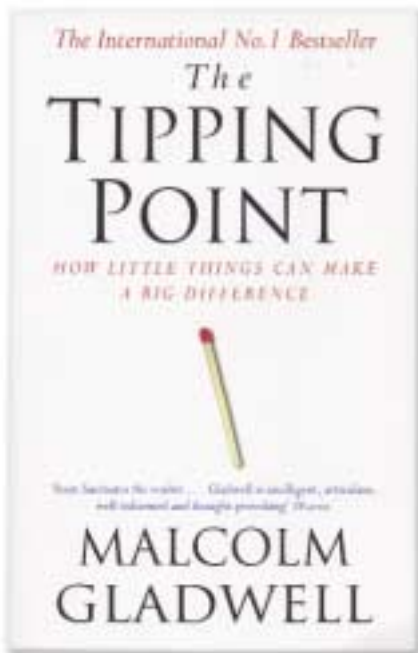




BOOK REVIEW

Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point



A "Tipping Point" is the moment at which something reaches a critical mass and grows astonishingly quickly. Normally what we're talking about is social phenomena, and drawing the analogy from the behaviour of diseases they are often referred to as social epidemics. This is an enduring metaphor, as Gladwell points out there are three key similarities:

1. **Contagiousness**
2. **Little causes can have big effects**
3. **Change happens not gradually, but at one dramatic moment**

They also grow exponentially - meaning that the speed of "infection" is proportional to the number already infected. Exponential growth can be staggeringly fast:

For some time now marketers have sought to use (or abuse) social networks in order to achieve these kinds of adoption rate for their products. That's why they employ cool-hunters (see Salesmen later on), and tactics such as Viral marketing. They're also hoping

to get round our increasing scepticism for traditional advertising media. Increasingly these social epidemics are being associated with the internet, email and new media.

The internet certainly seems to have facilitated the speed and reach of social epidemics (much the same effect that the transport revolution had on diseases). Memes and social epidemics spread through the surprisingly small world of the internet like wildfire. Popular internet memes include the Star Wars Kid, Badger Badger Badger and more recently the Flying Spaghetti Monster. Occasionally businesses have managed to shoehorn their way into this arena, mostly by abandoning any pretence of relevance to their product - Burger King's Subservient Chicken is a case in point (<http://www.subservientchicken.com>).

So what's new?

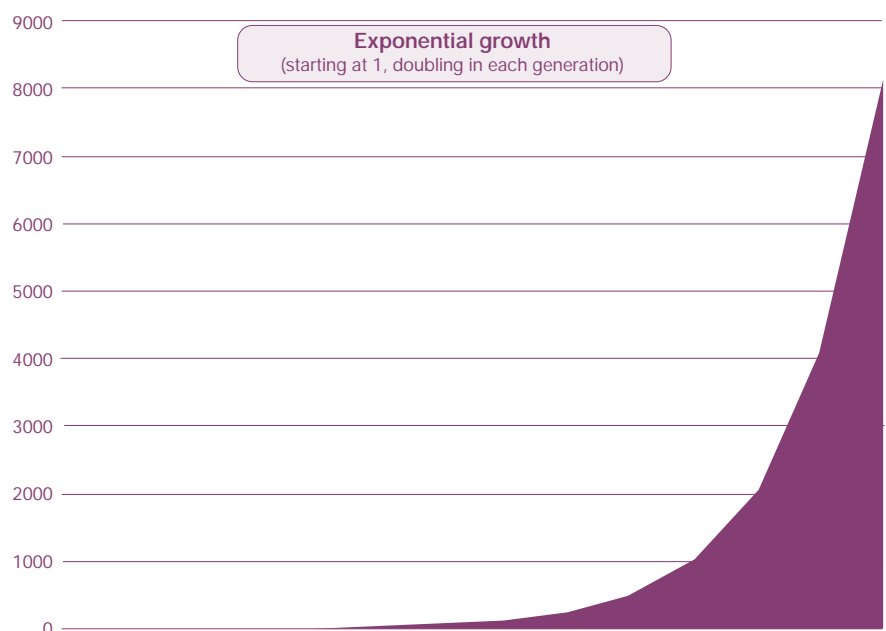
Lot's of people have commented on the social epidemic phenomenon. What makes The Tipping Point valuable is his

analysis of why, or perhaps how, they happen. More specifically he explains who makes it happen.

People

According to Gladwell it takes a combination of three special types of people to kick off an epidemic:

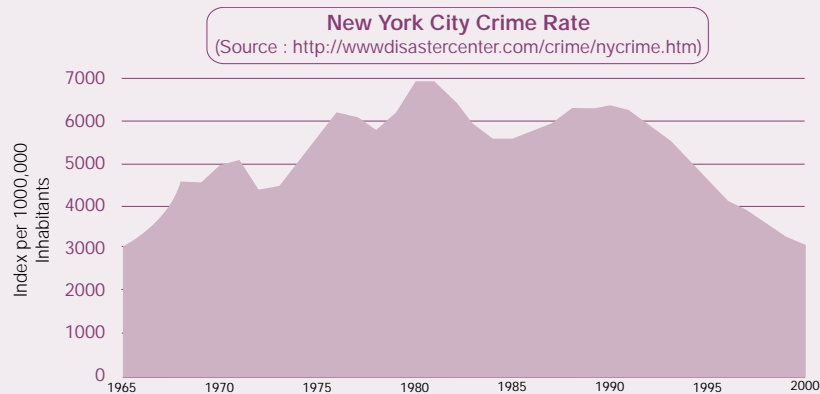
Connectors are the people who know everyone, the ones who collect acquaintances. You are probably familiar with the notion of "six degrees of separation" or the small world phenomenon. Recently it has become obvious that the reason this works is because of connectors, who act as "hubs" that connect various otherwise separate social networks. Word of mouth remains the most powerful and effective way of spreading a message. Connectors tend to inhabit several worlds, bringing them together and allowing new ideas and connections to form. Connectors get people together and spread a message quickly.





New York Crime Rate Collapse

One of Gladwell's poster issues is the 1990s New York city crime crash. No one really knows why it happened, and he glosses over the debate about what precisely caused the crash to focus on the resultant social upheaval. The facts, as the chart shows, are startling:



As Gladwell points out the fall probably came about through a unique combination of a number of causes that on their own would not have been enough.

Mavens are people who acquire information about an area, and enjoy telling others about it. The friend you go to talk to when you want to buy a digital camera or a hi-fi and you want the best deal is a Maven. They know a market intimately, know what the best products are and what is a fair price, and enjoy sharing knowledge with others. In a social epidemic Mavens provide the information.

Salesmen are people who are good at influencing others. The name is a bit misleading though, often salesmen (and women!) work just by being themselves, rather than by actively trying to promote something. Salesmen are cool, and cool is tremendously powerful. Gladwell makes the point in relation to teenage smoking:

...“the anti-smoking movement has railed against the tobacco companies for making smoking cool and has spent untold millions...trying to convince teenagers that smoking isn't cool. But

that's not the point. Smoking was never cool. Smokers are cool.”

Portrait of an epidemic

The Law of the Few

Certain people (the ones outlined before) have a disproportionate influence over the spread of social phenomena. Small numbers of the right people can start an epidemic, but without them nothing will happen. Gladwell points out that Paul Revere was not the only rider to bring news of the Redcoats coming, but he was the only one to raise a response because he had a wide circle of acquaintance. So to start an epidemic around your product you just need to find the right people.

Stickiness

Some products and ideas, or perhaps rather some ways of packaging information about them, are sticky - they are irresistibly attractive to people. By presenting things in the right way you can have a huge influence over the success of

a product or idea, and often it is little changes that make a big difference.

Kitty Genovese and the bystander problem

In 1964 a young woman was stabbed to death in New York, having been attacked three times over the course of half an hour. 38 people watched it happen, but none of them called the police. At the time this was thought to indicate the coldness and psychological isolation of city living. In fact it now seems that the reason no-one did anything is because there were 38 people - everyone assumed that someone else would act. If there had only been one witness then the chances are they would have done something.



BOOK REVIEW

Continued: Malcolm Gladwell, The Tipping Point

The Power of Context

Behaviour is strongly influenced by context. This is the rationale behind the idea that zero tolerance policing could cut violent crime. More depressingly this also explains the "bystander problem" - typified by the story of Kitty Genovese. In general we tend to overestimate the role of individual character traits and underestimate the importance of environmental context in motivation.

The Magic Number 150

Sociological theory states that a human can only have a proper social relationship with up to 150 people. Groups larger than this tend to subdivide, and this often works out best for the health of the group. Similar trends can be observed with other apes (chimps, for example, also show a tendency to split when groups get over a

certain size). For an entertaining take on this head to <http://www.pointlesswasteoftime.com/monkeysphere.html>

Group size and the rule of 150 is therefore fundamental to understanding social behaviours, and is one of the most important contextual influences on social epidemics. These groups are also a mechanism that makes it far easier for new ideas and information to "tip" from one person to the entire group.

The New Product Cycle

Another theory that sheds light on the operation of social epidemics is Rogers' model of adoption: (see below)

The few key individuals (Connectors, Salesmen and Mavens) are essential in

setting trends, making things "cool" and informing people before kicking off an epidemic that spreads rapidly through the early and late majorities.

Conclusion

The key lesson of The Tipping Point is that it is the right combination of little things that is the secret to triggering any social epidemic (including a rush on your product). You need to focus all your effort on a few key people in order to use this theory in your marketing.

The other key is that apparently minor elements of context and presentation can have a counter-intuitively large impact on the spread of a social epidemic. Why did the Subservient Chicken spread so successfully when so many other Viral campaigns fail? It's hard to be sure, but it will come down to little things about context and targeting the right few people.

An interesting aspect of the information age recently is the growing power of bloggers - many of whom combine aspects of Connector, Maven and Salesman. Figuring out how to target marketing through this channel will be one key to online campaigns this century. **S**

The adoption bell curve

