

Technology Journal --- Books: Epidemics Give Clues to Technology

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

For something to reach a tipping point it needs to start with someone who is mostly likely to be a combination of at least two of these exemplars. Paul Revere, who spread the news that the British were coming across Massachusetts, was a maven who found out about the British plans and a connector who told everyone. On the night of his famous ride, another man called William Dawes set out from Boston to spread the word but had little impact. Revere went down in history as the man who started the American Revolution; Dawes barely gets a mention. The reason, according to Mr. [Malcolm Gladwell], is that Revere was a connector, a gregarious man who loved to be at the center of events and who had friends across the region. He linked the inchoate groups together, and when he came riding through, people knew and believed him. Dawes didn't know anybody along the route he took, and his warnings came to nothing.

Finally, Mr. Gladwell's Power of Context rule says context makes all the difference. To illustrate this, Mr. Gladwell uses the now well-known idea of "broken windows" crime enforcement, which says if police stop petty crime such as graffiti, the rates of serious crime will fall. When this method was used in New York, there was an enormous decline in crime, making it one of the safest cities in the U.S. Mend broken windows and clean up graffiti and you remove the signals that start crime in the first place. Context is also about groups, which have a vital impact on behavior and the spread of ideas. Many acts that appear individual, such as suicide, are really affected by group behavior.

FULL TEXT

THE TIPPING POINT: HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE

by Malcolm Gladwell

(Little, Brown, \$24.95)

Dot-com advertising already has become white noise. The ads for i-this and e-that leave no impression at all. Indeed, almost none of the names or ideas stick in my mind longer than 30 seconds. The only dot-com ad that has had the slightest impact on me recently was one for andylau.com I spotted on the side of a Hong Kong bus. That ad registered only because I thought the Cantopop crooner's site was the place on the Web I was least likely to visit.

The people who make the advertisements that leave us with goldfish-sized memories, indeed all people involved in Web sites, should take time out from counting their (rapidly diminishing) wealth to read "The Tipping Point," a slim, purposeful book that uses models from epidemics to explain fads. Although the book mostly examines fashion and social phenomena, it offers a way for people to reconsider many ideas about marketing, advertising and indeed the spread of technology.

Malcolm Gladwell, a staff writer for The New Yorker, has crafted a memorable and provocative book from the idea that certain slight changes in behavior among small groups can have massive consequences. For a short book, it is

ambitiously sweeping, and it is certainly the first volume to bring together discussions of the impact of Sesame Street, gonorrhea in Baltimore and patterns of suicide in Micronesia. It is a book of examples rather than solid explanations, but Mr. Gladwell shows that many aspects of our lives from fashions to best-selling books, from teenage smoking to crime waves can be better understood by looking at them as if they were diseases.

There are ideas here that could have a large impact if applied to the Web, particularly given the brutal competition that is emerging. This book may hold the key to making a site or product stand out, for that i-whatever site to leave the pack behind. As Mr. Gladwell says: "Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push -- in just the right place -- it can be tipped." The key is finding the right place.

Mr. Gladwell posits three rules that offer a way to make sense of how things reach the tipping point at which they become epidemics -- the Law of the Few, the Stickiness Factor and the Power of Context.

The Law of the Few is essentially that a small group of people have a disproportionate impact. At a basic level this is the 20/80 split -- 20% of criminals commit 80% of crimes, 20% of people spread 80% of sexually transmitted diseases. For something to take off or, in the case of diseases, be controlled, you need to reach the 20%.

How to reach the 20% is a problem that is overcome by identifying three types of people, not just the hosts and vectors of diseases, but mavens, connectors and salesmen. Mavens are people who collect knowledge, the sort of person who always knows which restaurant to go to or how to install software. Connectors are people who link disparate groups, those who collect people. Salesmen are those who can sell an idea, the sprightly, optimistic persuaders among us.

"In a social epidemic," Mr. Gladwell writes, "mavens are data banks. They provide the message. Connectors are social glue: They spread it. But there is also a select group of people -- salesmen -- with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing."

For something to reach a tipping point it needs to start with someone who is mostly likely to be a combination of at least two of these exemplars. Paul Revere, who spread the news that the British were coming across Massachusetts, was a maven who found out about the British plans and a connector who told everyone. On the night of his famous ride, another man called William Dawes set out from Boston to spread the word but had little impact. Revere went down in history as the man who started the American Revolution; Dawes barely gets a mention. The reason, according to Mr. Gladwell, is that Revere was a connector, a gregarious man who loved to be at the center of events and who had friends across the region. He linked the inchoate groups together, and when he came riding through, people knew and believed him. Dawes didn't know anybody along the route he took, and his warnings came to nothing.

Mr. Gladwell's second rule, the Stickiness Factor, says that for a message to get across, it needs to be sticky -- a concept already familiar to those who work on the Web (it's important not just to attract viewers but to keep them there, or make them stick). Small changes can make something sticky. Putting basic, even well known, information such as the location and opening times of a clinic improved tetanus immunization rates among students, but showing ever more graphically horrifying pictures of the disease had little impact. (Web designers, take note: Useful information on your opening page is more likely to keep people than all your exciting graphics.) Producers of children's shows found that certain types of repetition and pauses that allow children to answer questions themselves increase stickiness, but fast-moving, flashing images did not (pay attention here, designers of irritating banner ads).

Finally, Mr. Gladwell's Power of Context rule says context makes all the difference. To illustrate this, Mr. Gladwell uses the now well-known idea of "broken windows" crime enforcement, which says if police stop petty crime such as graffiti, the rates of serious crime will fall. When this method was used in New York, there was an enormous decline in crime, making it one of the safest cities in the U.S. Mend broken windows and clean up graffiti and you remove the signals that start crime in the first place. Context is also about groups, which have a vital impact on behavior and the spread of ideas. Many acts that appear individual, such as suicide, are really affected by group behavior.

Mr. Gladwell's book is replete with fascinating examples of tipping points and what causes them. His publisher paid him more than US\$1 million for this book, so it must have been convinced that the book would tip. Indeed the applicability of this work across so many fields -- not least technology -- means we will be hearing more of this term.

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