

A perfect social media storm

3-3 minutes

If you've been on Facebook in the last few weeks and fall in the right demographic, you've likely seen the ice bucket challenge that's been circulating. While I suspect this isn't consciously by design, the meme leverages a number of characteristics that the Facebook propagation machine (and people) seems to love:

- **Original video content:** At least anecdotally, multimedia posts have better engagement in general. Especially with the muted autoplay feature, video seems both popular with users and likely to get pushed to the newsfeed. I wouldn't be surprised if original content performs better than linked videos. Original content also reduces the spam feeling — compare it to forwarding on messages about dying kids and other Facebook charity memes.
- **Tagging friends:** Not only does this tap into the obvious network propagation effect, psychology would suggest that people who are explicitly called out are more likely to engage. Additionally, tagging people who are clustered in the network (e.g., roommates or friends from the same social group) seems to increase the chances that the post will get bubbled up to the newsfeed of mutual friends.
- **Hashtag:** Organizing around a hashtag solidifies the movement, while allowing participants to find others involved. I would be surprised if, in their attempt to push related features, Facebook doesn't look favorably on hashtag usage.
- **24-hour timeline:** A sense of urgency encourages people to take action. Also, fast cycle time is key to virality.
- **Fallback option:** Don't want to pour water on your head? You can opt out while still looking good (probably even better, since you're contributing money and not just eyeballs) and furthering the propagation.

And some less structural characteristics:

- **A real, good cause:** Unlike other spammy Facebook newsfeed campaigns, the meme associates itself with both a national charity association and a real person with the disease, who has the credentials and social media presence to feel authentic.
- **Clear target demographics:** The origin of the challenge is a former Boston College baseball player; the meme has especially proliferated among college students (the dense, holy grail networks for gaining viral adoption) and professional athletes (high profile).