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Book Review: The Tipping Point

by Meghan Wright

Introduction

The Tipping Point by Malcom Gladwell (2000) explains the factors that influence how messages, products, and ideas are spread, and what characteristics help them reach the tipping point of extreme popularity. Gladwell refers to these factors as “agents of change” (p. 19), and identifies three specific “Principles of Epidemics” (p. 9), which he refers to as The Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context. These factors powerfully explain how tipping points are reached based on the people who spread them, the characteristics of the idea, message, or product, and the conditions and environment in which they occur. He supports these claims by describing the three principles in the context of a variety of historical trends, personal stories, and research studies, which makes the book relatable and helps the reader understand these abstract concepts in different situations. Gladwell began as a journalist for *The Washington Post* and *The New Yorker*, with a background in history. He wrote an article on social trends in 1996, which later expanded to *The Tipping Point*.

Summary

Gladwell argues that trends do not simply appear, but rather have to spread and become popular because of different influences. He begs the question of what is important to make messages, products, or ideas more contagious, and to reach as many people as possible. He introduces the importance of the role each of the three factors—the Law of Few, the Stickiness Factor, and the Power of Context—plays in launching trends. He explains that a certain type of person

or small group is important to spread a message, product, or idea the message, product, or idea must be memorable, also known as sticky, and the environment or context must be right in order for popularity to be achieved.

He structures the book by thoroughly analyzing and dissecting each factor, by identifying important characteristics, and how they help ideas, messages, or products reach the tipping point. To support these claims in context, he uses personal examples, research studies, and historical trends such as Hush Puppies Shoes, sexually transmitted disease, violent crime, Airwalk Shoes, Paul Revere’s ride, Sesame Street and Blue’s Clues, suicide and cigarette use, as well as how a women’s novel became a best seller, to exemplify these factors in real life contexts. He concludes with an example of how a combination of minor shifts in all three factors helped spread awareness of breast cancer in the African American population.

Evaluation/Analysis

The importance and characteristic of each of the three identified factors which cause messages, ideas, or products to reach the tipping point, are carefully and critically analyzed and demonstrated in appropriate contexts and examples. *The Law of the Few* describes the “nature of the messenger” (p. 92), and describes how messengers cause trends to spread, based on certain qualities of a person (Gladwell, 2000). To help the reader understand this concept even more, he discusses these types of people and the qualities they embody. He explains certain types of people with “rare social gifts” (p. 33) who help to create trends, and then classifies these types of people into three

types: Connectors, Mavens, and Salesman. The example of Paul Revere's ride is used to exemplify that information is passed among people all the time, but certain people make the message more impactful. Gladwell clearly helps the reader understand how each of these types of people is an important piece of spreading ideas, products, or messages. Connectors represent the person who knows many people, the Maven is the person with a lot of information, and the Salesman is someone who knows how to persuade and convince others.

Connectors represent a type of person who knows a lot of people, and has a gift for bringing people together, especially those from different worlds and subcultures (Gladwell, 2000). Gladwell engages and relates to the reader by giving a personal example of the people in his life, and how a small number of people link everyone within a larger group. In another example, Gladwell (2000) identifies Roger Horchow as a Connector and explains that he has "an instinctive and natural gift for making social connections... he simply likes people, in a powerful way, and he finds patterns of acquaintanceship and interaction in which people arrange themselves" (p. 43). Oftentimes, Connectors have many weak ties, or friendly yet casual social connections, and Gladwell (2000) emphasizes the strength of weak ties. Acquaintances are more likely to know something you don't know, and the more acquaintances someone knows, the more social power they have. It is notable how Gladwell relates back to the majority of people, which helps the reader see the importance and differences in the qualities of the types of special people he describes. The majority of people tend to choose the people we want to know, and reject those who we don't; however, Connectors see the possibility in everyone. He identifies traits of Connectors, which include curiosity, energy, sociability, and self-confidence. Hush Puppies Shoes grew to exponential popularity because a

few Connectors told their connections (friends and acquaintances). The trend would have not necessarily exploded if it weren't for a certain type of person. He explains that although people who connect others in important, another piece of the puzzle are the people we rely on for information, who he identifies as Mavens.

Mavens are people who have abundant information about products, ideas, or people, and initiates discussion with consumers to become "helpers in the marketplace" (Gladwell, 2000, p. 62). The important distinction is that it is not about what information Mavens know, it is how they pass that information to others. In addition, Gladwell explains that the motivation of a Maven is not to persuade others in their own interest, but rather to educate and help others. Mavens are referred to as "information brokers" and "data banks" (2000, p. 69). Mavens work to provide the message to Connectors who then spread that message.

The last type of person is known as the Salesman, someone who has persuasive skills, especially when people are unconvinced (Gladwell, 2000). Gladwell admits that the traits of a Salesman are indefinable, but is "something powerful and contagious and irresistible that goes beyond what comes out of his mouth. It is energy, enthusiasm, its charm, its likability" (2000, p. 73). Gladwell analyzes other aspects of persuasiveness humans engage in besides words, such as non-verbal cues, physical movements, and a motor mimicry. Overall, certain kinds of people are critical in spreading information in order for the "tipping point" to be achieved.

Gladwell (2000) then goes on to describe the next factor, which is an abstract concept called Stickiness. Stickiness refers to when something is memorable, relatable, and makes an impact, which often is caused by small and critical

adjustments in how something is presented. He explains that a message, idea, or product becomes *sticky* when there are changes made to the presentation or structure. By using the examples of the children's TV shows Sesame Street and Blue's Clues, Gladwell helps the reader relate to the examples being presented to explain the concept of Stickiness. He backs up his claims by walking the reader through the qualities of each TV show, and why they were successful or not, based on keeping children's attention. He explains that the quality of the content, the presentation, and the structure are critical in helping something reach the *tipping point*, by being memorable. Blue's Clues became popular and successful because the show made small changes compared to Sesame Street such as increasing repetition, making the show simpler visually (2-D feel), having a single and repetitive story line, slowing the pace, and decreasing wordplay and humor, which helped hook children into watching, and made it more memorable (Gladwell, 2000).

The last factor that *affects* how messages, products, or ideas reach the tipping point is called the Power of Context. Following the structure of his explanations, he explains the importance of context, and then discusses this concept in various examples including the decrease of crime in New York City. Gladwell (2000) emphasizes that "epidemics are strongly influenced by their situation, the circumstances, conditions, and particulars of the environment" (p. 26). He claims that sometimes behavior is not always a result of a person, but rather of the environment. Gladwell explains that crimes were significantly reduced in New York City because of small changes in the environment, such as the clean-up of graffiti, crackdown on fare beating, and increased patrol and consequences of certain minor crimes. Gladwell (2000) again relates and reminds the reader that people are generally sensitive to changes in the environment. Gladwell

(2000) helps increase the validity of his claims by including research studies such as Darley and Batson (1973), who said that "contents of thoughts are less important in guiding actions than the immediate context of behavior" (p. 140). Gladwell (2000) also gives the example of how a book-club book, *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Wells, 1998), was launched into widespread popularity as a best seller because of the context in which it was read—by intimate small book clubs of women who spread the word. He delves deeper in how a subset of context is the size of groups (specifically less than 150 people), and how that makes a difference in reaching the tipping point. Not only does Gladwell make this claim, but he explains why that number is so critical, which is that it is the maximum number where we can have a genuine relationship, and have more in common, again relating to the reader.

After explaining each factor in depth, Gladwell gives the reader two detailed case studies on Airwalk Shoes, and teen smoking/suicide, which exemplify the concepts even more. Then, to make a final impression on the reader, Gladwell concludes by giving an example that combines all three factors into one example: spreading breast cancer awareness in the African American community by changing the context from black churches, to hair salons. He reiterates that the messenger became the stylist, someone who is typically sociable and has many acquaintances; the context was changed to a hair salon, a place where people are usually relaxed and receptive to new ideas; and the message was changed to be *stickier* and more relatable (Gladwell, 2000). This helps the reader see how each factor is independently important, yet how they are intertwined to make a message *tip*. Overall, Gladwell thoroughly discusses the importance and characteristics of these factors through the context of real life situations which helps the reader visualize and understand how they affect a product, idea, or

message, reach the “tipping point.”

Conclusion

Gladwell (2000) does a powerful and clear job of explaining the *Law of the Few*, the *Stickiness Factor*, and the *Power of Context*; abstract concepts that lie within each factor, and why they are important to *tipping* trends. He then backs up each factor with relatable examples to show the reader how and why that factor caused a certain trend to become popular. Especially notable is how he looks at the *big picture*, how he helps the reader reflect on the explanations through examples we are familiar with, and discusses every aspect of tipping trends, not simply the traits or skills people possess, and introduces less obvious factors such as stickiness and context. Throughout the entire book, he constantly summarizes and reminds the reader of the previously described factors, what makes them different, and how they all work together to help an idea, message, or product reach the *tipping point*. He frequently emphasizes how “with the slightest push, in the right place, by the right people, it [a message] can be tipped” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 245). *The Tipping Point* is a book that helps the reader understand these partially abstract factors within relatable contexts.

References

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