



Book

Contagious

Why Things Catch On

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Provoke buzz about your product or idea by generating word of mouth (and not just tweets).

Recommendation

If you want your product, service or cause to become the talk of the town – or the talk of the Internet – don't rely on advertising. People trust their friends' and acquaintances' opinions far more than paid promotions. The challenge is getting your offering on the tip of everyone's tongue. Marketer Jonah Berger explains why some topics blaze their way around the world while others are ignored. His solutions go beyond social media; as he says, Twitter, Tumblr and Facebook are mere tools. If you can forgive him for inventing unnecessary extra jargon (like "inner remarkability"), Berger will show you how to turn your product or cause into a topic of public conversation, a subject that everyone wants to discuss. *getAbstract* thinks this entertaining take on fueling the buzz will intrigue marketers, advertisers and sociologists alike.

In this summary, you will learn

- What factors cause people to talk about and talk up products, ideas and services
- What six steps you can take to make your product, cause or idea catch on
- How you can narrate stories that cause people to want spread the word about your product

Take-Aways

- To promote your product, service or idea, generate "social contagion" – voluntary, widespread word of mouth.
- Every day, people have many conversations about products and brands, 93% of which happen offline.
- Six "principles of contagion" affect whether people talk about your product:
- First, use "social currency" by making people feel influential when they discuss it.
- Second, remind people of your product, service, cause or idea with "triggers." These hints are more effective when they are familiar.
- Third, "emotion," whether positive or negative, can incite people to action.
- Fourth, go "public"; make sure your activities and products are highly visible.

- Fifth, provide information of “practical value” to prompt people to spread the word.
- Sixth, “stories” are the best and most effective way to convey information, because people think in narratives.
- Apply these principles to promote almost any product or endeavor at a low cost.

Summary

“Sharing extraordinary, novel, or entertaining stories or ads makes people seem more extraordinary, novel and entertaining.”

Hot or Not?

When a product, idea or topic becomes the newest hot talking point, it has gained “social contagion”; this is a good thing, and it can happen spontaneously. For example, a new house of worship can naturally experience a boom of interest within a community, or a pressing political cause can inspire people to get involved. But if you’re a marketer seeking ways to make your product, service or idea catch on, that fire can be much harder to ignite. Products can become trendy if they are superior to their competitors, if they cost less, or if their ads are more clever and effective. But those elements alone can’t explain why some ideas and items become contagious and others don’t.

Word of mouth – that magic surge of communication and buzz that happens when people talk with their friends, family and associates about products or brands – provides much more effective promotion than even the best or most expensive advertisement. Social influence is more convincing than a paid testimonial and it benefits from being more targeted. Usually, folks who discover a product and like it will tell other people who they think will appreciate it.

“Virality is most valuable when the brand or product benefit is integral to the story – when it’s woven so deeply into the narrative that people can’t tell the story without mentioning it.”

Word of mouth is ubiquitous and affordable: You don’t even need a computer or web connection to participate. Since 93% of word of mouth actually happens offline, don’t assume that using social media is an end unto itself. “Facebook and Twitter are technologies, not strategies.”

Your goal is to develop “contagious content” – viral ideas and topics that proliferate no matter who distributes them. You must understand why people talk about ideas, products or causes and how to draw that conversation to your product. To do so, put the following six “principles of contagiousness” (which follow the acronym “STEPPS”) into action:

1. “Social Currency”

A product, service, cause or idea becomes social currency when talking about it makes people feel important or knowledgeable. The desire to scope out some great new restaurant before everyone else discovers it is a good example. Currency can apply to interesting, fun facts, too, if they possess “inner remarkability,” a quality that prompts consumers to share information that they believe reflects well on them.

“People talk about Cheerios more than Disney World. The reason? Triggers.”

Think about the ways in which your product may possess inner remarkability. What aspect or feature distinguishes it from the competition? How can you break “a pattern people have come to expect?” JetBlue, for example, offers spacious seating, a variety of snacks and individual video screens in an effort to provide perks that flyers don’t expect but will certainly remember.

Engage your customers or clients in a game, such as a mileage program, to keep them coming back. “Game mechanics” intrigue customers and inspire them to announce their winnings to friends who might then also become your clients. Accumulating frequent-flier miles or flashing an exclusive credit card earned with

“By acting as reminders, triggers not only get people talking, they keep them talking. Top of mind means tip of tongue.”

“Triggers are like little environmental reminders for related concepts and ideas.”

“Just like inspiring things, or those that make us angry, funny content is shared because amusement is a high-arousal emotion.”

“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.”

points makes customers feel special; such games and competitions carry social currency. Customers will take to the web to discuss their tactics and victories. Every conversation they have further promotes your product.

2. “Triggers”

Triggers remind people about products, services or ideas and prompt conversation about them. You may think that consumers would talk more about, say, an exciting theme park than about a breakfast cereal, but no. Folks eat breakfast every day; they go to theme parks only now and then. Your product might be familiar or unexciting, but consumers will still discuss it and want to hear what others have to say.

People talk about products, brands and organizations frequently – on average, more than 16 times daily. Given that behavior, how do certain products end up being hotly discussed? To find out, marketers must dig deep and research what happens when word-of-mouth conversations take place. Do they occur only immediately after a trigger, or do they continue on an enduring basis? “Immediate word of mouth” happens when you use a product or have a particular experience. “Ongoing word of mouth” ensues over time. Using a product may generate immediate word of mouth, but that won’t necessarily inspire the desirable ongoing buzz.

Triggers can arise unexpectedly, often in the environment surrounding your product or idea. When researchers asked voters to approve a motion to raise their sales tax from 5.0% to 5.6% to support local schools, participants were more likely to approve it if their polling station was in a public school. Such associations are the most potent tool in breeding word of mouth. Familiarity helps. For instance, Budweiser’s “Wassup?” campaign was a huge success because so many people adopted the expression, a slurred version of “What’s up?” Sales of Kit Kat chocolate wafer bars rose when an ad paired Kit Kats with a cup of coffee. To evaluate the potential effectiveness of a trigger, consider these factors:

- How often does the trigger happen?
- How strong is the link between the trigger and your product?
- Is the trigger part of your product’s normal milieu?
- What is your geographic location? For example, an innovative cheesesteak campaign might not succeed outside Philadelphia.
- What time of year is it? Because of Halloween, orange-colored products sell better in October than in December.

3. “Emotion”

People talk about subjects that stir their feelings. Topics go viral when they strike a chord and, subsequently, when people discuss them face-to-face or via social media. For example, a scientific photograph of a cough published in *The New York Times* became one of the most popular pieces the newspaper ever published in terms of how often readers forwarded it via email. People instinctively share information they find amazing or awesome.

A variety of emotions can cause people to push a topic to viral status. While amazement and awe are positive emotions, negative emotions such as anger and anxiety also motivate people to talk. A “high-arousal” emotion such as amusement provides an important impetus, but paradoxically feeling happy (or sad, for that matter) tends to dampen the impulse to share. While advertisers generally try not to evoke negative feelings, in certain instances, negative emotions can be effective – for example, in medical messages such as campaigns that encourage people to quit smoking. Whatever type of feeling you evoke, emotions usually inspire action.

“The mere fact that something isn’t readily available can make people value it more and tell others to capitalize on the social currency of knowing about it or having it.”

“It doesn’t require a costly ad agency or millions of dollars in focus groups to get people to feel emotion.”

“Making something more observable makes it easier to imitate.”

“Observability has a huge impact on whether products and ideas catch on.”

“Almost every product or idea imaginable has

4. “Public”

This principle concerns “observability.” People who are apt to follow others’ recommendations and tastes do so more frequently when others’ preferences are visible. Steve Jobs understood this theory. He decided that the logo on an Apple laptop should not face the user, but should face the people around the user. That visibility spurred non-Apple users to consider buying Apple when they saw the logo. In psychology, this phenomenon is called “social proof.” People are inundated with information. They seek out others’ choices to guide them when they make decisions. To achieve high observability:

- **“Make the private public”** – Turn your cause into an item or event that catches people’s attention and inspires dialogue. For instance, a prostate cancer organization asks clean-shaven men to grow mustaches every November to increase awareness.
- **“Design ideas that advertise themselves”** – Incorporate a commercial into your brand. Hotmail added a tagline touting its services to every email message.
- **Employ “behavioral residue”** – Choose a campaign or tactic with a long shelf life. The Livestrong Foundation decided that bracelets would create longer-lasting cancer awareness than a single-day bike race featuring Lance Armstrong. Even the negative publicity Armstrong received for doping has not turned the public away from the foundation or its famous bracelets. The foundation showed marketing savvy by emphasizing that its spokesman’s behavior had not compromised its mission to fight cancer. This provided another narrative in Livestrong’s already potent arsenal of stories.

When you want to change negative behavior, you incur certain risks by trying to make the private public. The “Just Say No” antidrug campaign failed because it raised young people’s awareness that other teens were using drugs. This resulted in peer pressure and offered social proof of peer drug use. To avoid this unintended consequence if you campaign against a harmful behavior, emphasize a positive replacement, something beneficial your listeners could do instead.

5. “Practical Value”

Information with practical applicability spreads easily by word of mouth because people enjoy helping their friends. Offer them “news others can use.” This practical information can be simple tips, such as cooking advice, and can often involve ways to determine whether a price is “a good deal.” When individuals judge bargains, they work from a mental “reference point.” For example, senior citizens who remember when movie tickets cost under \$1 are less tolerant of today’s prices than teens who grew up buying movie tickets that cost more than \$10. Retailers know that customers rely on reference points, so merchants frequently post a nonsale price next to a discounted price in their advertising to benefit from that contrast.

“Diminishing sensitivity” also can influence whether a customer perceives a good deal. A discount on an inexpensive item seems more impressive than the same discount on a pricey item. Similarly, on lower-priced items, discounts stated in percentages appear more advantageous, while on big-ticket items, discounts stated in dollars work better. This is called the “Rule of 100”: If your product sells for less than \$100, state your sale price in terms of the percentage reduction. If it’s more than \$100, discount the price in dollars. Both tactics will encourage people to buy your product and to tell their friends about it.

6. “Stories”

To get consumers to notice and talk about your product, service or cause, put it in a story. Stories capture individuals’ interest and influence listeners more than advertising. When communicating naturally, people don’t exchange data as much as they share tales. For example, if you find a great bargain, you will probably describe your entire consumer experience when you recommend the deal to your friends. That’s because people tend to “think in terms of narratives.” People

something useful about it.”

readily recall stories, and those who hear interesting narratives rarely attempt to contradict them, though that is often a person’s instinctive reaction to assertions made in paid marketing campaigns.

When you create a story to increase interest in your product, make sure it’s logical. For example, the makers of Dove skin products benefited from a video that showed how unrealistic professional models look when they are costumed, made up, coiffed and airbrushed. The video underscored a preference for natural, clean skin. Strive to give your product, service or idea “valuable virality” – that is, a core significance that generates narrative meaning.

“People don’t think in terms of information. They think in terms of narratives. But while people focus on the story itself, information comes along for the ride.”

Stories should be unadorned. As people transmit stories to one another, they tend to omit superfluous details, retain the vital ones and put a heightened spin on them. Make your stories amusing and creative. Be sure your listeners can grasp them and associate them with you.

You can put the six STEPPS to work for your product, service, cause or idea without spending a lot of money or hiring the world’s best ad agency. If your brand makes potential consumers feel important, appears frequently in their environments, evokes feelings, is clearly visible, is useful and helpful, and carries a good story, it will become contagious.

About the Author

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