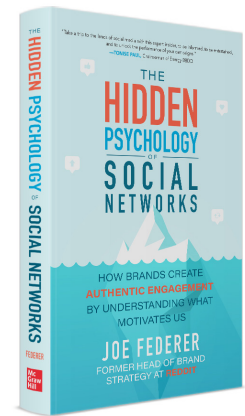


The Hidden Psychology of Social Networks

How Brands Create Authentic Engagement
By Understanding What Motivates Us

by **Joe Federer**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Why do people act differently in various online spaces, and what do they seek from participating in each one? In *The Hidden Psychology of Social Networks*, author Joe Federer draws on evolutionary biology, anthropology, neuroanatomy, psychology, and extensive hands-on experience to answer these questions.

Federer shows how the internet is a digital reflection of the collective human psyche and how different social networks correspond to different mindsets. In the same way you behave differently when you're home alone, out with friends, or interacting with co-workers, people act and express themselves differently in various online spaces. Context matters. Understanding this allows you to execute effective engagement strategies to reach your target audiences on each social network.

Fascinating and deeply compelling, *The Hidden Psychology of Social Networks* will help you to make more efficient use of your media buys, establish more thoughtful strategies, develop better creative material, and deliver more effective marketing.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To create content that drives sharing and word of mouth.
- How brands can fit into different types of social channels.
- Strategies and lessons for building a social strategy.
- Inspiring stories of companies balancing social presence across networks.

Introduction

Social media represents new psychological territory for us. For our brains, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Reddit are real places, not just websites we visit or apps we open. We don't just log on to social media. We navigate through it.

If advertisers are interested in engaging people in these spaces, they need to become accustomed to their cultural norms. When we attend a happy hour with our co-workers, we're probably slightly different versions of ourselves than when we go to a music festival with our friends or we are home for Thanksgiving dinner with our families.

Likewise, the person we play on Facebook and the person we represent on Twitter may be very different characters. The way we relate to a piece of content on Reddit is likely very different from how we'd relate to that same content on LinkedIn.

Social media feels very new to us, but what isn't new is us. From the content we share to the people we engage to the posts we like, the ways we express ourselves in social media are governed by the same psychological and biological processes that have dictated human social lives for millennia.

That's why we need to understand how social media fits into the innate, essential drives that have dictated our biological and cultural evolution as humans. To effectively reach people in different social media environments, we need to understand what value they derive from participating in those social networks in the first place.

Putting on a headdress and donning body glitter may be an effective way to integrate naturally into a music festival, but it's probably not how we want to approach someone at an office happy hour. Social media etiquette is equally nuanced, but it does not have the obvious physical social cues to tell us when we err.

By understanding the contexts in which we hope to reach people, we'll establish more thoughtful media strategies and deliver more effective marketing.

PART I: MEMEOLOGY

What's In a Meme?

Meme. It's that hot buzzword about which everyone in advertising, marketing, and communications with any digital sense can't stop talking.

Let's start with what is actually meant by the word "meme."

In 1976, an evolutionary biologist named Richard Dawkins wrote a monumental book called *The Selfish Gene*, in which he defines a new kind of replicator, the meme, which he defines as a unit of cultural transmission. Things like ideas, songs, fashion, and language are all examples of memes.

Like genes, memes undergo an evolutionary process. When a new idea occurs to someone, a physical process happens within their brain. And if they can find a way to articulate that idea to others, that physical process happens within their brains, too. The recipient of a meme may even change the meme, akin to mutation.

As advertisers, communicators, community managers, and influencers, we're in the business of propagating memes. Whether it's "Just do it," "I'm lovin' it," or "Buy my merch, you schmuck," ideas are at the bottom of every marketing and communications discipline.

When we talk about internet memes as "those silly pictures with text on them," what we're really talking about is the format used to communicate different memes. We might call these formats "meme machines." For early humans, we had only the meme machines of the sounds we made, the pictures we drew, and then eventually, the languages we invented.

Now, the meme machine is likely the physical pages in your hand, the digital screen on which the text is being displayed, or the audio version to which you're listening.

Meme Machines Evolve to Most Efficiently Communicate Their Memes

The meme machine is just as important as the meme itself. The meme can be carried by two entirely different meme machines, and they may show absolutely polar results when we measure their effectiveness at propagating.

A great comedian can tell you a joke about something you've heard a thousand other jokes about but will do so in a way that makes the idea—the meme—feel totally fresh and new.

A bad joke teller can start with the most hilarious possible content and absolutely fail to engage an audience.

When we're participating in social media as content creators, we desperately need to understand this principle. In advertising and marketing, we generally spend an enormous amount of time thinking about what we want to say—the meme—but we rarely put equal thought into the meme machines we use to deliver those memes. The meme machines

Be willing to break out of the advertiser comfort zone (video). Test new formats and ways of expressing your messages.

we use must be low friction and must be extremely efficient at delivering their memes.

The Meme and the Meme Machine: The Importance of the Format of a Meme

A social feed is an extremely competitive environment for content. The instant something seems boring or loses our attention, another piece of content is immediately ready to follow it.

When we're scrolling through a competitive social feed, a video requires a drastic change in behavior for us. Assuming we're on our phones, a video requires us to put on headphones, enable sound, and click to view as full screen, after which we sit and wait for things to happen.

By adding captions to videos, content creators remove the requirement for users to enable sound, meaning anyone viewing the video in a public or quiet space can suddenly access the memes present in the video in ways they couldn't (or wouldn't) with an average video.

Gifs, which are essentially silent videos, have made a massive comeback in internet culture. But video shouldn't be the only type of content we create, and it shouldn't always be our default format. Videos work particularly well on TV and YouTube because they fit naturally into those environments.

Social feeds are active—people are scrolling manually through posts, not waiting for content to be delivered to them. Text, images, gifs, and gif-like videos are much more active meme machines—they move at the speed of the audience.

Be willing to break out of the advertiser comfort zone (video). Test new formats and ways of expressing your messages, and you may well discover new, more efficient ways of sharing those messages.

Evolving Meme Machines: Five Principles to Maximize Engagement

It's up to each of us to discover which memes and meme machines will most effectively propagate our brand. What works for a brand with a massive following will probably not work for the fresh contender brand. What works for the flashy new startup probably won't for the century-old legacy brand.

But that doesn't mean we have to start from scratch. Consider these principles starting points from which any brand can test, iterate, and improve.

Add value. Understanding what adds value means removing our brand-centric lenses and looking critically at what we're making. If we weren't in any way invested in the brand for which we're creating content, and this piece of content crossed our social feeds, would we care? Would we click the share button? Why? Adding value means giving people something with which they have a reason to interact or pass along. Exactly what is meant by "value" can vary significantly among categories, brands, target audiences, and social networks themselves.

Design meme machines to reinforce the value of the meme. Whatever we upload to a social network—usually an image or a video—is the content. What we write in the social platform's text field is what we're saying *about* that content. A headline, instructions for how to make something, context required to understand a joke or reference, or any other information that is vital to unlocking the value of a post should be present within the content itself.

Create space for personal connection through narrative elements. Most of the time, we don't have the space to tell long, full stories in social media. However, we can still borrow narrative elements that render our content more memorable. For example, when we're telling people about a fun new do-it-yourself project, showing people an intriguing finished product is an important part of the narrative. But we can build an even more compelling narrative by showing the steps toward achieving that final product.

Develop content for a specific objective or action.

When we create content, we should have a particular goal in mind, and we should make it as simple as possible for our audience to act in accordance with that goal. Keeping particular actions in mind during the development process simplifies the consumption process.

Maintain brand consistency and ownability. The counterbalance to leveraging popular meme machines is that the finished content needs to be ownable for the brand. Making a popular post on a social network is great, but it's only worthwhile from a marketing perspective if it's attributable to the brand.

PART II: SOCIAL MEDIA AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Wearing Our Memes: The Ideal Self, Managed Self, and True Self

In his book *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, proposed that a single mind is actually composed of different, sometimes incompatible psychological forces.

Freud called our mostly unconscious, unfiltered, instinctual drives and desires our Ids. As social creatures living in complex societies, we also internalize our learned cultural rules, which becomes our conscience and resides in what Freud called our Superegos. And to mediate between our instinctual desires, our cultural ideals, and the limitations placed on us by the physical world, we develop what Freud called our Egos.

The instinctual desires of our Id and the cultural rules in our Superego are often in conflict, with our Ego in a constant state of moderation between the two.

The Id, Ego, and Superego Manifest Themselves in Different Kinds of Social Networks

We tend to occupy one of three essential personas when we interact online, and these personas correlate to this Freudian structure. Which type of persona we wear is closely related to the two factors of social network structure: how we're identified and how we're connected.

When we engage as our offline selves and are connected exclusively to the people we know offline, as we do on Facebook and Snapchat, we're manifesting our Egos—managed versions of ourselves. We pay close attention to how we communicate about ourselves because anything we say or do has a one-to-one correspondence with how people will think about us offline.

On platforms like Twitter and Instagram, we're again likely to participate as our offline selves, but there is a significant mindset change that comes from being potentially exposed to millions of people we don't know. It's the difference between recording a silly selfie video you'd send to your friends and a video that might just get broadcast on national television. This is Superego, ideal self space, where we may have the exact same friend connections we did on Facebook, but where we're discoverable by the seemingly infinite number of people we don't know yet.

In ideal self space, we filter ourselves a little more, we try to be a little quippier, and we tend to curate particularly bright highlights. Superego networks are often hierarchical. Social standing means everything.

While anonymity has certainly borne the brunt of much of the discourse about online safety, anonymous space can be extremely constructive and healthy for people. Without an offline self to represent, people are free to be expressive and candid. This unfiltered self is an embodiment of the Id.

Id networks are those in which users are disconnected from their offline selves and are organized around their interests and passions rather than by their offline connections. Networks like Reddit, Tumblr, Imgur, Twitch, and even 4chan are examples of Id networks.

On Id networks, we're looking for content that's funny, compelling, entertaining, or otherwise interesting to us—not representative versions of ourselves. We're able to discuss taboo topics without worrying about what our friends and relatives might think.

Let's dig further into Id, Ego, and Superego network structures, what makes them tick, and how brands are leaning strategically into the value people derive from participating in each.

Online Representation of the Offline Self: The Ego and the Conscious Center of Action

In Ego space online, we're connected almost exclusively to the people we know offline, and we're clearly identifiable as our offline selves. Facebook, Snapchat, and any network that remains closed around your curated group of friends while identifying as your offline self qualifies as an Ego network.

When we participate in Ego networks, we're more bound to

our real-life selves than we are in Superego and Id networks because the only people with whom we're connected are the people who know our offline selves.

The things we do and say in Ego networks have a greater sense of realism attached to them. Our real name accompanies every post we make, every article we like, and every comment we express.

Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, VSCO, and even LinkedIn are examples of Superego networks.

Adding Value in Ego Networks Means Helping People Represent Themselves

As brands, if we ask ourselves how we can add value for users in Ego networks, our answer must relate to the self-expression of our audiences. Too often, we set out to create campaigns that “generate engagement,” but we fail to ask ourselves a simple question: What would it mean for a person to engage with this content?

This doesn't mean “What would it mean *to us*?” It means, if people engage with our content, what are they expressing about themselves socially? What would their friends think about their engagement with that content? In order to drive meaningful engagement within Ego networks, it's not enough to position ourselves to our audiences. We need to help our audience define themselves to *their* audience.

For example, in a competitive industry filled with overly stylized, modified, and generally unattainable beauty standards, the Dove brand made a bold decision to embrace real people with real bodies. Its Real Beauty Sketches generated more than 630,000 shares on Facebook in its first 10 days.

When someone shared the Dove Real Beauty Sketches campaign, they weren't thinking about what the video meant to the Dove marketing team. They were thinking about what it would mean to their friend connections—and, more specifically, what it would mean for their friend connections to see that the video came from them.

Given that Ego space is where our identity is most closely associated with our offline selves, these networks are also the ones in which people are most strongly attached to their preconceptions about our brands.

Brand building in Ego space happens piece by piece through the content we share, meaning it's very difficult for us to get people to change their minds about us.

The Guiding Influence of Cultural Ideals: Superego Networks and the Expression of the Ideal Self

The Superego is the combination of our learned rules—the cultural norms that characterize what it means to be a good person, how we ought to relate to the people around us, and who we ought to be.

Superego networks are ones in which we're usually identifiable as our offline selves, have some connection to the people we know offline, and simultaneously have the potential to reach an entire network of people we don't know yet.

Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, VSCO, and even LinkedIn are examples of Superego networks. Each of these platforms employs mechanics like hashtags to connect otherwise disparate users and content. In response to these connections of self-expression, we tend to manifest idealized versions of ourselves.

Engaging Audiences in Superego Space Means Helping Them Manifest Aspects of Their Ideal Selves

As brands in Superego space, we're in delicate territory. The content with which people are willing to engage is much more tightly curated. Our audiences' expressions in Superego space are not only filtered through their selves as known by their offline personal connections but through the representations of their ideal selves.

How can we provide people with content that speaks to their ideal selves? Or satisfies their need for social approval and acceptance? Or reduces their anxiety as they compare themselves to others?

The reason we ought to pose these questions for ourselves is because our audience will judge us much more harshly—“If you don't add value to my experience, I will not interact with you in any public way.” And “public” is important here because that's how brands demonstrate their social status in Superego spaces.

Technology company GoPro shares the epitome of aspirational content: professional extreme athletes performing ludicrous stunts. Most of us probably don't ride our bikes down jagged mountain outcrops, skydive in formation, surf waves as tall as buildings, or scuba dive in underwater caves. But that doesn't mean we don't identify with what those represent—daring, adrenaline, conquering death, nerves of steel.

It also doesn't mean we don't want a camera that could capture all of those extreme activities. Subscribing to GoPro and engaging with its content is a way of communicating that we're adventurous, that we're energetic about life, and that we're willing to confront our fears. With more than 16 million followers on Instagram and over 2.2 million followers on Twitter, GoPro is a brand that has embraced the natural Superego niche cut out for it.

The Unrealized Power of True Self Networks: The Id and the Unconscious Self

The prevailing attitude of the media toward online anonymity is that if only we could strip the internet of anonymity, we could solve the problems of online trolling, bullying, and general bad acting.

But the ways in which people use anonymity online are varied, and anonymity comes with some built-in risk. It provides us with protection for ourselves—mental breathing space that's safely separated from our curated identities. Anonymity allows for creative vulnerability and expression without social ramifications. It gives us space to explore new interests and ideas we haven't yet integrated into our social identities.

It's the freedom to learn about something without announcing "this is what I believe."

This space without Ego is important to users and vital to us as brands—people have room to change their minds. As brands, we're in the business of changing minds. We're trying to get people to think about our brand as being relevant to them, or recognize that our product solves a problem they have, or agree that our product is better than another product, or that we represent something different from their preconception.

By strategically engaging Id networks, we're able to move our messaging upstream to the points at which the broader internet is actively forming opinions.

As a result of this freedom of expression and more fluid sense

of identity, people tend to be more candid in Id networks. They also expect brands to be more genuine. Content that goes behind the scenes, makes people feel involved in something larger, and that sparks genuine discussion will be highly effective at driving meaningful engagement in Id space.

Charles Schwab on Reddit

For financial brands, communities like Reddit's group r/PersonalFinance offer unique kinds of engagements, given Redditors' comfort in discussing intimate details of their financial lives. The Charles Schwab brand took an interesting approach to adding value to these conversational financial communities by opening lanes of dialogue with challenging questions.

With its brand creative platform being, "Own your tomorrow," Charles Schwab prompted Redditors with an open-ended question: "What's something you're doing today to set yourself up for success tomorrow?" Encouraging Redditors to answer from all aspects of their lives, the brand generated an engaging thread of constructive life choices.

Redditors talked about doing yoga, putting more money into savings, starting investment portfolios, contributing toward future children's college funds, and so on.

In Id networks, it's especially important to demonstrate that the brand understands the local culture. Because these spaces are more community minded and because they develop their own customs, memes, vernacular, and so on, we need to proceed with humility and start with listening.

PART III: SOCIAL MEDIA'S RIGHT AND LEFT BRAINS

Left and Right Brain Networks: The Known and the Unknown

The right hemisphere of our brains is the domain of raw experience with the world, while our left hemisphere creates a workable representation of the world based on the right's experience.

The Id, containing our unfiltered, unconscious self, seems to share many of its characteristics with the right brain—expressive, experiential, and explorative. The Ego, being a representation of the self in the context of the outside world, and the Superego, being a representation of our learned social rules, seem to fit comfortably in the left brain's domain of categorization and analysis of the represented world.

In Ego and Superego networks, we're creating literal repre-

Because users in right brain space are in a mode of exploration, we have the opportunity to engage people with deeper and more immersive experiences.

sentations of ourselves in simulated social worlds, and we're connected to people in an environment we've curated—a world of familiarity.

When we're searching for new information or are exploring a new topic as we might in Id networks, we're wading into the unfamiliar—right brain territory. We're not concerned with creating a representation of our offline selves because we tend to be anonymous and engaged directly with information as we encounter it.

To reach people effectively in different social networks, we need to understand the mode in which they're interacting: Which space are they occupying? Known or unknown? By understanding how these psychological contexts affect our audience, we can be more strategic about which messages we direct to which channels and how we embody them.

Introducing Novelty into Known, Left Brain Territory Helps Grab Attention

The Target brand is a prime example of strong, traditional brand building that has successfully differentiated itself from Walmart, Kmart, Lowe's, and other home goods retailers by introducing just the right amount of novelty.

Following in the footsteps of more clothing-specific retailers like H&M and UNIQLO, Target started partnering with high-end designers in 1999. Thanks to notable integrations with designers like Missoni, Jason Wu, Alexander McQueen, and Michael Graves, Target inserted itself into high-end fashion conversations that would previously have been completely unattainable for the average home goods retailer.

In right brain Id networks, brands tend to be less present. More often than not, brands are represented through organic conversations among users. People also tend to have more candid conversations about their beliefs in right brain space, and the lack of official brand presence in these networks allows user conversations to maintain near full control over brand perceptions. That's a massive opportunity for brands willing to embrace unexplored territory.

Because users in right brain space are in a mode of explora-

tion, we have the opportunity to engage people with deeper and more immersive experiences. It also means that our success depends on our ability to stoke users' curiosity.

Coca-Cola put this strategy to use in a Super Bowl campaign on Reddit in 2016. The brand had partnered with Marvel Studios to develop its Super Bowl TV spot, and prior to its airing, Coca-Cola asked comic book enthusiasts and bloggers to hype a “never before seen” matchup between two Marvel characters. To stoke the conversation further, Coca-Cola created an open-ended thread asking Redditors to get creative with their knowledge of the Marvel universe: “Which Marvel Super Hero matchup would make the best Big Game commercial?”

Seeding the thread first within Marvel communities, then eventually broadening its targeting to Reddit's front page, the brand generated a post filled with unique user-generated stories. Some users even wrote scripts about their favorite Marvel characters fighting over Cokes.

Once the actual spot aired during the Super Bowl, the Coca-Cola team posted the video, sparking Redditors to share their ad organically across various Marvel communities and confirming that one Redditor had actually correctly guessed the matchup—Hulk versus Ant-Man.

Coca-Cola harnessed this natural tendency toward creativity and conversation to drive a massive amount of organic sharing and deep engagement.

Five Lessons for Building and Honing a Social Strategy

Creativity and strategy are just as important in forming our channel strategies as they are in developing our content. Let's explore some guidelines and suggestions for fitting this broader social exploration together into some actionable advice.

Social listening is critical to building a social media-savvy brand. Different social networks and communities are ecosystems, meme pools, and cultures. That's exactly how we ought to treat social networks and the cultures

that reside within them. Listening helps us figure out from which channel we'll get the most value and how we ought to interact within those channels. Listening enables us to act as natives within these cultures—or, at the very least, as conscientious tourists.

Choose as many channels as you can do well, and designate discrete channel roles. The right channel mix and strategy is different for every brand. As we try to answer this question for our brands, we should first ask ourselves what we're trying to accomplish. Are we trying to attach our brand to popular culture? Do we aspire to build a community, or are we satisfied with being a voice in a community we don't manage?

Manifest behaviors with right brain appeal. Then tell left brain stories about them. Whenever possible, we should strive to find synergies between manifesting real behaviors in the world that have a tangible impact on people's lives (right brain) and telling those stories in ways that are generally interesting to a broad audience (left brain). Not only does that generate effective social content but it also maximizes the impact of everything we do.

Start your creative process with the most competitive content environments in mind. For major brands, social media is often the absolute last consideration when planning content and establishing messaging hierarchy. But social networks are also the most competitive meme pools in which our brand messaging competes. Rather than going straight into full-on production, let's find the most simple, straightforward way to communicate our concept and promote it to a small audience on our social channels.

Timing can be an effective tactic, but it's not a strategy. While timing can be an effective tactic to utilize,

it must be couched in a broader strategy and leveraged during moments of particularly high impact. Timeliness is not a strategy in and of itself.

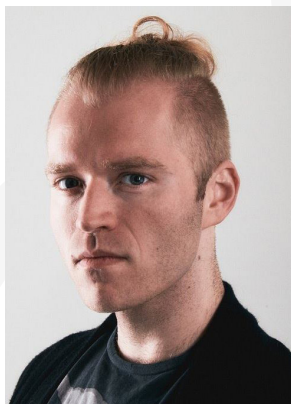
If a marketer's goal is to change people's minds, it's not enough to simply tell a story. We can spend all of the production budget in the world and still create an ad that's ineffective if the story feels disconnected from our audiences and the cultures in which they participate.

Fortunately, the internet provides a broad canvas for creating experiences and representing ourselves in ways that attract people. We may find our audiences engaged in pure self-expression and in modes of curiosity, in which we can deliver explorable experiences. And we may find our audiences in spaces in which they're representing themselves socially, in which we can aid them in expressing those representations, represent ourselves in ways that are aspirational or genuinely relatable, and facilitate connections between people. The possibilities are limited only by our creativity.

Look for what people value. Try to understand why they value it. Create something they'll genuinely enjoy. Then, tell stories about it.

IF YOU LIKED THIS SUMMARY, YOU MIGHT ALSO LIKE:

- *Likeable Social Media: How to Delight Your Customers, Create an Irresistible Brand, and Be Generally Amazing on Facebook (and Other Social Networks)* by Dave Kerpen
- *Straight Talk About Public Relations: New Strategies on Social Media and Content Marketing* by Robert Wynne



Joe Federer is the former head of brand strategy at Reddit, where he helped reposition the platform's narrative to the larger world of advertising, helping to drive revenue growth of more than 10× in its first year in market. With clients as diverse as Charles Schwab, Google, Amazon, McDonald's, Toyota, Audi, S.C. Johnson, Bud Light, and Coca-Cola, he thrives at finding the intersection between what brands stand for and what their social media fans are interested in seeing. He has developed a model for the way social media sites network together, an understanding of the value users derive from each platform, and the way ideas mutate and change as they are shared between different psychological environments.

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