

Tipping Point

by Malcolm Gladwell

The Definition of a Tipping Point

The number of murders in Brownsville & East New York in 1992 was 2170. By 1997 it had dropped to 770. In the same period total crime halved.

We are gradualists at heart. We are conditioned to think that it is long-term causes which lead to this reduction in crime. These factors have been cited as reasons why crime fell by 50% in 5 years:

1. better policing strategy
2. decline of the crack trade
3. ageing population
4. gradual improvement in the economy

Yet, why did crime fall so much more in New York than in other cities, and why did it fall so quickly rather than just ebbing away gradually? Gladwell argues that crime reached a tipping point – something more dramatic and immediate than the slow action of long-term factors. If you want to spread an idea like *What Do You Propose?* through your business, or to disseminate an idea about your business into the marketplace, paying attention to the factors which take an idea beyond the 'tipping point' will pay dividends.

The 3 central ideas around tipping points:

1. Behaviour, ideas etc. are contagious – they spread just like a virus
2. Little causes have big effects
3. Epidemics (of ideas as much as diseases) rise or fall in one dramatic moment (hence the name 'tipping point')

Let's look at these 3 ideas one at a time:

1. We know behaviour and ideas are contagious – senior management set the example in business, 'infecting' more junior members of the organization with their thinking.
2. Little causes have big effects: much bigger effects than we might think. Gladwell cites the example of folding a large piece of paper in half. If you did so fifty times, how tall do you think the paper would be? Surprisingly, it would stretch from the Earth to the Sun. Similarly, taking a moment to be more concrete with an initial communication can save hours of time spent rectifying misunderstandings later. Being prepared, asking for others' ideas, getting straight to the point, using praise and recognition, are also little causes which result in startling effects.
3. Epidemics happen in one dramatic moment: a tipping point. Water is an example of this: it is liquid at 5 degrees, 10 degrees, 15 degrees... 97 degrees, 98 degrees, 99 degrees. Then something dramatic happens and it becomes steam. Fax machines provide an example from business: in 1984 Sharp sold 80,000 faxes. The business grew slowly and steadily in the following years, until 1997 when enough people had a fax for it to make sense for everyone else to have one: in that year Sharp sold 1 million faxes. Brainstorming is a business process follows this pattern: a genuinely new idea emerges not gradually, but in one dramatic moment.

There are three factors involved in the rise of social epidemics:

- The Law of the Few
- The Stickiness Factor
- The Power of Context

1. The Law of the Few

A small number of people start epidemics. For example, there is one man, called 'patient zero', who is linked to 40 of the first recorded cases of AIDS. It's not people with 5 or 6 sexual partners who spread epidemics of disease; it's those with 40 or 50.

The same applies to epidemics of ideas: socially active people start them.

There are three types of people who spread ideas, and one person can embody all three:

Connectors: Quite simply, Connectors know everyone. They have hundreds of names in their address books. They are masters of the 'weak tie': the casual acquaintance. They cross social boundaries, and connect a large number of social groups and subgroups, like the centre of a large social Venn diagram.

Gladwell quotes a study of people looking for jobs to explain the idea of 'weak ties'. In a study of several thousand people looking for a job, a researcher found that 56% got the job through a personal contact. Of the 56%, only 16.7% saw the contact regularly, 55.6% saw them occasionally, and 28% saw the contact rarely. In other words, people don't get jobs through their friends, they get them through their friends' friends, or people they don't know very well. You are likely to know about what your friends know about. What will tip the idea or business you are promoting is if you contact people on the very edge of your social circle, and they pass the idea on to others who inhabit different social worlds.

Mavens: If connectors broadcast information far and wide, mavens discover the information connectors broadcast. They are the kind of people who write to *Which? Magazine* to correct mistakes made with technical information. They know everything about what make of product to get, where to go for it, how much to pay etc. If it is to tip, mavens need to know about your idea, product or service.

Salesmen – Mavens get information, connectors broadcast it, and salesmen persuade people to act on it – to buy the product, adopt a new behaviour, and so on.

2. The Stickiness Factor

Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen spread the message, but for an epidemic to start, people need to remember the message and act on it: it must be sticky. Among others, Gladwell gives this example of stickiness:

Traditional Manhattan advertising supremos McCann Eriksson took on small town Lester Wunderman for part of the Colombia Records mail order record advertising contract. Wunderman won. While McCann ran prime-time TV advertisements, Wunderman ran ads on cheap late night TV which asked viewers to look in their TV guide for a gold box. If they found it they could get a free record from Colombia. The gold box was in a coupon to send off to join Colombia Records' mail order business. This created unprecedented profits for Colombia and won him the deal. The gold box made the campaign sticky.

Gladwell's conclusion is that we like to think it is the inherent power of our ideas which makes people remember them, but it's also the small things we change – the gold box, the map – which make our messages sticky. At Mitchell Phoenix we use an arrow pointing to a dot in a circle to stand for "get straight to the point". Several companies use advertising or the company motto to make a key message stick – HSBC are "The World's Local Bank", Stanley have the motto "Make Something Great".

3. The Power of Context

Context is crucial in the rise of epidemics – small changes in context lead to huge results, and people are much more sensitive to context than we generally realise.

Broken Windows Theory: If an area looks run-down, with broken windows, graffiti, and litter all over the pavements, people are more likely to think no-one cares about that area, and are more likely to commit crime. Mend the windows, clean up the graffiti, and there will be less crime.

The New York Subway, Gladwell recounts, was a no-go, crime-infested area in the 1980s. All sorts of initiatives had been undertaken to address underlying causes of crime on the trains, to no effect. So the new chief of transport police decided to clamp down on all the little crimes which were being committed. He waged a 6 year war on graffiti artists who painted the trains, and fare-dodgers – who didn't pay the \$1.25 it cost to ride the train. By relentlessly pursuing these two groups, the chief of transport police ensured that all other crimes on the subway also plummeted. Fare dodgers were arrested, searched for weapons, run through a computer for outstanding warrants, and the police had a field day. Once a train had been 'reclaimed' from graffiti, it was never allowed to be painted again.

This strategy of attending to small things was then rolled out across all of New York, and it became the safest city in America. This is radical idea because we tend to think of criminals as people who are almost destined to commit a crime – because of their background and psychological make-up. In fact, just like everyone else, they are a lot more susceptible to their environment than we realised. A downward epidemic – that of falling crime – was tipped by cleaning up the trains and tackling fare-dodgers.

In other words, situations affect our behaviour as much as our background. An employee who does not consider themselves to be creative, might be surprisingly imaginative in the right context. Similarly, in the appropriate environment, an executive who never listens to others might become exceedingly receptive. A strong culture of asking others for their ideas might be just the context the two hypothetical people above need to display unexpected characteristics.

The importance of groups in social epidemics

Once we're in a group we are susceptible to peer pressure, social norms and many other kinds of influence which can play a critical role in sweeping us up in the beginnings of an epidemic.

John Wesley, founder of the Methodist movement knew this. Neither a great speaker nor a great theologian, he rode around the country forming groups of believers – and he rode *everywhere*. He took being connected to individuals one stage further, and became connected to a number of groups.

Groups function well up to 150, then they become cliquey and dysfunctional. Gladwell cites a number of communities which have realised this, including Gore Associates, who make Gore Tex and many other products. They keep plant sizes at 150 people, and when they have more than that they make a new plant. This way everyone knows everyone else well enough to know what they are good at and what they can expect from them, and a kind of peer pressure to perform builds within that group. They also ensure that manufacturing, sales, finance etc are all in that 150, rather than dividing the business by technical speciality.

To create a social epidemic, it is necessary to create a large number of small movements first, which then all join together. If you would like everyone to behave in a certain way within your organization, this law would suggest that rather than go on a blanket drive to sell that idea or behaviour, you instead convince different groups in different ways within the company.

Case Study: Airwalk Trainers

In the early 1930s 259 farmers were offered a new kind of seed which was vastly superior to the traditional seed they used in terms of yield and resistance to blight. Despite its obvious advantages, take-up of the seed was slow. By 1932 only around 16 farmers were using the seed: these were the Innovators. Then a further 21 farmers began to use it: the Early Adopters. Then nearly 100 more started to use the seed: the Early Majority. Next around 80 more farmers began to use it: the Late Majority. Then, in the early 1940s the final few farmers came on board: these were the Laggards.

In business, Innovators will buy new technology before it is widespread enough to be cheap, and they will have outsourced to India before it became a truly tried and proven option. Gladwell argues that epidemics tip when the information or products the Innovators work with are *translated* (by mavens, connectors, salesmen) into something the Early Majority can accept and work with.

Airwalk trainers did just this in the 1990s. They went to Innovators of youth style in big cities in America and observed what these people liked. If they saw that enough groups liked the same thing, they knew within a year that this craze would grip the Majority, so Airwalk commissioned advertisements which centred around this new craze. Significantly, the ads toned down whatever the craze was, making it less extreme so the majority could like it. An example of this was kung fu movies, which cool kids were watching – Airwalk translated this by making a jokey advertisement with a guy doing funny kung fu fighting, because a serious kung fu spot wouldn't have interested the Majority.

Use mavens, connectors and salespeople to translate Innovators' cutting edge ideas into terms which will be understandable and palatable for the Majority.

Conclusion

Tipping Point is about accomplishing a great deal with few resources. One of Gladwell's final examples is of a nurse who wanted to publicise diabetes services and breast cancer screening in her area. She tried running groups after church, but most people went home to cook lunch. So she targeted local hairdressers, told them the message, coached them in how to bring it up and what stories to tell on the subject, and had huge success.

Rule 1: concentrate resources on connectors, mavens and salespeople.

Rule 2: human communication is not as straightforward as we might think – who would have guessed that an apparently unsophisticated advertising campaign based around finding a gold box would comprehensively outsell a much more expensive, prime-time promotion?