Unleashing the Ideavirus™

In [Unleashing the Ideavirus](#) (Do You Zoom, Inc, 2000), Seth Godin talks about how to create an "ideavirus," but he doesn't delve into what he's done to create one himself. Like a comedian who unconsciously finds the humor in whatever they see, I suspect that Seth has developed a knack for synthesizing words that reinforce his point of view. On page 93 he says: "Words matter. Understanding exactly what we're talking about makes it easier to do something about the world around us. That's why I take such great pains to invent new words and get us all thinking about exactly what they mean." So let's pull apart how he does it.

Manifesto

Right of the bat, Seth describes his work as a "manifesto," not a book. Growing up in the 1950s, I heard "Communist Manifesto" over and over again. The word, manifesto, took on a decidedly "Communist" meaning. It was BAD! But Seth uses its original meaning: a public declaration of intentions, opinions, or purposes; to make clear to the eye. And he also uses manifesto to mean a desire to influence or convince the reader of his point of view.

Notice that *manifesto* is an infrequently used word that has a rich sound and an negative emotional hook. Instead of a generic "book," Seth has used *manifesto* to separate his work from the crowd and to reposition his competition. Slick, huh?

Ideavirus

Then he continues by creating a fresh word for a "meme": *ideavirus*. A meme is an idea and they spread by jumping from mind to mind, like viruses jump from body to body. An idea is intangible, while a virus is a living thing that comes from biology. *Idea* has a soft sound; *virus* has a sharper sound. Most people like ideas, but don't like viruses: "infectious agents that replicates only within the cells of living hosts. So the new word has both positive and negative emotional impact. By splicing or grafting these two words together, Godin gets the meaning and emotional impact of both. And because *ideavirus* is a new word, there's plenty of room in the mind for the new word.

Hive

In marketing, people talk about markets and segments and niches, but to freshen the discussion, Godin borrows from the insect world: a *hive*. I don't know about you, but markets, segments, and niches all sound mechanical, inorganic. A hive, however, is a living breathing entity. Looking at any city or office building, I can immediately see it as a hive. In this case, Godin hijacks the word *hive* and its metaphorical meaning in service of his manifesto. Here again we're beginning to detect his preference for words with a "v" in them.

Sneezers

For rhinovirus (i.e., cold) to spread, you need for someone to sneeze. For an ideavirus to spread, you need someone to sneeze the idea to another person. For your ideavirus to spread, you need sneezers. Here Godin takes a verb, *sneeze*, and turns it into an job. Like *bake* becomes *baker*, Godin turns *sneeze* into *sneezers*. And *sneezer* is a funny word, and entertaining word, something you might expect to hear come out of your favorite comedian. So we can turn verbs into jobs, positions, titles for the cast of characters in our manifesto. Kool!

Then Godin continues to expand on sneezers by dividing them into powerful and promiscuous. The powerful do it for prestige; the promiscuous do it for money. Power and sex are two emotion-rich veins in our society and Godin mines both.

Velocity

Ideas spread through a population at a certain rate of speed. Godin chooses to use *velocity* instead of speed. Here again we hear his preference for words with a "v" and little used words that can be hijacked easily in service of a new idea.

Vector

Idea adoption follows a path or arc through a population. Like *velocity*, Godin chooses *vector*.

Medium

How are ideas transmitted? Via an intervening or surrounding medium. The medium determines how smooth it is and its velocity. Notice that *medium* has a soft sound, no hard consonants. Here Godin could have chosen the word *vehicle*, but didn't. He could have used *agency* or *network* or a number of other words.

Smoothness

When you ask someone: "How did it go?" They often reply "smooth" or "rough." Smoothness describes how easily an ideavirus can be spread to another person. Can you forward an idea by just one click of the mouse on a website? That's smooth. If you listen to the word, *smooth*, it sounds like the thing it's describing. Like *click, bang, or whiz* we can choose words that sound like what they describe.

Persistence

When something persists, it lasts or endures tenaciously. If you're going to launch a meme campaign, you want your ideas to persist and hopefully thrive. Godin choose *persistence* because it's underused yet appropriate. *Tenacity* might have been another possible choice.

Amplifier

For an idea to spread, it needs to get louder, rather than softer, as it moves away from its source. If an ideavirus was a pebble dropped in a pond, the ripples would be small at the edge of the pond. A true ideavirus is more like a tsunami, gathering momentum and power as it surges forward. In this case, Godin chose a familiar word whose meaning is

already deeply rooted. It's hard to hijack a well known word for which the meaning hasn't changed. This might have been a good place to choose or invent a better word: accelerator, compounder, expander, or tsunamifier.

Riffs
Lead guitarists talk about "riffs" when they play solos. For Seth, a riff is a quick ideaburst, not a longer, more involved thought.

Meme Stew
Rather than one overarching metaphor, Godin's memeplex draws words from thinking, biology, electronics, music, and so on. It's more like a thick, hearty stew or goulash than a simple soup. In many ways, it draws its richness from the diversity of metaphors and origins of the various word species. Where a single metaphor has limits, a meme stew has more robustness and flexibility.