

FRAME: Emergence and Social Epidemics

The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

by Malcolm Gladwell

Introduction

The book takes a crack at explaining how contagious behavior—like a fashion trend, or the emergence of a bestseller—starts and grows in an organic fashion, much like a virus does, without any central control or master plan. It focuses in particular on examples where little changes create big effects (like when the temperature of fresh water drops from 32.2 degrees to 31.9 degrees and all of a sudden ice occurs). And it also tries to understand when change happens not gradually, but explosively. The “tipping point” from which the book takes its title is that point in a system’s development where a small change leads to a huge effect, in a very rapid time frame, and spreads through the system in a contagious fashion. Not all systemic change is like this, but for those people who want to foment rapid change, the principles or components of the tipping point model are worth examining.

Components of the Model

The Law of the Few

Contagious expansion of ideas or systemic changes doesn’t rely upon thousands or millions of people all rising up of one accord to create the change. Instead, the rapid growth is usually started by a

handful of people who exhibit some kind of exceptional behavior. In the propagation of infectious diseases, there are often certain types of people who by the nature of what they do or the lifestyle they lead allow the growth of the disease to tip so that it becomes an epidemic. The same can be said for many other trends—a small number of people (like skateboarders) have the ability to infect a large number of other people with a new idea (like a style of clothing or shoes). Within the law of the few, there are three types of exceptional people who tend to lend disproportional influence to make a change tip and become a trend. They’re Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen.

Connectors

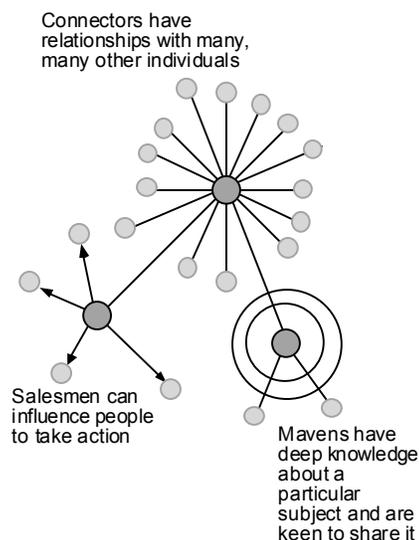
There are some people who seem to know everyone. As information travels through networks, two things tend to happen. First, the information is highly likely to come in contact with a connector—much more likely than coming in contact with someone who is not so connected. Second, if the information engages the connector’s interest, he or she will distribute it to a huge number of other individuals in a short period of time, creating a tipping point. There don’t need to be many of them in a system to propagate a new trend.

Mavens

Mavens are information specialists. They’re the types of people who know everything there is to know about a certain topic. But they have one additional feature that makes them different from ordinary experts: they love to share what they know with others. They’re not necessarily a hub in a network like a connector is, but they are eager to share what they know. Mavens are important as tipping points because they’re on the leading edge of acquiring new information. They know things that the rest of us don’t. In a network of individuals, they’re likely the first to know of a potential system change. If they’re in touch with a connector, then the change can get communicated very rapidly.

Salesmen

These people are the quintessential persuaders who can get people to make decisions and take actions



that they ordinarily wouldn't take if left to themselves. But these salesmen are not the type that are reviled in popular culture—instead they're people who have the ability to persuade in part because they can get the other person to root for them in the same way that an audience roots for a performer on stage. They also use their emotions as contagious influences on other people. Their ability to persuade makes them strong carriers of infectious ideas, concepts, trends and changes.

The Stickiness Factor

Every advertising firm dreams of creating those specific types of messages that capture the attention of the public in such a way that the message becomes ingrained into the culture. Xerox became synonymous with photocopying. The Wendy's brand received a boost with the phrase "where's the beef?" Nike's slogan became a mantra for a generation: "Just do it." But slogans are not the only things that rely upon stickiness for success. Teachers look for ways to provide stickiness in their lessons. Television shows try to find ways to get viewers hooked. People trying to make changes in organizations hunt for ways of presenting the change so that its features become contagious. The trick is that there is usually one small element within the design of the television show or the strategic plan or the marketing idea that provides the stickiness component. It's not necessary that the entire idea or that all of the components of the new educational intervention be sticky. If only one component is irresistible enough, it will bring the rest of the components along with it. Some other features that contribute to stickiness include: participation, practicality, personal.

The Power of Context

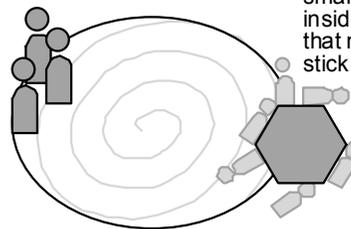
The physical and social environment within which an individual or group of people receives a particular type of information can radically influence whether the information sticks and gets passed on. But it's not necessarily that the environment as a whole causes the contagious behavior. Instead, it's possible to take a trend to the tipping point by tinkering with the smallest details

of the environment. An example can be found in the "broken windows" experiment in New York City in the early 1990's. If a window is broken and left unrepaired, people walking by will conclude that no one cares and no one is in charge. Soon, more windows will be broken, and the sense of anarchy will spread from the building to the street on which it faces, sending a signal that anything. New York applied this principle in reverse, diligently playing hardball on the little things like broken windows, graffiti and panhandling in certain crime ridden parts of the city. As attention to the little things improved, residents felt more comfortable moving about in their neighborhoods and criminals felt less comfortable. Attention to the "broken windows" caused the crime rate to tip and reduce in a radical way.

There's a social side to the power of context. It seems that groups of up to 150 can serve as incubators for contagious messages. They exhibit a sort of joint memory system. One hundred fifty people is about the maximum number of people that a single human being can have a valuable relationship with— a relationship that can serve as an influence to individual behavior.

The Law of the Few says that trends can become highly and rapidly contagious based on the influence of only a few people or circumstances

The Stickiness factor says that trends become highly contagious because of some small element inside the trend that makes it stick with people



The Power of Context says that a few components of the physical and social environment can radically increase the contagious nature of an idea.

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