“Why did the rate of crime in New York drop so suddenly in the mid-1990s?”

How does an unknown novelist – such as J.K. Rowling of Harry Potter fame – end up as a bestselling author? Why is teenage smoking out of control, when everyone knows that smoking kills? What makes TV shows like Sesame Street so good at teaching kids how to read? Why did Hush Puppies, a daggy 30,000-pair-a-year accessory become a hip million-pair-a-year accessory in two years, with practically no input from the company? What makes word of mouth such a powerful marketing tool?"

In this best selling book, Malcolm Gladwell looks at why major changes in our society so often happen suddenly and unexpectedly. Ideas, information and products, often spread like outbreaks of infectious disease.

Just as a single person can start a flu epidemic, so too can a few fare jumpers and graffiti artists fuel a subway crime wave, or a few key satisfied customers fill a new restaurant.

These are examples of social epidemics, and the point where they reach their critical mass is called the Tipping Point.

The Tipping Point provides an examination of the social epidemics that surround us. You’ll discover just how impressive the results are when the tipping point is reached.

Although the book is not a “How to” manual, with a little ingenuity and thought when you apply this knowledge to your marketing strategy, you too could turn your idea, product or service, into an epidemic.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malcolm Gladwell covered business, science and medicine for the Washington Post from 1987 to 1996. He became its New York City bureau chief before moving to The New Yorker as a staff writer in 1997. He has so far written more than sixty articles for the New Yorker. It was while covering the AIDS epidemic in the early 1990s that Gladwell began to relate epidemics with social behavioural trends.

THREE RULES OF EPIDEMICS

One can compare the rise and fall of social and cultural phenomena – fashion trends, fads, and behaviours – to epidemics. They spread the way viruses and bacteria do over the populations they “infect”.

History has shown that epidemics sweep across populations in waves ebbing and flowing dramatically. What is not clearly understood is this:

Why do epidemics propagate as waves rather than in gradual evolutionary progression?

Why, for example, did the crime rate in New York City suddenly reach alarming proportions in the 80s and then just as suddenly plunge to normal levels in the early to mid 1990s? In the early years of this decade murders dropped by almost two thirds and serious felonies by half – far steeper declines than any other US city during that same period.

There were conventional explanations – the gradual improvement of the economy in the 90’s, the stemming of the drug trade, etc. None of them explain why the changes were far more radical in New York compared to other US cities, which were also subject to the same socioeconomic conditions.

All runaway successes and epidemics have tipping points. They usually start out chugging along with normal growth or incremental increases in popularity or public awareness. Then suddenly a point is reached where growth shoots off the charts. In 1987, the fax machine reached its tipping point. After four years of sales in the low hundreds of thousands per year, sales rocketed to a million a year. Critical mass was reached and suddenly everyone just had to have a fax machine. Similar trends have been observed in personal computers and mobile phones.

There are lots of examples in our world in both nature and engineering. In many cases just a small leak has compromised the structural integrity of a dam. The dam then collapses and lets out a torrential and destructive deluge. During tests of compression strength, steel beams suddenly buckle after consistently supporting a gradually increasing load without readily observable stress.

What accounts for all this? It is at the tipping point where a handful of critical conditions or factors mysteriously come together to create an epidemic. When a phenomenon “tips over” it goes from becoming evolutionary to revolutionary.

With some insight on how tipping points come about, and what causes them, you can apply the same principles to institute change in behaviour and culture in your organisation. This leads us to the three rules of epidemics:

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

THE LAW OF THE FEW

What economists call Pareto’s Principle, or the 80/20 rule – 80 percent of results are outcomes of 20 percent of a system’s elements – accounts for many ordinary phenomena. For example, 80 percent of the value of your purchases may be made from 20 percent of your suppliers; 20 percent of your customers may account for 80 percent of your profits, 80 percent of a country’s economic output may be accounted for by 20 percent of its population – you get the picture.

The people and factors behind epidemics though are far more exceptional than the 80/20 rule. A misplaced candle and a set of curtains can account for an infinitesimal proportion of a house’s mass. Together they can cause the destruction of an entire building. A handful of in-crowd trendsetters spotted wearing a certain brand of clothing can spark a fashion craze. A few hundred highly promiscuous individuals could be behind an outbreak of sexually transmitted disease affecting tens of thousands.

These elite – and most notorious – few are behind the most virulent of social epidemics. They have started ridiculous fashion crazes and bizarre behavioural fads from platform shoes and Pet Rocks to body piercing and mass suicides. They are by no means persuaders and few of them are consciously aware of the influence they have on society. However they possess traits and lead lives very much outside of the ordinary. They not only possess extraordinary social skills but also have peculiar traits and behaviours that inadvertently extend the effectiveness of such skills considerably.

There are three kinds of such exceptional people that can be most credited for the spread of social epidemics:
Connectors

Connectors are people who serve as bridges across social circles. Most of us know at least one such person. They are often a common denominator among groups of friends and acquaintances in our life. They know not only more people than the average person knows; they know more types of them. They have an ability to flit around different worlds and to overcome the biases that most of us instinctively harbour. They see possibilities in people rather than hindrances to getting to know them.

The sheer number of people they are acquainted with indicates an ability unique to Connectors – the ability to sustain weak ties with many people. Close friends live in the same world as you do and therefore are likely to know what you already know. While most of us nurture relationships with close friends, Connectors are able to nurture weak ties across a large number of acquaintances. This ensures them constant access to sources of information across different worlds – and just as wide an audience for their views and ideas. It is this bridge that allows epidemics (ideas, diseases, trends, etc) to spread across different social groups that would ordinarily have no contact.

Mavens

If Connectors are collectors of acquaintances, Mavens are brokers of knowledge. Their knowledge is highly-regarded – rightly so – for its quality. And when they dish out their opinions using this knowledge, people listen. These are the people who complain when they spot something amiss – a price claim that really isn’t so “special”, for example. They obsessively track price movements and compare deals. Most importantly, they care to share their analyses and findings with others. They do so, not for any self-serving interest, but to satisfy their own genuine desire to guide people in their own shopping decisions. They find genuine pleasure in solving other people’s issues.

Mavens play a key part in the spread of social epidemics more because of the way they pass along important information. Because their messages are so widely respected, recipients of their messages, in turn, pass them on to others. So while a Maven may not have the wide social network of a Connector, the conviction by which they express their views ensures that their message is propagated beyond their first recipients.

Salesmen

Despite the potency of their messages, Mavens are not out to persuade. Their main impetus is to help and educate. Beyond the casual influence of Connectors and Mavens, persuasion needs to fuel most social epidemics. This is where Salesmen come into the picture.

While there are people who obviously are talented Salesmen, persuasion itself works in very subtle ways. Skilled persuaders are able to employ subtle gestures and tones of voice that together mount a concerted effort directed at the target of the persuasion. Studies conducted on various acts and situations of persuasion have yielded the following implications:

1. Little things can make a big difference. The passive way that we watch the evening news for example makes us vulnerable to persuasion. Even the subtlest hint of bias could go a long way. During the 1984 presidential campaign between Ronald Reagan and Walter Mondale in the US, for example, surveys indicated a high percentage of pro-Reagan sentiment among people who watched ABC News compared to CBS and NBC. This was linked to very subtle cues detected in ABC News anchor Peter Jennings’ manner and facial expression whenever he delivered news related to the Reagan campaign. It is hardly surprising that ABC News vehemently denies this claim.

2. Non-verbal signals are very important. They convey sentiments of the speaker that words cannot express. We as a species have had our instinct for reading non-verbal cues far longer than our skill for verbal language. This makes us ‘face and gesture’ interpreters by nature and ‘verbal interpreters’ by training. A million-year-old instinct will more likely prevail over a 20,000 year-old invention like language.

3. We do not fully understand how persuasion works on us. Our mind is extremely efficient at acquiring information from its environment. This ability is so well honed by millions of years of evolution that it is virtually impossible to understand the process by which we interpret and internalise all the signals we receive.

All this implies that the process of communication between two people is a concert of harmonised signals of incredible complexity and subtlety. Such is this complexity that we are barely aware of it, if we are aware of it at all. Salesmen are adept at tweaking many elements of this symphony of words, gestures, and facial expressions to suit their ends when engaged in conversation.
THE REVIVAL OF HUSH PUPPIES

The Hush Puppies brand was in the verge of extinction in the mid-90s after its heyday in the 70s and 80s. Sales were down to 30,000 pairs a year and Wolverine, the company that manufactured them, was just about to phase them out. That was the plan before Hush Puppies executives Owen Baxter and Geoffrey Lewis were told by a New York stylist that the shoes were routinely being seen in hip clubs and bars in downtown Manhattan. Resale shops in Soho were selling them and they were being sought out even in small town family stores that were then the only other stores carrying the brand.

By 1995 things were happening. Fashion designers were calling and ordering shoes for their season collections. The basset hound – the brand’s mascot – could be seen again on store window display posters. Sales reached 430,000 pairs on that year and quadrupled the following year.

The resurgence of Hush Puppies was traced to a handful of kids who were spotted wearing them in East Village and Soho. These kids weren’t deliberately trying to promote Hush Puppies. They simply wore them because no one else would. They were part of what marketing professionals now call a “counter-culture”. Counter-culture characterises groups of people who truly define cool or hip. Unlike most of us who buy cool and hip, these people create cool and hip. The ironic thing is that they are not even aware that they do.

THE STICKINESS FACTOR

The common cold, which can be spread by a mere sneeze, is far more contagious than AIDS. However AIDS sticks around long enough to make one’s life miserable and, eventually, kills. Mass media provides advertisers with the power to reach millions, yet so much thought goes into ensuring that the message sent sticks, so it does not go in one ear and leak out the other.

Most advertisements today hardly provide any factual information about the products they hawk. Instead, these advertisements make use of compelling imagery and punchy taglines – measures that ensure maximum stickiness. Stickiness ensures that a message stays in your psyche long enough for it to be passed on by word of mouth.

The Stickiness Factor is about using a certain structure and delivery mode for your message to make it endure in peoples’ minds. The children’s show Sesame Street, for example succeeded where many other educational programs failed. Its medium of delivery – television – is notorious for the low rate of involvement by which it engages its viewers. Yet the program consistently proved its educational worth in virtually every rigorous scientific test it was subject to.

What did Sesame Street do that other children’s shows didn’t? Most of us think that the way to make our views received and understood clearly is by speaking more forcefully – by speaking louder and being repetitive. Most parents can attest to the folly of this approach.

What the founders of Sesame Street discovered was that despite TV lacking the power of interactivity, they were still able to create a message that would stick in the minds of those watching. How? By making small but important changes in how they presented different concepts they were able to make it memorable.

There are specific steps you can take to maximise the impact of your message.

1. Create a “little gold box” in your message.

In the 1970’s there was a showdown between 2 advertising agencies (McCaan’s and Wunderman) for the lucrative Columbia Records account. Not knowing who to choose Columbia records pitted these two agencies against each other giving half of their advertising market to each company.

In 13 of the 26 markets McCaan ran normal TV awareness commercials. In the other 13 Wunderman ran the famed Little Golden Box Campaign. This involved getting readers of Parade and TV Guide to look for a little gold box hidden somewhere in issues of these magazines where the ad ran. Readers who found them could then choose a record from a list and get it free.

This was one of the pioneering ad campaigns involving interactivity – getting the target audience to participate in the campaign itself. The results were outstanding for Wunderman who increased sales 80% compared to McCaans who only increased 16.9%.

Publishers Clearing House in their famous – or infamous – direct marketing campaigns include a puzzle you needed to piece together to “qualify” yourself to join their million-dollar “sweepstakes” draw. The “pieces” of this puzzle were scattered across brochures in the sweepstakes qualification pack they would post to you.

Such a tactic ensures recipients of these packs actually take the time to peruse the enclosed sales brochures instead of chucking them into the bin.

2. Provide a roadmap to your proposed action step.
In the 1960s, Howard Levanthal conducted “fear experiments” on groups of Yale students. In one experiment, two groups of students were given leaflets that described the debilitating effects of tetanus. The objective was to persuade the subjects of the study to get themselves inoculated against the disease. The leaflets given to one group contained very graphic images of tetanus victims.

A significantly higher percentage within the group that received these graphic leaflets expressed a strong intention to have themselves inoculated compared to the other group.

Fear was clearly a factor in the initial impact of the message. However, as a factor in getting some action out of the subjects, it failed miserably. Only 3 percent of the students from the high-fear group actually walked over to the campus health centre to get their vaccination. In a follow-up experiment what tipped the results over, to a dramatically improved success rate of 28 percent, was a minor addition to the leaflets.

The only addition to the leaflets was a map of the campus clearly showing the location of the health centre and the time slots available for vaccination. This gave the students clear instructions on how to fit the proposed action step into their personal agendas.

3. Set your message against familiar territory.

The creators of Sesame Street conducted numerous studies to continuously refine the stickiness of their program.

In one of these studies, they found that a child’s attention was secured when they understood at least part of the message and was lost when they were confused. This debunked conventional thinking that boredom was the enemy in children’s programming. The movie Star Wars, for example, while set in “a galaxy far, far away” – an environment very few of us can relate with – made use of classic Earthly themes to hold our attention: bar-room brawls, sword and gun duels, and World War II style dogfights (albeit set in space). Real scientifically sound science fiction rarely breaks any box office records or makes the best-seller list. Similarly, factual information as a tool for persuasion is only as good as its perceived relevance to the lives of its target audience.

SUICIDE IN MICRONESIA

Between 1955 and 1966 there was not one reported case of suicide on the entire island of Ebeye. In 1966 a boy hung himself in his cell after being taken in for stealing.

Later that year a charismatic, well known man by the name of ‘R’ killed himself in despair after not being able to choose between 2 different women, both of which he had fathered a child to.

3 days later another young man killed himself after not coming to terms with marital difficulties. 25 suicides followed over the next 12 years. Many of the people who suicided, or attempted suicide, reported seeing past victims calling to them in their dreams.

Many of the suicides also involved the same context and theme as R’s suicide – that of a romantic nature, with the victim often being torn between the choice of 2 partners.

R was, in this case, the person that tipped this epidemic over the edge. He was the salesman whose experience, unwittingly, became that of those that followed him.

A STICKIER SESAME STREET

Blues Clues today is one of the most popular children’s TV shows. It is tops in ratings and audience participation and therefore a significant improvement in educational value over Sesame Street.

Sesame Street set the standard for children’s show stickiness. Blue’s Clues raised this standard. While Sesame Street laced its episodes with humour, some of it even meant for adults, Blue’s Clues was predictable and literal. There are none of the elements that involve themes that are beyond the understanding of the average pre-schooler. Each episode was structurally the same, further eliminating a conceptual layer that a child needs to navigate with every episode.

The core theme of the program involves figuring out a puzzle surrounding Blue, an animated dog. Blue leaves behind clues that the audience discovers throughout the course of the episode with the help of Steve, the program’s host. Along the way, Steve plays games that further help the audience make sense of Blue’s trail of clues.

The creators of Blue’s Clues borrowed three of many elements used by Sesame Street and designed their program around only these three.
1. Interaction with the audience. Most of Steve’s time is spent talking directly at the camera enlisting the audience’s participation in solving an episode’s puzzle. When asking the audience a question, Steve will wait a few beats longer than one would normally wait when talking to an adult. Even for instances where the answer was obvious, Steve will play dumb, giving ample opportunity for kids to take the lead. This format increased the audience’s involvement in the show and is evident in the way kids yell out answers on cue as they watch.

2. Repetition. An episode of Blue’s Clues typically ran repetitively Monday through Friday. The cycle is repeated for a new episode the following week and so on for an entire season. The theory behind this is that kids experience episodes in a completely different way each time they watch it. This was a discovery made by the original creators of Sesame Street. With each repetition of an episode, the level of participation of the audience increases with their ability to anticipate the episode’s events. Increasing the audience’s mastery over an episode progressively increased its predicability to its audience.

This predicability, as the theory goes, is a welcome respite for kids from a world that generally confuses them.

3. Intuitive sequencing of events. Blue’s Clues is a journey of discovery for kids. Therefore it is important that every episode is designed so that kids get progressively drawn into the narrative as the story unfolds. Episodes start with the easiest concepts and introduce increasingly complex ones as the show progresses. This enables kids to gain confidence that is important for sustaining their interest early in an episode. This format makes it possible for an episode to be aired repetitively for five straight days as kids’ mastery of an episode proceeds sequentially from its early parts to its later parts.

What is extraordinary about Blue’s Clues is that it goes against the grain of what made Sesame Street such a well-loved program. Blue’s Clues is dull, witless and is repeated everyday for an entire week. Yet it gets the job done spectacularly.

**THE POWER OF CONTEXT**

As the old joke goes, shout “Hey you!” in a New York street and you get ignored, do the same in a Shanghai street and bystanders across half the block turn around to look. People respond to messages in different ways depending on the environment in which it is received. Thus an epidemic can be created or reversed simply by altering fine details of its environment.

**NEW YORK CRIME WAVE**

**Broken Windows**

Sometimes it is a small feature in the physical environment that is found to effect change. This concept is crystallised in the Broken Windows theory of noted criminologists James Q. Wilson and George Kelling. The theory says that even one broken window that remains unfixed in a neighbourhood could be an invitation to criminality.

In the example of the New York crime wave of the 1980s, graffiti had come to symbolise the “collapse of the system” as David Gunn put it at the time. Gunn was hired by the New York Transit Authority to oversee a complete overhaul of the subway system.

He considered “winning the war against graffiti” to be the fundamental key for the overall project to be successful. A huge effort was mounted to physically clean up the system. Vandalised cars were suspended from service until they were painted over. Vandal, for their part, soon realised that there was no point spending several nights “working” on a train only to have their handiwork obliterated before it saw the light of day.

The clean-up restored the dignity of the system and encouraged its patrons to take more civic responsibility for the goings on in the stations and trains. Such responsibility nurtured a greater intolerance for disorder, which replaced the previous sentiment of resignation over the formerly degenerate subway system.

**SMALL THINGS MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE**

For Police, cracking down on a seemingly harmless misdemeanour like vandalism was a tough sell. With far more serious crimes happening on trains and stations, cops considered the pursuit of these cases as not worth their time. Amazingly police found that small infractions like graffiti, fare avoidance, drunkenness and vagrancy were, in fact, collective “expressions of disorder”. The lessons were clear. Even small expressions of disorder sent encouraging signals to would-be crooks, people who would otherwise think twice about acting on their criminal tendency.

The commitment of the authorities to go after even the smallest incidences of disorder forced them to develop more efficient procedures to process them. These procedures showed that the transit authority was deadly serious about its crackdown and more hardened criminals
where either caught or chose to try their luck in a less
difficult environment.

The Power of Context gives you the understanding that
you don’t have to fix the huge problems to fix crime or
your business. The little things make all the difference

KITTY GENOVESE

It is 1964 and a young black woman by the name of Kitty
Genovese is chased, attacked three times and ultimately
stabbed to death over a 1/2 hour period while 38 of her
neighbours watched from the safety of their windows.
No one called the police. No one came to her aid.
What is now known as the ‘bystander problem’ tells us
that the predominant factor in creating ‘helping
behaviour’ is the number of witnesses in any situation.
Studies have shown that in a group environment
individuals give up their responsibility and are less likely
to take action.

That 38 people did not act even though they heard Ms
Genovese’s screams is not as concerning as the fact that
38 people did not act ‘because 38 people heard her
scream’. The irony of this tragedy is that if Kitty
Genovese had been attacked on a street with only one
bystander, she might have lived.

REVISITING THE CASE OF NEW YORK CITY
CRIME

In the early 90s it was an uncompromising focus on the
key critical factors that dramatically transformed New
York from a hellhole to the premier city that it is today.
And it is still an unrelenting focus on many of these same
factors that has sustained this change. “Maximum
intolerance” to petty crime was a philosophy that came to
characterise the entire administration of Mayor Rudy
Giuliani in New York City. It is a formula that endures to
this day.

By ensuring that the city’s social harmony is maintained
at the grassroots, its entire social fabric blossoms.

• The Power of the Few. By apprehending fare-avoiders,
vagrants, and other petty crooks, the New York Transit
Authority sent the message: we mean business. The
round-ups also yielded clues to preventing future crimes
and discouraged petty crooks from tipping over to
serious felonies.

• The Stickiness Factor. David Gunn created the
stickiness among the cops who executed his approach by
supporting them with the proper systems. Mobile police
stations and streamlined procedures made booking petty
crooks a breeze. Just how sticky it became is evident in

AIRWALK

In the mid 1980s two entrepreneurs started to market
athletic shoes to hard-core skateboarders. They named
their company Airwalk after a popular skateboarding
stunt. These shoes were supposedly designed with the
needs of skaters in mind but the shoes ultimately became
a fashion statement. They were worn more for their
coolness than for any promised technical advantage it
affords a skater. Before long, Airwalk became a stable
$13 million-a-year enterprise that sponsored professional
skateboarders and maintained a cult status with a loyal
following.

The most important milestone of the company was when
its owners hired the services of Lambesis, an advertising
company, to take its marketing campaign to the next
level. Under the guidance of Lambesis, Airwalk sales
jumped from $16 million a year in 1993 to $175 million
a year in 1996. It reached its tipping point in the
mid-1990s.

Lambesis’ helped Airwalk pioneer the image-rich,
striking and, often, off tangent type of ad that is now
standard formula for advertising “cool”. Airwalk ads
showed shoes juxtaposed against images representing
concepts that happened to be fashionable at the moment
– Tibet and the Dalai Lama, technology, The X-Files, etc.

Sadly, the end of the heady days of ‘King of Cool’ for
Airwalk began in 1997 when sales began to dip. While
there were obvious operational issues that contributed to
its decline, its image ultimately suffered from the very
popularity it enjoyed. By becoming popular and
“mainstream”, the brand was no longer “alternative”.
What’s so cool about a product that anyone can buy at J
C Penney or Foot Locker?
**TIP THEM OVER!**

Discover the critical conditions and factors you need to push your idea, product or service over the tipping point!

- **Concentrate Resources on a Few Key Areas.**
  This is a direct application of The Law of the Few. Connectors, Mavens, and Salesmen possess the immense power to start idea epidemics by word of mouth. Find these types of people within or outside your organisation and tap their potential to create radical change.

- **Make Your Message Stickier**
  Explore, test and then use a certain structure and delivery mode for your message to make it endure in peoples’ minds. Try to maximise the impact of your message by:

  1) Create a “little gold box” in your message.

  2) Provide a roadmap to your proposed action step.

  3) Set your message against familiar territory.

This is that cliché ‘think outside of the box.’ Any person or company that has succeeded in creating a social epidemic did so through testing their intuition. Lester Wunderman’s hidden box idea sounded ridiculous until it beat conventional advertising methods by over 60%.

- **Use The Power Of Context**
  Know that we are all extremely sensitive to contextual changes in our environment. What is the most fertile environment you can create for your message to take root?

  Hush Puppies became a phenomenal success because they were being worn by children in ‘cutting-edge’ parts of town. This created an environment for people to look at the shoes in a new way.

  Be careful about what you throw away or neglect to focus on. You may already be sitting on the next Hush Puppies!