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Brand Empathy /

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Brand Empathy / Monkey see, monkey feel? Turns out yes — our emotions mirror those we observe, whether snacking or telling a story / By Frank Rose /

In the early 1990s, long before social networking existed on the web — almost before the web itself existed, in fact — a monkey in Italy made a wholly unexpected contribution to our future understanding of the phenomenon of empathy. The monkey, which was part of an experiment in a neuroscience lab at the University of Parma, was watching a research assistant eat an ice cream cone. Because the scientists were trying to map the part of monkey brains involved in rehearsing things, the animal had needles in its head — needles so thin they had been implanted in individual neurons. As the lab assistant lifted the cone to his lips, one of the researchers noticed a particular neuron lighting up in the monkey's brain — the same neuron that would have lit up if the monkey itself had made such a motion. The scientists tried putting a piece of food on a table, taking it off the table, taking it from another researcher's hand, each time with the identical result: the same neurons that fired when the monkey did something also fired when the monkey watched a person doing it.

Mirroring mechanisms

The scientists at Parma had stumbled across what's come to be known as 'mirror neurons' — cells that mirror the experience of cells in other brains, almost as if the observer and the observed were one. Subsequent research has revealed the same phenomenon in humans. A study at University of California, Los Angeles, used Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) to show that the area of the brain that's activated when people watch someone else move a finger is also activated when they move their own finger. Researchers at Washington University in St Louis

found the same correlation when they conducted fMRI scans of people reading stories from a book about a day in the life of a schoolboy.

fMRI works by showing blood flow within the brain. It can't tell you what a person is thinking, but it can show which parts of the brain are doing the thinking. When the test subjects in the St Louis experiment read about a schoolboy picking up his workbook, blood flowed to the parts of their brains that are associated with grasping motions. When they read about him walking over to his teacher's desk, the frontal cortex and hippocampus lit up — the areas of the brain that deal with location in space. When he shook his head no, the part of the brain that deals with goal-directed activity was activated. Whatever he did, the brains of the readers reacted almost as if they were doing it themselves.

Most scientists have concluded that these mirroring mechanisms show a neural basis for empathy — for our ability to share the feelings that other people are experiencing. Vittorio Gallese, one of the researchers at the University of Parma, writes that mirror neurons 'enable social connectedness by reducing the gap between self and others.' This is not the whole picture; if it were, we'd be too freaked by what happens to other people to function ourselves. But it explains a great deal about how people behave in social networks and, by extension, how brands ought to behave as well.

Currency of connectivity

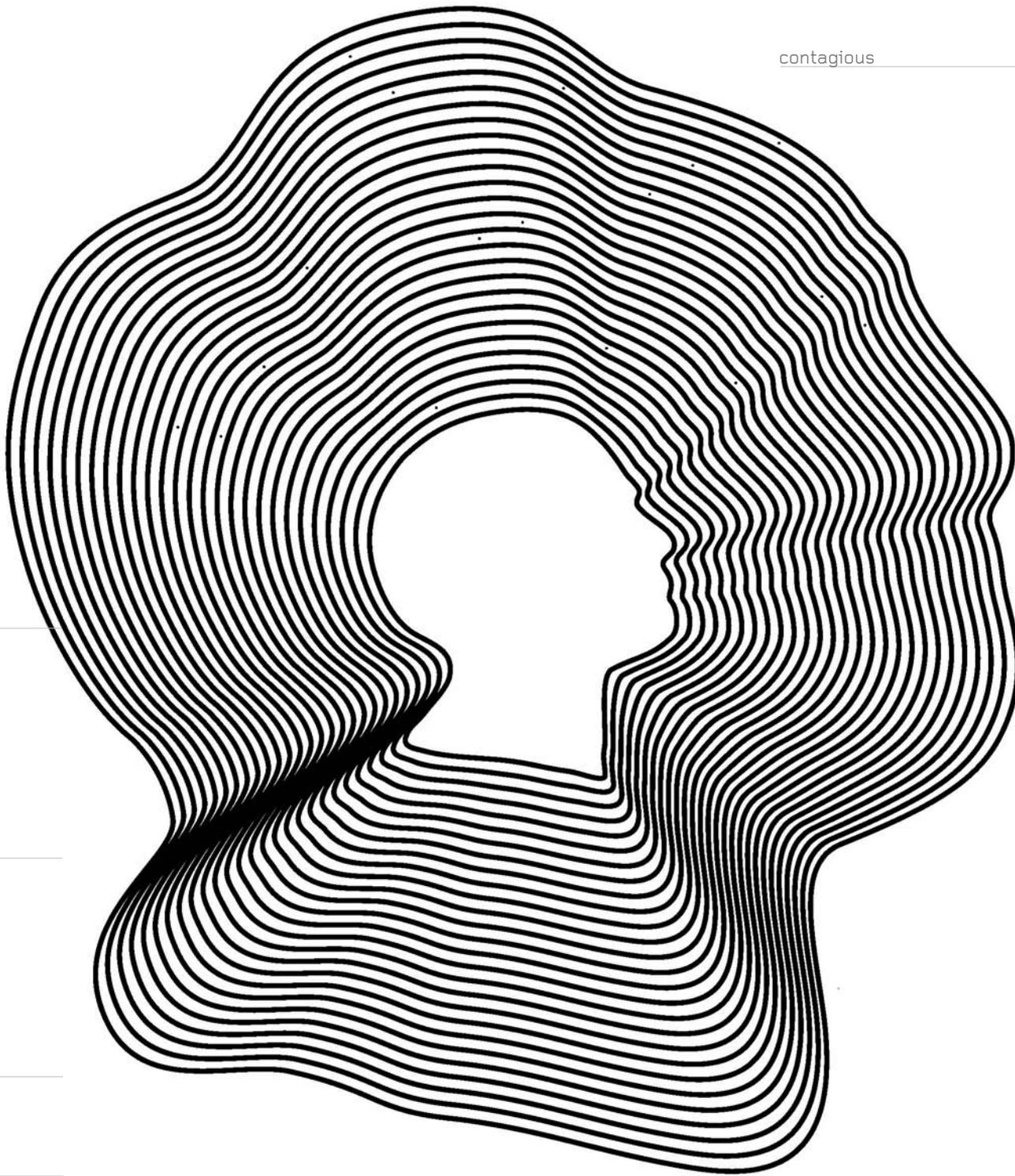
Social networks far predate 'social networking'. 'Man is by nature a social animal,' Spinoza observed more than three centuries ago. We're embedded from birth in a network of fellow humans — some we know, many we don't — but

we depend on them all. Only because the internet has made the network such a central metaphor are we aware of this in a way that the average 17th-century European was not.

The currency of social networks is connections. And the most dependable way to forge a connection, whether with a colleague in a new job or with strangers on Twitter, is by sharing information. Usually that means telling a story. Stripped of all the apparatus of advanced civilization and pecuniary gain — stripped of Hollywood and television and publishing — storytelling is a simple act of sharing. Social media have become the mechanism we use to do that. We share what's happening on Twitter. We share what we like on Facebook. Sometimes we overshare. But we're compelled to share nonetheless, because life is a constantly functioning information exchange.

As social animals, we need a steady flow of information to keep our bearings. Fortunately, we seem to derive as much benefit from providing information as we do from receiving it. The most obvious thing we get is status — an opportunity to claim the attention of people around us. But we also strengthen our connection to other people, and thus our place in the social network. Which is why, both as tellers and as listeners, we use stories strategically and selectively.

As advertising moves from little stories we're expected to watch in the middle of our TV shows to little stories we hopefully want to share with one another online, brands need to think strategically in the same way. Seven years ago, Crispin Porter + Bogusky accidentally upended the ad business with its Subservient Chicken campaign for Burger King — a TV spot about a guy in a chicken suit



that went wildly viral when, almost as an afterthought, the agency put it online, tricked out with canned responses and controls that let people think they were bossing the chicken man around. Last year, Wieden+Kennedy upended the business again with The Man Your Man Could Smell Like for Old Spice – not just the ad campaign, which transformed a former football player into a pop culture sensation, but the two day marathon response session, which invited people to ask him questions on Twitter and had him answering more than 180 of them almost instantly on YouTube. The idea was to give people a way to connect with Isaiah Mustafa, the man who'd become 'The Man Your Man Could Smell Like'. In the first week alone, the videos racked up more than 34 million views.

Brand infusion

The response videos worked because, to paraphrase the Italian brain scientist who made the mirror neuron discovery, they enabled social connectedness by reducing the gap between self and Old Spice. Billee Howard, who heads the brand innovation group at the newly formed US PR firm Allison & Partners, puts it more or less the same way. By subtly directing brand perceptions while encouraging the consumer to help create those perceptions, she maintains that marketers can help the brand and the consumer to, in effect, become one. 'You can't rely on ads,' she says, and increasingly, successful brands do not. Ads are becoming more a launch pad for the real campaign, which depends primarily on the people it's aimed at to

carry the message. 'A brand becomes relevant by infusing itself directly into culture,' Howard maintains, through music, through YouTube, through Facebook, through events that get reported in the media. 'Advertising used to interrupt life's programming. Now advertising *is* the programming. And if you're actually being marketed to successfully, you have no idea.' ❧

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