

Viral marketing and social epidemics

BY ARUN SETH

It's common knowledge that word-of-mouth and (the relatively synonymous term) viral marketing are the most effective way to spread a message. The main reason this is the case is that we have grown immune to most marketing messages.

To understand the rise of immunity to marketing messages, look no further than your opinion of telemarketing calls, spam email, pop-up ads, and most television commercials. Our growing indifference to these messages is the reason why word-of-mouth marketing becomes more important every day.

Moreover, in tough economic times, the need to find the most effective, low-cost ways to reach and secure our customers greatly increases.

In that context, it makes sense to take a close look at how viral marketing and word-of-mouth really work – by exploring the science of how social epidemics spread.

There is perhaps no better work on the subject than the 2000 title, "The Tipping Point," by Malcolm Gladwell. In his book Gladwell states that word-of-mouth epidemics spread through a population according to three rules:

1. The Law of the Few – only a select few are capable of spreading the message;
2. The Stickiness Factor – the message needs to be memorable and retained; and
3. The Power of Context – the context of the environment must be just right for the message to spread.

He draws a convincing analogy with the way viruses spread through society with these same three rules: only a select few are capable of spreading viruses to epidemic levels through their vast social contact; the virus must be contagious, and the environment must be just right for the virus to spread.

world, but if your product is no good, you will never get the repeat customers that lead to profitability.

The Power of Context

Well before the summer of 1977 and the "Son of Sam" crime phenomenon, New York City had another famous murder, which many believe is really when the city lost its innocence. On March 13, 1964, Kitty Genovese returned home to her apartment in Queens in the early morning hours. As she walked from her car to her apartment, she was repeatedly stabbed by Winston Moseley and screamed for help. Accounts differ, but at least a dozen (and perhaps as many as 38) people heard her screams, and shockingly, nobody called the police until it was too late.

The lesson here is that we have to put our message or product in the right context and it will have a huge effect on the receptivity towards it.

The general reaction to the story was that New York City had lost its innocence. How could these neighbors be so apathetic and callous that they did not call the police?

But the reason people didn't call the police had nothing to do with apathy, and had everything to do with what sociologists term "The Bystander Effect." Put simply, people didn't call the police because they assumed someone else would. This is very similar to why you might not call the electric company when your power goes out. Indeed, your more responsible neighbors will have surely notified the electric company by now and they are already on their way to fix it.

What this shows is that we are far more sensitive to the context of our environment than we could possibly know. If I asked a

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of the environment in which the jacket was seen has changed.

Such are the lessons of "The Tipping Point" – that small changes can have a massive impact and we can do a lot with a little. The trick is for a great product to tap into a Paul Revere type – the mavens, connectors, and salesmen amongst us – who then becomes eager to spread the word.

I recently read an article in *Inc.* magazine about a company in Florida selling spring water out of juice boxes. When a vacationing TV reporter visited one of the local shops the company had its product in, she decided to do a story on the water boxes because she loved the concept so much. Next thing you know, the company had national distribution and its revenue exploded. Doesn't that sound like the sort of thing that could happen around here? ♦

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The Law of the Few

When it comes to spreading social epidemics, we must focus our resources on the first rule, the Law of the Few, which states that only a rare breed is capable of spreading these epidemics.

There is perhaps no better example of this than Paul Revere's horseback ride. It's not well known that there was a similar ride that day, by one William Dawes, to inform the pilgrims. But the towns that Dawes rode through didn't rise to battle as the towns that Revere rode through.

The lesson here is that in trying to spread social epidemics, businesses must concentrate their efforts on the opinion leaders and early adopters. These are the people with vast contacts, comfortable in many different social circles, with a gift for bringing people together ("Connectors"). We must also focus on the "Mavens" – the people who love knowledge and love to share it. Finally, there are the "Salesman" – the very persuasive people who are usually very effective with non-verbal cues and are able to convince the skeptical amongst us.

Paul Revere was all of these people wrapped into one. He had vast social connections and was widely respected for his knowledge, while Dawes was a relative nobody. When Revere spoke, people listened – and that is why his ride was able to mobilize the resistance.

The Stickiness Factor

While the Law of the Few is about spreading social epidemics in the most effective manner, the Stickiness Factor is more about the inherent qualities of the message or product itself. Making messages memorable is a difficult task in an age when we are growing immune to marketing messages and making a product or message irresistible is more a function of the product itself and not the marketing behind it.

What this means is that you can have all the mavens, connectors, and salesmen you could need, eager to spread your message. But if the message (or product) itself isn't good, then it will never spread like wildfire.

This isn't altogether different than saying you could have the best sales staff in the

roomful of people whether they would call the police should they witness a violent crime outside their home, I am sure most everyone would say yes. But we could actually put those people in a certain context or situation where they wouldn't call the police.

The lesson here is that we have to put our message or product in the right context and it will have a huge effect on the receptivity towards it.

For example, if I were to wear a used vinyl jacket purchased from a thrift shop, many young people might look at me like I stepped out of a time machine. But put those people in New York City, and have them witness a bunch of east village hipsters wearing that same jacket, and all of a sudden the jacket is cool and sought-after. The jacket hasn't changed, only the context

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