

THE CURIOUS CASE OF
BEN HUH

How a culturally confused teen immigrant mastered the mighty meme and made America laugh. Inside the mind behind **ICANHASCHEEZBURGER.**

Story by Katelyn Hackett • Photo by Hayley Young



Ben Huh has probably made you laugh. It's not too much of a leap to say that he has also likely made your life, and the lives of the laptop-wielding coffee shop patrons he currently sits among, somehow more joyful.

Huh has only been in Seattle for a few years, but the 31-year-old native of Korea already knows how to pay proper homage to the city's favored beverage. "Coffee is liquid sunshine," he says, his hands circling his daily afternoon cup at an airy, bright coffee shop in Pioneer Square. By mid-afternoon, Huh has earned his pick-me-up; he has spent the day, like most others, working to bring smiles to millions of Internet users. They don't know it, but his fellow bean lovers are in the presence of greatness. As the personable,

ambitious CEO of Pet Holdings, Inc., Huh has kept a low profile while his creations, most notably the websites I Can Has Cheezburger and Fail Blog, have induced cascading fits of laughter around the world.

For the uninitiated, here's how Huh's sites work. Each displays a running list of humorous, captioned images submitted by users and filtered by moderators. On icanhascheezburger.com, for example, you'll see candid photos of pet cats with captions printed right on the image; the captions are misspelled >

intentionally, according to the rules of an Internet-birthered dialect called lolpeak. The classic lolcat, after which Huh's site is named, is a crazed-looking gray cat, its mouth slightly open, with the phrase "I can has cheezburger?" in a heavy, blocked font stretching across the photo. The popularity of lolcats has been discussed at length in blogs and magazines alike, and though there is not a consensus on why, one thing is certain: They are popular.

Huh's network, consisting of icanhascheezburger.com and seven similar sites, receives nearly 10,000 image submissions a day for its eight sites combined. Thousands more participate in the site's rating and recommendation system, and millions of people beyond that cruise the site casually every day.

Funny business, it turns out, is a serious endeavor—and Huh has jumped into the challenge with enough know-how to strengthen and expand his business during the deepest economic recession since the 1980s. For a man who didn't even arrive in the United States until the age of 14, Huh sure has a firm grasp on Northwest culture—and on what makes Americans laugh.

Huh was born and raised in Korea, across the Pacific from the city he would wind up 30 years later. In his early teens, his family moved to Hong Kong, where Huh learned the Queen's English and then the American dialect at a private American school in the city. When he was 14, the family immigrated to California. "I was pretty old," he says. "Coming to the States was a bit of a culture shock." A major difference was the relatively lax standards at his new high school in Sacramento. He spent most of those first years goofing off and learning valuable lessons that would later help him tap into the American psyche.

"High school was an interesting training ground for the way people consume humor in the United States," he says, sipping at his coffee. "British humor is pretty different. British humor in Hong Kong is even more different. At first I was laughing at stuff no one else was laughing at. There's this big disconnect, and you try to bridge the gap by becoming culturally aware. The memes that are funny in the United States are not funny across the world."

Memes are very important to Huh. After all, his effectiveness in understanding them is key to his business' success. This, then, begs the question, "What the hell is a meme?"

At its most basic, a meme is a cultural virus: a concept or idea that is passed from person to person via just about any means of communication. Lolcats are a meme. Manifest destiny was a meme. The smiley face? A meme. "Memes are an old concept, pre-Internet," explains Huh. "They've been around for decades, if not hundreds of years; we just hadn't defined it as a meme. 'Meme' as a business model only came about in the last few years."

It is important to understand, though, that that business model does not involve the creation of memes; such a task would be maddening and, ultimately, a failure. Memes cannot be willed into existence. They just happen.

Though lolcats are now associated predominantly with his site, Huh doesn't take credit for their creation or virality. "It's the mission of the company to understand what memes are and how to harness the power of them. We don't purport to create any of them; that's not the business model that we're in,"



Lolcat photos from 'I Can Has Cheezburger?': A Lolcat Collectiskun, published by Gotham

he says. "We want to make them more accessible to people—more participatory. The nature of a meme is that it's evolutionary. People need to participate and put their hands in it and create their own for it to grow and to thrive.

Therein lies Ben Huh's genius. His websites not only entertain their users, but, through a user-friendly tool called the "Builder," it gives them the opportunity to take part in their own entertainment, captioning image-based memes like lolcats without any specialized software. It's a simple concept, but sometimes—and Huh would say often—simple is just better.

ut how does a meme like lolcats even get started? Huh explains that memes are usually seeded in a very small group. "Just a handful of guys," he says. "They decide they're going to

do an action which will consume the zeitgeist of something happening around the world, or even just in that culture, and they're going to put it into a format that has established structure."

The lolcat meme was probably birthed in the wilds of a site called 4chan.org; An image bulletin board with almost no rules except an unspoken Fight Club-esque "don't talk about it" agreement, 4chan is often cited as one of the scariest and most misunderstood places on the Internet. "Lolcats came out of there. Rick Rolling* came out of there," Huh says. "If you read it at face value, you'd say, 'Oh my God, these people are idiots, assholes and criminals.' But then you dig deeper."

Deeper than all the racist, shock-value jokes on 4chan is a deep well of creativity and twisted humor at the furthest edges of the barely explored world of memes. One of the site's

SEPTEMBER 07



ICANHASCHEEZBURGER | icanhascheezburger.com

Cats in states of comedic expression accompanied by captions written in lolpeak, a misspelled, grammatically incorrect version of English.

FEBRUARY 08



ICANHASHOTDOG | icanhashotdog.com

The dog version of ICanHasCheezburger. Turns out dogs are also proficient at lolpeak.

APRIL 08



FAILBLOG | failblog.org

Funny or ironic mistakes captured on camera or film.

JULY 08



TOTALLYLOOKSALIKE
totallylookslike.com

Who knew how similar Clay Aiken and Barry Manilow looked before this site came along?

PUNDITKITCHEN | punditkitchen.com

Political commentary, compliments of ICHC's signature impact-font caption builder.

GRAPHJAM | graphjam.com

Pie charts, line graphs and Venn diagrams about everything from zombies' activities to what 3-year-olds prefer to wear.

longest-standing traditions, “Caturday,” involved a daylong theme of what should by now sound familiar: lots and lots of cat pictures with misspelled captions. Eric Nakagawa and Kari Unebusami, a couple in Arizona, thought the images were funny and created a site where their favorite Caturday images could be archived before the fast-paced 4chan boards swallowed them irretrievably. The site, which they named I Can Has Cheezburger, after their favorite lolcat, began to catch on with all kinds of people—some who had never even heard of 4Chan.

One of ICHC’s early visitors was Huh, then a recent grad of Northwestern University. He didn’t even think the lolcats were funny at first. In fact, it took him three visits before he caught the humor. Once he got it, he liked it so much that he showed the site to an entrepreneur

friend of his in Seattle. He had worked for a number of start-ups in Chicago, and something about the idea of capitalizing on funny memes resonated with him. The entrepreneur suggested they buy the site from Nakagawa and Unebusami and offered to help Huh come up with enough money to make an offer. Their vision was to take lolcats mainstream by building a site that would help people create their own captioned images.

Three months and several more investors later, Huh was ready to buy. The entire sales negotiation happened via instant messenger. (“How internetty is that?” Huh says, laughing.) In September 2007, he and his wife flew down to Arizona to sign papers and meet icanhascheezburger.com’s founders for the first time. “They opened the door and we were looking at mirror images of ourselves,” Ben says, again with laughter. Until that moment, the two couples had no idea they looked so similar; it was an appropriately funny foot on which to start what would be a profitable friendship for both parties.

ay Chrisman, one of Huh’s senior moderators, says his boss’s devotion to simplicity as a guiding principle has been instrumental to the company’s success. “It’s really hard for people to take the ‘keep it simple, stupid’ principle to heart. But Ben is a guru of it. And if you follow his advice, you’re golden,” he says. For instance, rather than spending its money on fancy site design, the company uses it to upgrade its servers so that the site’s thousands of images load as quickly as possible. It’s more important to Huh that the site be functional and easy for users to navigate and understand than to win any graphic design awards.

Lolcats themselves are, in essence, simple too. “You don’t have to look at a lolcat for too long before you’re like, ‘That’s pretty funny,’” Chrisman points out. “If you’re looking at a picture of a cat and you have that a-ha moment, you just slap the caption on there and submit it. And it goes into the voting pool and people love it or hate it, and if they love it, it goes onto the front page. You spent two minutes putting it together.” That’s exactly how Huh wants it to work.

The formula has been so successful that Chrisman estimates many of the captioned photos posted on 4chan.org these days were created using icanhascheezburger.com’s builders, though the company’s watermark is digitally removed from most of those images.

“4Chan hates us,” Chrisman says, referring mostly to the users on the “Random” section of the site’s bulletin board. “But if you have any one of our employees look at 4chan, they can tell you exactly which pictures were put into our builder, >

HARNESSING A MEME

THE BIRTH OF 140PEDIA.COM

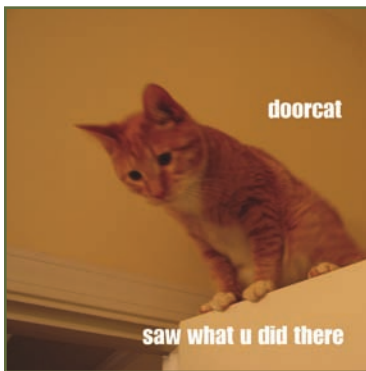
On a recent Friday night (“Things usually happen on Friday nights,” says Huh), the ICHC crew was busy brainstorming in its conference room. Huh had been inspired by the simple rule of the micro-blogging format Twitter: the restricted length of each post. “140 characters, go,” he announced. “It’s a game.” I Can Has Cheezburger’s Twitter account is one of that company’s top 50 most popular of all time and Huh wanted the team to come up with a way to capitalize on that.

“We said, ‘okay,’” Huh says, recalling the brainstorming session. “It has to be text-related; it has to be funny. We looked at the pattern that was emerging: People were trying to put ‘everything’ into 140 characters. What is a zeitgeist of ‘everything?’ Wikipedia. Can we put Wikipedia into 140 characters?” The team’s first attempts, straight definitions, just weren’t funny. Finally, someone suggested that they try to define a pop culture icon: Amy Winehouse.

“An ironic crack-whore singer from UK who constantly amazes the public by managing to staying alive and out of jail.”

Bingo. “We were like, ‘Okay, this works.’” From there, Huh says, the team named the site 140pedia and began working to pull together submissions.

Huh and co. have posted a couple dozen entries online but haven’t linked 140pedia in with the rest of the network of ICHC sites; that comes after users have caught on to the idea and Huh is satisfied that it will go viral. Every new site goes through a similar vetting process, which allows Huh and the ICHC team to freely experiment. After that, it’s all about where the users will take it.



AUGUST 08



ENGRISHFUNNY | engrishfunny.com

Asian signs and packaging mistranslated into English to mean something entirely different from what was intended.

SEPTEMBER 08



ROFLRAZZI | roflrazz.com

“Rolling on the Floor Laughing” plus paparazzi translates to fresh takes on celebrity images.

DECEMBER 08



ONCEUPONAWIN | onceuponawin.com

Toys from our childhoods were much cooler than they are now—and they’re worth celebrating for just how cool they were.

“MOST COMPANIES HAVE A PROBLEM DRAWING TRAFFIC; WE HAVE A PROBLEM MANAGING THAT TRAFFIC.” —BEN HUH

captioned with our builder, and then had our watermark cropped off. If they don't want to admit it, whatever." From 4Chan's perspective, Huh and ICHC are now profiting from what never should have been monetized or taken from the bulletin boards in the first place. "I imagine when [ICHC] first started and was just a repository for Caturday pictures, they appreciated that there was a place where all those pictures went. And at some point it got twisted," Chrisman continues.

If there is animosity from the 4Chan community, Huh doesn't let it affect his view; he cites 4Chan as one of the most culturally influential sites on the Internet. "People don't realize how influential it is," he says. "It's fascinating because it has very few rules. You post a picture, you write something, and people respond. There's very few restrictions, and that creates an unbridled forum of exchange. It's completely anonymous. It's incredibly liberating." The way he sees it, ICHC isn't competing with 4Chan; it's enabling more people to contribute to the conversations—a lot more people.

"I think something like 2 percent of the United States population visits one of our sites or more every month," Huh says. "The vast majority of challenges this company struggles with have to do with scale. Which, you know—cry me a tiny little violin. Most companies have a problem drawing traffic; we have a problem managing that traffic. We actually have to peel back functionality because it's slowing down our system."

One thing that Huh refuses to peel back is the community aspect of his sites. One of the network's features is a user profile database that allows registered users to bookmark their favorite images, keep track of the images they have captioned, and—in a very web 2.0 appropriate manner—use the site as a social networking tool by connecting with other users' profiles and denoting them as friends. The profiles help users share content with each other and develop community, a valuable service Huh says is a priority for the company's operations.

"I try to make sure that my fingerprint can't be seen on the company, because it's not about me. It's about the users," Huh says. He's put some thought into this question. "This is not about us, [and] this is not about exerting our ego about what we like, and the more objective you can be about content and letting the users drive the community, the more long-lasting and evolutionary you're gonna be."

The ICHC moderators, who monitor which users are submitting the most content, develop a certain rhythm with the contributors. "Every time I look at content that this one guy created, I laugh my ass off," says Chrisman. "He picks up an idea that I would never have thought of in a million years and makes it hilarious. That's what's really special about it. I don't even know who this guy is—he could be my next door neighbor; he could be anybody. And for whatever reason, he comes to our website and creates content. It seems like they're almost in tune



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with us too."

As thousands of Northwest techies can attest, working for an Internet start-up is usually no picnic. But the 12 employees and additional independent contractors who spend long hours in the Queen Anne ICHC office seem to actually like their jobs; the company has a remarkably low turnover rate, with only three employees leaving (and all on good terms) since the company's inception in 2007. Chrisman was hired in 2007 with no experience working with a website, or even with a

small company. Huh quickly put him in charge of developing PunditKitchen, a political site that was one of ICHC's first offshoots.

"Ben will say, 'You go do your thing, and if I like it I'll let you know, and if I don't I'll ask you to change it,'" Chrisman says. When Huh does need to step in and redirect or refocus, he does so without alienating his employees. "It's like having an older brother be your boss, somebody that's not really gonna be too harsh. Ben doesn't do that," Chrisman reflects. "It's basically Ben saying, 'I'm gonna reel you in, but as soon as I tell you what I want, I'm gonna let you off the leash again.'" Though Huh calls himself the "chief distractor" at the office, he seems to be able to keep everything focused on making ICHC's sites stronger and true to their emphasis on the users.

"If you really want to know the secret to Ben, he's always thinking," Chrisman says. "He's always on top of his game. He holds his cards tight, but he's always playing them." Still, Huh keeps his home life at home.

Sitting across from Huh as he finishes his coffee, it's not hard to believe that he'll easily succeed at doubling ICHC's traffic. He's taking a risk—as Chrisman puts it, "Who spends that much money on a website about cats with bad grammar?"—but he's got everything he needs to earn a historic win at the participatory meme game. Does he have plans to sell? "We have no plans to sell," he says. "It's a great time to be independent." ■

**If you have never been "Rick Rolled," consider yourself lucky. But be warned: It will happen.*