

## Contagious—Why things Catch On.

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### Introduction: Why Things Catch On

- The actual number is 7 percent. Not 47 percent, not 27 percent, but 7 percent. Research by the Keller Fay Group finds that only 7 percent of word of mouth happens online.
- **So the first issue** with all the hype around social media is that people tend to ignore the importance of offline word of mouth, even though offline discussions are more prevalent, and potentially even more impactful, than online ones.
- Harnessing the power of word of mouth, online or offline, requires understanding why people talk and why some things get talked about and shared more than others. The psychology of »i4haring. The science of social transmission.
- Further, by focusing so much on the messenger, we've neglected a much more obvious driver of sharing: the message.
- One holiday season I remember being particularly excited to get a book of logic puzzles, which I explored incessantly over the next few months.
- Take Will It Blend? And the hundred-dollar cheese steak at Barclay Prime. Both stories evoke emotions like surprise or amazement: Who would have thought a blender could tear through an iPhone, or that a cheese steak would cost anywhere near a hundred dollars? Both stories are also pretty remarkable. So they make the teller look cool for passing them on. And both offer useful information: it's always helpful to know about products that work well or restaurants that have great food.
- “After analyzing hundreds of contagious messages, products, and ideas, we noticed that the same six “ingredients,” or principles, were often at work. Six key STEPPS, as I call them that cause things to be talked about shared and imitated.
- Principle 1: Social Currency
  - Just like the clothes we wear and the cars we drive, what we talk about influences how others see us.
- Principle 2: Triggers
  - How do we remind people to talk about our products and ideas?
- Principle 3: Emotion
- Principle 4: Public
  - Making things more observable makes them easier to imitate, which makes them more likely to become popular.
- Principle 5: Practical Value
- Principle 6: Stories

### 1. Social Currency

- You'll notice an old-school rotary dial phone hanging on the inside of the booth, the type that has a finger wheel with little holes for you to dial each number. Just for kicks, place your finger in the hole under the number 2 (ABC). Dial clockwise until you reach the finger stop, release the wheel, and hold the receiver to your ear. To your astonishment, someone answers. “Do you have a

reservation?” a voice asks. A reservation? Yes, a reservation. Of course you don’t have one. What would you even need a reservation for? A phone booth in the corner of a hot dog restaurant? But today is your lucky day, apparently: they can take you. Suddenly, the back of the booth swings open—it’s a secret door!—and you are let into a clandestine bar called, of all things, Please Don’t Tell.

- In case it’s not already clear, here’s a little secret about secrets: they tend not to stay secret very long.
- Think about the last time someone shared a secret with you. Remember how earnestly she begged you not to tell a soul? And –remember what you did next?
- As it turns out, if something is supposed to be secret, people might well be more likely to talk about it. The reason? Social currency. People share things that make them look good to others.
- In one study, Mitchell and Tamir hooked subjects up to brain scanners and asked them to share either their own opinions and attitudes (“I like snowboarding”) or the opinions and attitudes of another person (“He likes puppies”). They found that sharing personal opinions activated the same brain circuits that respond to rewards like food and money. So talking about what you did this weekend might feel just as good as taking a delicious bite of double chocolate cake?
- The result? People were willing to forgo money to share their opinions. Overall, they were willing to take a 25 percent pay cut to share their thoughts. Compared with doing nothing for five seconds, people valued sharing their opinion at just under a cent. This puts a new spin on an old maxim. Maybe instead of giving people a penny for their thoughts, we should get paid a penny for listening.
- We talk about how we got a reservation at the hottest restaurant in town and skip the story about how the hotel we chose faced a parking lot. We talk about how the camera we picked was a Consumer Reports Best Buy and skip the story about how the laptop we bought ended up being cheaper at another store.
- So to get people talking, companies and organizations need to mint social currency. Give people a way to make themselves look good while promoting their products and ideas along the way. There are three ways to do that: (1) find inner remarkability; (2) leverage game mechanics; and (3) make people feel like insiders.
- Once outside, you twist the top off and take a long drink. Feeling sufficiently revitalized, you’re about to get in your friend’s car when you notice something written on the inside of the Snapple cap.
  - Real Fact # 27; A ball of glass will bounce higher than a ball of rubber.
  - Wow. Really? You’d probably be pretty impressed (after all, who even knew glass could bounce), but think for a moment about what you’d do next. What would you do with this newfound tidbit of information? Would you keep it to yourself or would you tell your friend?
- Think of what else we could do with that time! If you’ve ever happened to drink a Snapple with a friend, you’ll find yourself telling each other which fact you received – similar to happens when your family breaks open a fortune cookie after a meal at a Chinese restaurant
- Depending on whom participants happened to tell the story to, it came out differently. If they were talking to another student—that is, if they were trying to impress and entertain rather than simply report the facts—the cockroaches were larger, more numerous, and the entire experience more disgusting. The students exaggerated the details to make the story more remarkable. We’ve

all had similar experiences. How big was the trout we caught last time we went fishing in Colorado? How many times did the baby wake up crying during the night? Often we're not even trying to exaggerate; we just can't recall all the details of the story. Our memories aren't perfect records of what happened. They're more like dinosaur skeletons patched together by archeologists. We have the main chunks, but some of the pieces are missing, so we fill them in as best we can. We make an educated guess. But in the process, stories often become more extreme or entertaining; particularly when people tell them in front of a group.

- The key to finding inner remarkability is to think about what makes something interesting, surprising, or novel. Can the product do something no one would have thought possible?
- But it's possible to find the inner remarkability in any product or idea by thinking about what makes that thing stand out.
- A few years ago, students at Harvard University were asked make a seemingly straightforward choice: which would they prefer, a job where they made \$50,000 a year (option A) or one where they made \$100,000 a year (option B) Seems like a no-brainer, right? Everyone should take option B. But there was one catch. In option A, the students would get paid twice as much as others, who would only get \$25,000. In option B, they would get paid half as much as others, who would get \$200,000. So option B would make the students more money overall, but they would be doing worse than others around them. What did the majority of people choose? Option A. They preferred to do better than others, even if it meant getting less for themselves. They chose the option that was worse in absolute terms but better in relative terms.
- And this is how game mechanics boosts word of mouth. People are talking because they want to show off their achievements, but along the way they talk about the brands (Delta or Twitter) or domains (golf or the SAT) where they achieved.
- In 2005, Ben Fischman became CEO of SmartBargains.com. The discount shopping website sold everything from apparel and bedding to home décor and luggage. The business model was straightforward: companies wanting to offload clearance items or extra merchandise would sell them cheap to SmartBargains, and SmartBargains would pass the deals on to the consumer. There was a broad variety of merchandise, and prices were often up to 75 percent lower than retail. But by 2007 the website was floundering. Margins had always been low, but excitement about the brand had dissipated, and momentum was slowing. A number of related websites had also sprung up, and SmartBargains was struggling to differentiate itself from similar competitors.
- **A year later Fischman** started a new website called Rue La La. It carried high-end designer goods but focused on "flash sales" in which the deals were available for only a limited time—twenty-four hours or a couple of days at most. And the site followed the same model as sample sales in the fashion industry. Access was by invitation only. You had to be invited by an existing member. Sales took off, and the site did extremely well. So well, in fact. That in 2009 Ben sold both websites for \$350 million. Rue La La's success is particularly noteworthy, given one tiny detail. It sold the same products as SmartBargains. The exact same dresses, skirts, and suits. The same shoes, shirts, and slacks. So what transformed what could have been a ho-hum website into one people was clamoring to get access to? How come Rue La La was so much more successful? Because it made people feel like insiders.
- While it might not be obvious right away, Rue La La actually has a lot in common with Please Don't Tell, the secret bar we talked about at the beginning of the chapter. Both used scarcity and exclusivity to make customers feel like insiders.

- After you've paid for your drinks, your server hands you a small business card. All black, almost like the calling card of a psychic or wizard. In red script the card simply says "Please Don't Tell" and includes a phone number. So while everything else suggests the proprietors want to keep the venue under wraps, at the end of the experience they make sure you have their phone number. Just in case you want to share their secret.

## 2. Triggers

- People talk about Cheerios more than Disney World. The reason? Triggers.
- Imagine you've just gotten an e-mail about a new recycling initiative. Do you talk about it with your coworkers later that day? Mention it to your spouse that weekend? If so, you're engaging in immediate word of mouth. This occurs when you pass on the details of an experience, or share new information you've acquired, soon after it occurs.
- Ongoing word of mouth, in contrast, covers the conversations you have in the weeks and months that follow. The movies you saw last month or a vacation you took last year.
- At any given moment, some thoughts are more top of mind, or accessible, than others. Right now, for example, you might be thinking about the sentence you're reading or the same which you had for lunch. Some things are chronically accessible. Sports fanatics will often have those subjects top of mind.
- Using a product is a strong trigger. Most people drink milk more often than grape juice, so milk is top of mind more often. But triggers can also be indirect. Seeing a jar of peanut butter not only triggers us to think about peanut butter, it also makes us think about its frequent partner, jelly. Triggers are like little environmental reminders for related concepts and ideas.
- Why does it matter if particular thoughts or ideas are top of mind? Because accessible thoughts and ideas lead to action.
- One group of students saw the slogan "Live the healthy way, eat five fruits and veggies a day." Another group saw "Each and every dining-hall tray needs five fruits and veggies a day." Both slogans encouraged people to eat fruits and vegetables, but the tray slogan did so using a trigger. The students lived on campus, and many of them ate in dining halls that used trays. So we wanted to see if we could trigger healthy eating behavior by using the dining room tray to remind students of the slogan.
- Returning to the BzzAgent data, triggers helped us answer why some products get talked about more. More frequently triggered products got 15 percent more word of mouth. Even mundane products like Ziploc bags and moisturizer received lots of buzz because people were triggered to think about them so frequently. People who use moisturizer often apply it at least once a day. People often use Ziploc bags after meals to wrap up leftovers. These everyday activities make those products more top of mind and, as a result, lead them to be talked about more. Furthermore, not only did triggered products get more immediate word of mouth, they also got more word of mouth on an ongoing basis.
- In this way, Ziploc Bags are the antithesis of me going to teach dressed like a pirate. The pirate story is interesting, but it's here today, gone tomorrow. Ziploc bags may be boring, but they get mentioned week in and week out because they are frequently triggered. By acting as reminders, triggers not only get people talking, they keep them talking. Top of mind means tip of tongue.

- **The more the** desired behavior happens after a delay, the more important being triggered becomes.
- Colleen needed a way to get consumers to start thinking about the brand again. To make Kit Kat more top of mind. And given the years of failed new directions, upper management was unwilling to spend the money to put the brand back on TV. Any financial support would be modest at best. So she did some research. Colleen looked at when people actually consumed Kit Kats. She found two things: consumers often ate Kit Kats to take a break, and many consumed it in coordination with a hot beverage. She had an idea. Kit Kat and coffee. Colleen pulled the campaign together in a matter of months. Described as “a break’s best friend,” the radio spots featured the candy bar sitting on a counter next to a cup of coffee, or someone grabbing coffee and asking for a Kit Kat. Kit Kat and coffee. Coffee and Kit Kat. The spots repeatedly paired the two together. The campaign was a hit. By the end of the year it had lifted sales by 8 percent. After twelve months, sales were up by a third. Kit Kat and coffee put Kit Kat back on the map. The then-\$300 million brand has since grown to \$500 million. Many things contributed to the campaign’s success. “Kit Kat and coffee” has a nice alliteration, and the idea of taking a break.
- Many drink it a number of times throughout the day. And by linking Kit Kat to coffee. Colleen created a frequent trigger to remind people of the brand
- During a six-week campaign, some people were exposed to messages that repeatedly paired the restaurant with dinner. “Thinking about dinner? Think about Boston Market!” Other people received a similar advertising campaign that contained a more generic message: “Thinking about a place to eat? Think about Boston Market!” We then measured how often the respective groups talked about the restaurant. The results were dramatic. Compared to the generic message, the message that grew the habitat (by associating Boston Market with dinner) increased word of mouth by 20 percent among people who previously had associated the brand only with lunch. Growing the habitat boosted buzz.
- Competitors can even be used as a trigger. How can public health organizations compete against the marketing strength of the better funded rival like a cigarette company? One way to combat this inequality is to transform a weakness into strength: by making a rival’s message acts as a trigger for your own. A famous antismoking campaign, for example, spoofed Marlboro’s iconic ads by captioning a picture of one Marlboro cowboy talking to another with the words: “Bob, I’ve got emphysema.” So now whenever people see a Marlboro ad, it triggers them to think about the antismoking message.
- Linking a product or idea with a stimulus that is already associated with many things isn’t as effective as forging a fresher, more original link. It is also important to pick triggers that happen near where the desired behavior is taking place.
- The “Man Drinks Fat” clip closes with a huge congealed chunk of fat being dropped on a dinner plate. It oozes over the table as message flashes up on the screen: “Drinking one can of soda a day) can make you 10 pounds fatter a year. So don’t drink yourself fat.” The video is clever. But by showing fat pouring out of a can the DOH also nicely leveraged triggers. Unlike the bath mat ad its video triggered the message (don’t consume sugary drinks) at precisely the right time: when people are thinking of drinking a soda.
- Mentions of Cheerios spike every day at approximately the same time. The first references occur at 5:00 a.m. They peak between 7:30 a.m. and 8:00 a.m. And they diminish around 11:00 a.m. This sharp increase and corresponding decline align precisely with the traditional time for

breakfast. The pattern even shifts slightly on weekends when people eat breakfast later. Triggers drive talking.

- Triggers are the foundation of word of mouth and contagiousness. To use an analogy, think of most rock bands. Social Currency is the front man or woman. It's exciting, fun, and gets lots of attention. Triggers could be the drummer or bassist. It's not as sexy a concept as Social Currency, but it's an important workhorse that gets the job done. People may not pay as much attention to it, but it lays the groundwork that drives success. The more something is triggered, the more it will be top of mind, and the more successful it will become.
- So we need to consider the context. Like Budweiser's "wassup" or Rebecca Black's "Friday," our products and ideas need to take advantage of existing triggers. We also need to grow the habitat. Like Colleen Chorak's Kit Kat and coffee, we need to create new links to prevalent triggers. Triggers and cues lead people to talk, choose, and use. Social currency gets people talking, but Triggers keep them talking. Op of mind means tip of tongue.

### 3. Emotion

- It turns out that science articles frequently chronicle innovations and discoveries that evoke a particular emotion in readers. That emotion? Awe.
- According to psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, awe is the sense of wonder and amazement that occur when someone is inspired by great knowledge, beauty, sublimit or might.
- Some of the Web's most viral videos also evoke awe. The snickering started as soon as the plump, matronly woman walked onto the stage. She looked more like a lunch lady than a vocalist. First, she was too old to be competing on Britain's Got It. At forty-seven, she was more than twice the age of many of the other contestants.
- When she replied that she wanted to be a professional singer you could just see the thoughts going through their heads. That's rich! You? A professional singer? The cameras zoomed in on members of the audience laughing and rolling their eyes. Even the judges smirked. They clearly wanted her to get off the stage as soon as possible. All signs pointed to her giving a terrible performance and being booted from the show, pronto. But just as it seemed that it couldn't get any worse, she started singing.
- But it didn't. In fact, sadness had the opposite effect. Sadder articles were actually 16 percent less likely to make the Most E-Mailed list. Something about sadness was making people less likely to share. What?
- We went back to our database and measured the positivity of each article. This time we used a textual analysis program developed by psychologist Jamie Pennebaker. The program quantifies the amount of positivity and negativity in a passage of text by counting the number of times hundreds of different emotional words appear.
- . In fact, it was the opposite. Articles that evoke anger or anxiety were more likely to make the Most emailed list
- Understanding arousal helps integrate the different results we had found so far. Anger and anxiety lead people to share because, like awe, they are high-arousal emotions. They kindle the fire, activate people, and drive them to take action.
- In their wonderful book Made to Stick, Chip and Dan Heath talk about using the "Three Whys" to find the emotional core of an idea. Write down why you think people are doing something. Then

ask “Why is this important?” three times. Each time you do this, note your answer and you’ll notice that you drill down further and further toward uncovering not only the core of an idea. But the emotion behind it

- Simply adding more arousal to a story or ad can have a big impact on people’s willingness to share it. In one experiment we changed the details of a story to make it evoke more anger.
- The practice of carrying your baby in a sling or similar carrier has been around for thousands of years. Some experts have even argued that the practice strengthens the maternal bond and the mother. But as strollers and other gadgets have been popularized, many parents have moved away from this practice. So in 2008, a celebration was held to raise awareness and encourage people around the world to reconsider the benefits of babywearing.
- McNeil Consumer Healthcare, the maker of painkiller Motrin, saw this swell of interest as a perfect opportunity. Motrin’s motto at the time was “We feel your pain.” So in an attempt to show solidarity with mothers, the company created an ad centered on the aches and pains mothers can suffer from carrying their babies in slings. The ad noted that while babywearing can be great for the baby, it can put a ton of strain on the back, neck, and shoulders of the mom. The company was trying to be supportive. It wanted to show that it understood mom’s pain and Motrin was there to help. But a number of so-called mommy bloggers saw things differently. The mom’s voice-over in the ad said babywearing “totally makes me look like an official mom. And so if I look tired and crazy, people will understand why.” Deeply offended on two fronts—by the implication that they wore their babies as fashion statements and that they looked crazy—mothers took to their blogs and Twitter accounts. The anger spread.
- Soon thousands of people were involved. “A baby will never be a fashion statement. How outrageous is that thinking!” one cried. The posts multiplied. Many of the writers said they would boycott the company. The topic started to trend on Twitter, and the movement got picked up by The New York Times, Ad Age, and a host of other media outlets. Soon seven out of the top ten searches for “Motrin” and “headache” on Google referred to the marketing debacle. Finally, after too long a delay, Motrin took the advertisement down from its website and issued a lengthy apology.
- But I wondered whether the effects of arousal might be even broader than that. Arousal induces sharing, and then might any physiologically arousing experience drive people to share stories and information with others?
- And it did. Among students who had been instructed to jog, 75 percent shared the article—more than twice as many as the students who had been in the “relaxed” group. Thus any sort of arousal, whether from emotional or physical sources, and even arousal due to the situation itself (rather than content), can boost transmission.
- Ads at the gym may provoke lots of discussion simply because people are already so amped. Work groups may benefit from taking walks together because it will encourage people to share their ideas and opinions

#### **4. Public**

- Thus a key factor in driving products to catch on is public visibility. If something is built to show, it’s built to grow.

- If you're like most people you'd probably follow a time /tested rule of thumb: look for a restaurant full of people. If lots of people are eating there, it's probably good. If a place is empty you should probably keep on walking. This is just one example of a much broader phenomenon people often imitate those around them.
- Imagine you are on that list. It is managed on a first-come, first-served basis, and available kidneys are offered first to people at the top of the list, who usually have been waiting the longest. You yourself have been waiting for months for an available kidney you're fairly low on the list, but finally one day you're offered a potential match. You'd take it, right? Clearly people who need a kidney to save their lives should take one when offered. But surprisingly, 97.1 percent of kidney offers are refused.
- This is where social proof comes into play. If so many others have refused this kidney, people assume it must not be very good.
- This herd mentality even affects the type of careers people consider. Every year I ask my second-year MBA students to do a short exercise. Half the students are asked what they thought they wanted to do with their life right when they started the MBA program. The other half are asked what they want to do now. Neither group gets to see the question the other was asked and responses are anonymous.
- And the effect was pretty big. Approximately one out of every eight cars sold was because of social influence.
- The Movember Foundation succeeded because they figured out how to make the private public. They figured out how to take support for an abstract cause—something not typically observable—and make it something that everyone can see. For the thirty days of November people who sport a moustache effectively become walking, talking billboards for the cause.
- Koreen Johannessen was able to reduce Arizona students' drinking by making the private public. She created ads in the school newspaper that merely stated the true norm. That most students had only one or two drinks, and 69 percent have four or fewer drinks, when they party. She didn't focus on the health consequences of drinking, she focused on social information. By showing students that the majority of their peers weren't bingeing. She helped them realize that others felt the same way. That no more students didn't want to binge. This corrected the false inferences students had made about others' behavior and led them to reduce their own drinking as a result. By making the private public, Johannessen was able to decrease heavy drinking by almost 30 percent.
- Similar ideas can be applied to a host of products and services. Tailors give away suit bags imprinted with the tailor's name. Nightclubs use sparklers to broadcast when someone pays to get bottle service. Tickets usually sit in people's pockets, but if theater/I companies and minor league teams could use buttons or stickers as the "ticket" instead, "tickets" would be much more publicly observable.
- 'When consumers are wearing other clothes, supporting a different cause, or doing something else entirely? Is there something that generates social proof that sticks around even when the product is not being used or the idea is not top of mind? Yes, and it's called behavioral residue.
- VlacEachern liked the wristband idea, but when he pitched it to Lance's advisors they weren't convinced. The foundation thought the bands would be a dud. Bill Stapleton, Armstrong's agent, thought they had no chance of success and called them "a stupid idea." Even Armstrong was incredulous, saying, "What are we going to do with the 4.9 million that we don't sell?"

MacEachern was stuck. While he liked the wristband idea he wasn't sure it would fly. But then he made one seemingly innocuous decision that had a big impact on the product's success.

MacEachern made the wristbands yellow.

- Yellow was chosen because it is the color of the race leader's jersey in the Tour de France. It's also not strongly associated with either gender, making it easy for both men and women to wear. But it was also a smart decision from an observability perspective. Yellow is a color people almost never see.
- In the end more than a 5 million wristbands were sold
- But regardless, one thing is clear: the wristband creates more behavioral residue than the cross-country ride ever could have.
- But in the 1980s election officials came up with a nice way to make voting more observable: the "I Voted" sticker. Simple enough,
- But anti-drug ads often say two things simultaneously. They say that drugs are bad, but they also say that other people are doing them. And as we've discussed throughout this chapter, the more others seem to be doing something, the more likely people are to think that thing is right or normal and what they should be doing as well.
- Our basic hypothesis is that the more kids saw these ads. The more they came to believe that lots of other kids were using marijuana. And the more they came to believe that other kids were using marijuana, the more they became interested in using it themselves.
- **As with many powerful** tools, making things more public can have unintended consequences when not applied carefully. If you want to get people not to do something, don't tell them that lots of their peers are doing it.
- Rather than making the private public, preventing a behavior requires the opposite: making the public private. Making others' behavior less observable.
- Psychologist Bob Cialdini and colleagues wanted to decrease the number of people who stole petrified wood from Arizona's Petrified Forest National Park. So they posted signs around the park that tried different strategies. One asked people not to take the wood because "many past visitors have removed petrified wood from the Park, changing the natural state of the Petrified Forest" But by providing social proof that others were stealing, the message had a perverse effect, almost doubling the number of people taking wood!
- Highlighting what people should do was much more effective. Over a different set of trails they tried a different sign that stated, "Please don't remove the petrified wood from the Park, in order to preserve the natural state of the Petrified Forest." By focusing on the positive effects of not taking the wood, rather than on what others were doing, the park service was able to reduce theft.
- But as we discussed, the phrase "Monkey see, monkey do captures more than just our tendency to follow others. If people can't see what others are doing, they can't imitate them. So to get our products and ideas to become popular we need to make them) more publicly observable. For Apple this was as easy as flipping its logo. By cleverly leveraging moustaches, Movember drew huge attention and donations for men's cancer research.

## 5. Practical value

- He took unshucked ears of corn and tossed them in a microwave. Four minutes an ear. Once they were done, he took a kitchen knife and cut a half inch or so off the bottom. Then he grabbed the

husk at the top of the corn, gave it a quick couple of shakes, and out popped the ear of corn. Clean as a whistle. No silk.

- The answer is simple. People like to pass along practical, useful information. News others can use.
- When writer and Editor William Buckley Jr. was asked which single book he would take with him to desert island, his reply was straightforward: a book on shipbuilding.
- Offering practical value helps make things contagious.
- The theory is amazingly rich, but at its core, it's based on a very basic idea. The way people actually make decisions often violates standard economic assumptions about how they should make decisions.
- Sound familiar? It should. Most infomercials use this technique to make whatever they are offering seem like a great deal. By mentioning \$100 or \$200 as the price you might expect to pay, the infomercial sets a high reference point, making the final price of \$39.99 seem like a steal.
- Reference points also work with quantities.
  - But wait, there's more! If you call now, we'll throw in a second set Free.
- To test this possibility, Anderson and Simester created two different versions of the catalog and mailed each to more than fifty thousand people. In one version some of the products (let's call them dresses) were marked with signs that said "Pre-Season SALE." In the other version the dresses were not marked as on sale. Sure enough, marking those items as on sale increased demand. By more than 50 percent. The kicker? The prices of the dresses were the same in both versions of the catalog. So using the word "sale" beside a price increased sales even though the price itself stayed the same.
- At the store where you expect to buy it, you find that the price is \$35. A clerk informs you that the same item is available at another branch of the same store for only \$25. The store is a twenty-minute drive away and the clerk assures you that they have what you want there. What would you do? Would you buy the clock radio at the first store or drive to the second store? If you're like most people, you're probably willing to go to the other store. After all, it's only a short drive away and you save almost 30 percent on the radio. It seems like a no-brainer. But consider a similar example. Imagine you are buying a new television. At the store where you expect to buy it, you find that the price is \$650. A clerk informs you that the same item is available at another branch of the same store for only \$640. The store is a twenty-minute drive away and the clerk assures you that they have what you want there. What would you do in this situation? Would you be willing to drive twenty minutes to save \$10 on the television? If you're like most people, this time around you probably said no. Why drive twenty minutes to save a few bucks on a TV? You'd probably spend more on gas than what you'd save on the product. In fact, when I gave each scenario to one hundred different people, 87 percent said they'd buy the television at the first store while only 17 percent said the same for the clock radio. But if you think about it, these two scenarios are essentially the same. They're both about driving twenty minutes to save \$10. So people should have been equally willing to take the drive in each scenario. Except they weren't. While almost everyone is willing to endure the drive for the cheaper clock radio, almost no one is willing to do it when buying a TV. Why? Diminishing sensitivity reflects the idea that the same change has a smaller impact the farther it is from the reference point

- Another factor that affects whether deals seem valuable is their availability. Somewhat counterintuitive making promotions more restrictive can actually make them more effective.
- “Wow, if I can only get one of these, it must mean that the deal is so good that the store is worried about running out of them. Better get one fast!” Indeed, research finds that quantity purchase limits increase sales by more than 50 percent.
- For things like laptops or other big-ticket items, framing price reductions in dollar terms (rather than percentage terms) makes them seem like a better offer. The laptop seems like a better deal when it is \$200 off rather than 10 percent off a simple way to figure out which discount frame seems larger is by using something called the Rule of 100. If the product’s price is less than \$100, the Rule of 100 says that percentage discounts will seem larger. For a \$30 T-shirt or a \$15 entrée, even a \$3 discount is still a relatively small number, but percentagewise (10 percent or 20 percent), that same discount looks much bigger. If the product’s price is more than \$100, the opposite is true numerical discounts will seem larger. Take a \$750 vacation package or the \$2,000 laptop. While a 10 percent discount may seem like a relatively small number, it immediately seems much bigger when translated into dollars (\$75 or \$200).
- **The problem** with this assumption, though, is that just because people can share with more people doesn’t mean they will. In fact, narrower content may actually be more likely to be shared because it reminds people of a specific friend or family member and makes them feel compelled to pass it along.
- So while broadly relevant content could be shared more, content that is obviously relevant to a narrow audience may actually be more viral.
- But finding Practical Value isn’t hard. Almost every product or idea imaginable has something useful about it. Whether it saves people money, makes them happier, improves health, or saves them time, all of these things are news you can use. So thinking about why people gravitate to our product or idea in the first place will give us a good sense of the underlying practical value.

## 6. Stories

- The rest of the Greek army sailed back under the cover of darkness and soon joined them, easily walking through the very gates they had fruitlessly assaulted for so many years. The city was able to stand a decade of battle, but it could not withstand an attack from within
- That’s because people don’t think in terms of information. They think in terms of narratives.
- People are so used to telling stories that they create narratives even when they don’t actually need to. Take online review. They’re supposed to be about product features. How well a new digital camera worked and whether the zoom is as good as the company suggests. But this mostly informational content often ends up being embedded in a background narrative.
  - My son just turned eight so we were planning our first trip to Disney World last July. We needed a digital camera to capture the experiences so bought this one because my friend recommended it. The zoom was great. We could easily get sharp pictures of Cinderella’s Castle even from far away.
  - We’re so used to telling stories that we do it even when a simple rating or opinion would have sufficed.
- But when the wolf tries the same thing at the third pig’s house, it doesn’t work. He huffs and he puffs but the wolf can’t destroy the third pig’s house because it’s made of bricks. And that’s the

moral of the story. Effort pays off Take the time to do something right. You might not have as much fun right away, but you'll find that it's worth it in the end.

- Second, we're so caught up in the drama of what happened to so-and-so that we don't have the cognitive resources to disagree. We're so engaged in following the narrative that we don't have the energy to question what is being said. So in the end, we're much more likely to be persuaded.
- And that is the magic of stories. Information travels under the guise of what seems like idle chatter.
- You are now gazing at a snapshot of a supermodel. As the camera pans backward, you can see that the image has been placed on a billboard for a makeup campaign. The screen fades to black, and small words appear in white writing. "No wonder our perception of beauty is distorted." Wow. This is a powerful clip. A great reminder of all that) really goes on behind the scenes in the beauty industry. But in addition to being a great conversation piece, it's also a clever Trojan horse for Dove products.
- "Evolution" was widely shared because Dove latched onto something people already wanted to talk about: unrealistic beauty norms. It's a highly emotional issue, but something so controversial that people might have been afraid to bring up otherwise.
- These are all good reasons to consider Bensimhon's belly flop, well, a flop. But I'd like to add another one to the list. The stunt had nothing to do with the product it was trying to promote
- When trying to generate word of mouth, many people forget one important detail. They focus so much on getting people to that they ignore the part that really matters: what people are talking about.
- When it's woven so deeply into the narrative that people can't tell the story without mentioning it.
- The same can be said for Blendtec's Will It Blend? Campaign. It's impossible to tell the story of the clips where the blender tears through an iPhone without talking about a blender. And without recognizing that the Blendtec blender in the videos must extremely tough—so strong that it can blend almost anything. This is exactly what Blendtec wants to communicate.
- Allport and Postman then looked at which story c details persisted along the transmission chain. They found that the amount of information shared dropped dramatically each time the rumor was shared. Around 70 percent of the story details were lost in the first five to six transmissions. But the stories didn't just become shorter: they were re also sharpened around the main point or key details. Across dozens of transmission chains there were common patterns. Certain details were consistently left out and certain details were consistently retained. In the story about the subway car the first person telling the story mentioned all the details. They talked about how the subway car seemed to be an Eighth Avenue Express, how it was going past Dyckman Street, and how there were a number of people on it, two of them arguing.
- But as the story was passed on down the telephone line, many of the unimportant details got stripped out. People stopped talking about what type of subway it was or where it was traveling and instead focused on the argument. The fact that one person was pointing at the other and brandishing a knife. Just as in the detective story, people mentioned the critical details and left out the extraneous ones.
- If you want to craft contagious content, try to build your own Trojan horse. The make sure you think about valuable virality. Make sure the information you want people to remember and transmit is critical to the narrative. Sure, you can make your. Narrative funny, surprising, or

entertaining. But if people don't connect the content back to you, it's not going to help you very much. Even if it goes viral.

## Epilogue

- Today, 80 percent of manicurists in California are Vietnamese Americans. Nationwide the number is greater than 40 percent. Vietnamese nail salons became contagious.
- Other immigrant groups have cornered similar niches. Estimates suggest that Cambodian Americans own approximately 80 percent of the doughnut shops in Los Angeles, and that Koreans own 65 percent of the dry cleaners in New York City. In the 1850s, 60 percent of the liquor stores in Boston were run by Irishmen. In the early 1900s, Jews produced 85 percent of men's clothes. The list goes on.
- First, any product, idea, or behavior can be contagious. We've talked about blenders (Will It Blend?), bars (Please Don't Tell), and breakfast cereals (Cheerios). "Naturally" exciting products, like discount shopping (Rue La La) and high-end restaurants (Barclay Prime's hundred-dollar cheesesteak) and less traditionally buzzworthy goods like com (Ken Craig's "Clean Ears Everytime") and online search (Google's "Parisian Love"). Products (iPod's white headphones) and services (Hotmail) but also nonprofits (Movember and Livestrong bands), health behaviors ("Man Drinks Fat"), and whole industries (Vietnamese nail salons). Even soap (Dove's "Evolution"). Social influence helps all sorts of products and ideas catch on.
- Y. Describing why a small handful of cool or connected people (so-called influential's) are not as important to social epidemics as we might think, sociologist Duncan Watts makes a nice comparison to forest fires. Some forest fires are bigger than others. But no one would claim that the size of the fire depends on the exceptional nature of the initial spark. Big forest fires aren't caused by big sparks. Lots of individual trees have to catch fire and carry the flames.
- And that's where we get to the third point: certain characteristics make products and ideas more likely to be talked about and shared. You might have thought it was just random why something's catch on, that certain products and ideas just got lucky.
- Social Currency – we share things that make us look good.
- Triggers – top of mind, to both tongue.
- Emotion – and we care, we share.
- Public – build to show, to grow.
- Practical value – news you can use.
- Stories – information travels under the guise of idle chatter.
- If you want to apply this framework, is a checklist you can use to see how well your product or idea is doing on the six different It STEPPS. Follow these six key STEPPS, or even just a few of them, and you can harness social influence and word of mouth to get any product or idea to catch on.
- Social Currency –Does talking about your product or idea make people look good? Can you find the inner remarkability? Leverage game mechanics? Make people feel like insiders?
- Triggers –Consider the context. What cues make people think about your product or idea? How can you grow the habitat and make it come to mind more often?
- Emotion –Focus on feelings. Does talking about your product or idea generate emotion? How can you kindle the fire?

- Public –Does your product or idea advertise itself? Can people see when others are using it? If not, how can you make the private public? Can you create behavioral residue that sticks around even after people use it?
- Practical Value –Does talking about your product or idea help people help others? How can you highlight incredible value, packaging your knowledge and expertise into useful information others will want to disseminate?
- Stories –What is your Trojan Horse? Is your product or idea embedded in a broader narrative that people want to share? Is the story not only viral, but also valuable?