Memes and science are key to memorable marketing language

Brands could communicate more effectively if only they followed advice from scientists, writes Chris West

The warning "a swan is strong enough to break a man's arm" is a time-tested meme. Photograph: Max Ellis

Science isn't the enemy of creativity. The two mingle happily. Steve Jobs insisted that instead of the original design for Pixar's studios, which proposed three separate buildings for computer scientists, animators and everyone else, there should be one cavernous space with just two bathrooms. Now, everyone at Pixar has a "bathroom story" of an inspirational conversation they had while washing their hands.

Science inspires creativity and for the CMO who wants to make their brand language more memorable, a famous professor's book and an overlooked scientific paper might provide the answers.

You can see the size of the challenge facing the CMO when you add up all the words that they are responsible for producing – and keeping on-brand – every day. A typical brand produces about 225 words a day in social media and, of course, it creates a verbal identity in its website updates, press releases, investor relations announcements, posters, radio ads and digital banners.

When you add in the hundreds of letters and emails that customer service produces, which can soon have a negative impact on your brand's reputation if you get them wrong and the conversations in-store every day, the total shoots past 100,000 words in no time. If you're the editor of a newspaper, publishing similar quantities, you've been brought

up on words. But if you're the CMO with a background in media, innovation or retail, how can you make sure that those words live on past midnight – or at least stay in the heads of your customers when they walk out of the store?

Internet memes in photographs like "planking" and videos like "Harlem Shake" are well-known. The concept of a 'unit of culture' passed from person to person originated in Richard Dawkins's book The Selfish Gene. He proposed that ideas, just as much as physiological adaptations, can be subject to Darwinian principles, being replicated by cultural transmission with only the most useful ideas surviving. A meme, meaning a "unit of culture", is society's equivalent of the gene, according to Dawkins.

Memes exist in language too. Take a walk along the bank of your local river on Sunday morning and there's a chance you'll hear them at work. Parents are busy warning their toddlers to be careful around the swans: "The swans are strong." "How strong is a swan?" "Strong enough to break a man's arm." Now, I've never seen a man's arm broken by a swan. I've never even heard of a man's arm being broken by a swan.

But this is the same warning I've given my own children about swans. And I was told it by my mother, who said it was her mother who told it to her. One meme, four generations, 100 years.

There are plenty of memes in the English language: "i before e except after C". "Don't swim for an hour after eating." And they are there in commercial copywriting too.

"Never knowingly undersold" is a meme: it lives beyond the paid-for posters or the press ads: it's the phrase John Lewis's shoppers use to explain why they shop there. Tesco's internal culture, as much as its customers perceptions have been steered by the successful little piece of verbal branding that is "Every Little Helps."

Saatchi's "Double Whammy" and Ronseal's "Does what it says on the tin" have been transmitted out of their commercial sphere into daily life.

In time, "To Fly, To Serve" can become a meme that helps us remember for ourselves (and explain to other people) why we choose British Airways, but only if the brand's behaviour lives up to the promise – the meme must transmit usefulness.

Phrases that do more than just report on a positioning seem to do well. When a brand's language captures the *promise* that the brand is making, its words seem to live on past the paid-for medium that brought them into the world.

But what makes a phrase memorable? And what makes it memorable enough to be passed from person to person? An overlooked scientific paper from the July 2012 Proceedings of the 50th Annual Meeting of the Association for Computational Linguistics might provide the answer.

Four linguists from Cornell University looked at the way in which a piece of information is phrased – the choice of words and the sentence structure used – affects the way in which it reaches widespread public awareness.

They analysed film quotes, comparing memorable and on-memorable quotes, controlling their analysis for the speaker, the setting of the quotes and the context. There were two variables involved in memorability, they discovered.

First, "lexical directiveness": memorable quotes are built from simple sentences, constructed in the normal way (or with "common syntactic patterns" as the linguists call it). But, the memorable phrases that we use are unexpected in those unsurprising sentence constructions.

Their second finding was that memorable quotes tend to be more generally applicable, and aren't tied to the particular area in which they were first developed. Even better, they found strong evidence that these principles apply to non-movie lines, such as advertising slogans and brand language.

For the more technically minded writer, they even observed how some sounds of speech, such as front vowels (represented by the letter *i*) are more common in memorable quotes than some other sounds. Perhaps it's time that creativity and science were encouraged to mingle a little more.