Do you have the brain power to detect a hot idea and make it go viral?

What distinguishes a hot new idea from one that's destined to be a dud? What makes that laughing baby video go viral?

University of California, Los Angeles researchers explored what they called the “buzz effect” by recruiting nearly 100 undergraduate students to serve as either “interns” pitching what they deemed to be the next megahit TV show or “producers” to evaluate the interns’ ideas. The researchers performed brain imaging scans while the interns were listening to potential ideas to determine which ones to pitch and found that those who were most successful at getting their ideas picked up by the producers had more activation in certain brain regions.

The MRI scans showed that getting excited by an idea activated certain reward regions in the brain in all the interns; but those who were successful at convincing the producers to make their ideas into TV shows were also more likely to have activation in brain regions involved in strategizing and planning—which the researchers called the “salesperson effect.” (I prefer calling it the Kardashian effect.)

“We predicted that the buzz effect would be associated with both reward and mentalizing regions, as the motivation and the ability to propagate the message go hand in hand,” wrote the researchers in the recent study published in the journal Psychological Science.

And that's exactly what they found.

Most of those in the study didn’t utilize the brain areas needed to convincingly generate enough excitement to take a new idea and make it into a blockbuster.

“It is possible that better message communicators were already thinking about how to make the information useful and interesting to other individuals...rather than simply taking in the information for their own sake,” wrote the researchers.

Future studies, they added, might identify what sorts of attributes lead people to tap into those mental processes that enable them to become successful launchers of viral ideas.