Your Brain On Buzz: Why Some Ideas Go Viral And Others Go Nowhere

Why do certain ideas go viral while others never make it past a second set of eyes (or ears, or lips)? A new neuroscience study attempted to answer this question by finding out if our brains react differently to buzz-worthy ideas. The results suggest that we’re wired to pass along certain ideas from the moment we see or hear them – even before we realize that we will.
The study was conducted in two parts. In the first, a group of UCLA students were presented with 20 or so ideas for potential television shows (including a reality show about former beauty queen mothers coaching their daughters to become beauty queens, and one about contestants sent to brave harsh environments around the world), while they were hooked up to an fMRI (brain imaging) machine. The students were told to evaluate the ideas as if they were television interns who would be pitching the best ideas to TV producers, and their assessments of the shows were videotaped.

A larger group of students were told that they were the TV producers and were asked to watch the first group’s videotaped assessments of the shows, and then make their own evaluations of which ideas were the best.

The researchers wanted to know if the brains of the “interns” who most effectively pitched the show ideas reacted differently than those who didn’t successfully persuade the “producers” to buy the ideas. The results showed quite convincingly that they did.

Brains of the would-be interns who were most persuasive in passing along the ideas showed significantly more activity in a brain region known as the temporoparietal junction (TPJ) at the moment they were first exposed to their chosen pilot ideas. Brains of students who weren’t successful in pitching the ideas didn’t show the same TPJ activation. The researchers called this difference in activity the “salesperson effect.”

The fact that this activity was noted “at the moment” they heard the ideas is crucial, because it at least partially rules out the possibility that brains of more persuasive people simply have more active TPJs. Instead, what this study seems to show is that once a buzz-worthy idea hits the brain—the very instant it hits—the brain’s buzz alarm goes off indicating that “this is something that needs to be passed along to more people!”

Once that happens, the recipient of the idea becomes a better evangelist for its replication, thus increasing the likelihood that the idea will become “contagious” for the next set of brains. What’s really intriguing is that the brain activity is evident even before a rational determination is made to pass along the idea. In other words, our brains are triggered to replicate certain ideas before we consciously decide to do so.

The TPJ is an important part of the brain’s mentalization network. In neuroscientific parlance, “mentalizing” is the ability to place ourselves inside
the minds of others to think as they think. We mentalize multiple times a day as a normal part of navigating interpersonal relationships. The ability to empathize hinges on mentalization, because we have to place ourselves in another person’s mental shoes to envision and feel what she or he is experiencing.

It makes sense that mentalization would be key to passing along buzz-worthy ideas, since what we’re really doing is envisioning how others will react to the ideas. This study suggests that our brains are subconsciously at the viral cusp well before we’re consciously selling others on the ideas, and this subconscious priming makes us better sellers.

Will this study lead to more effective means of persuading people to buy into certain notions – providing neural high-octane gas for advertisers? In the near term, I doubt it. But it does lift the lid on an effect that we know for certain is real, but haven’t known how or why our brains are triggered to pass along certain ideas while others immediately hit the cutting-room floor. The study falls short of showing exactly why ideas with no evident persuasion-push behind them go viral (many YouTube sensations, for example), but the discovery that our brains seem wired to jump on potentially viral ideas sheds light on that dynamic as well.

Future research will delve more deeply into the connection between the brain’s mentalization network and idea contagions – and eventually we’ll be talking about a “brain map” for buzz.

The study was published in the journal Psychological Science.

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