

## Harnessing the Tipping Point: Getting Big Results from Small Actions

### A New Idea Takes Flight

We've seen it before: A new idea comes out of nowhere and takes off. "Why didn't I think of that?" we might ask ourselves. It happened in the late 1800s with railroads and telephones, and in the 1900s with automobiles. Today it's happening with technologies related to the Internet.

*The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell takes a close look at ideas and how they spread. This newsletter will extract a few key points from the book. Some of the author's ideas apply directly to business success.

### What is a Tipping Point?

A tipping point is the moment when everything changes at once. It's a moment of critical mass, a threshold, a boiling point.

### Tipping Point, Boiling Point

What happens to water heated to 200° Fahrenheit? Practically nothing. It's just hot water. What about 210°? Still nothing, and nothing again at 211°.

But as soon as we hit 212° Fahrenheit, something powerful happens. We get steam. Steam to drive locomotives or turbines for electricity. But if we travel one degree below 212°, all we get is hot water. The tipping point between water and steam is 212° Fahrenheit.

### Two Simple Questions

The goal of *The Tipping Point* is to answer two simple questions:

- Why is it that some ideas or behaviors or products start epidemics and others don't?
- What can we do to deliberately start and control positive epidemics of our own?

People are good at harnessing natural forces to achieve goals. We harnessed electricity to create artificial light. And now we can harness *The Tipping Point* to spread ideas.

### Ideas As Epidemics

One way to understand the proliferation of fashion trends, the transformation of unknown books into best sellers, and the phenomenon of word of mouth is to think of them as epidemics. This comparison might seem strange until we discover that both events are driven by the same math.

Three characteristics of epidemics are observed:

- Contagiousness.
- Small causes, big effects.
- A tipping point – a single point of sudden, dramatic change.

### Epidemics Are Contagious

An epidemic disease may start with one person and eventually reach thousands. On the positive side, an epidemic idea can start with one small group of people, and then spread around the globe.

Coughing is a very simple example of contagiousness. Behavioral scientists have observed that coughing is contagious. If you hear a person cough, you might feel inclined to cough yourself. Reading the word cough will cause some people to cough. Sometimes one can induce coughing in another person merely by writing the word cough.

### Small Cause, Big Effect

The math of epidemics violates common sense. People by nature want to believe that there is a direct linear relationship between cause and effect. But epidemics don't work that way. Epidemics follow the mathematical laws of geometric progression.

Take a look at the example below. If you start with a penny and double it every day, how much money do you get? "Common sense" tells us one thing, but the laws of mathematics tell us the truth. Geometric growth seems to violate common sense, and we can leverage that "violation" to our advantage.

In the world of ideas, what happens if a person with an idea tells two people about it? What if each of them shares the idea with two of their friends, and so on? The same geometric growth applies.



### Small Cause, Big Effect: Geometric Growth

One day, a friend borrows ten bucks for lunch, and you decide to offer your friend a deal. Rather than pay you back the original ten bucks, you decide to let him pay you back over the course of a month. One cent on the first day, two cents on the second day, four on the third day, and so on – doubling the amount paid each day. At the end of the month he's done.

Should your friend take the deal?  
Let's do the math and find out:

1	2	3	31
1 Penny \$0.01	2 Pennies \$0.02	4 Pennies \$0.04	2 <sup>30</sup> Pennies \$10.7 MILLION

## How to Make Ideas Tip

Now that we've observed the tipping point phenomenon, how do we make the idea work for us?

It all depends on people. Yes, the math works. But in order to make an idea tip, we must enlist the assistance of three special groups of people. Gladwell calls them connectors, mavens, and salesmen.

### Connectors Know Everybody

Connectors are people who seem to know "everybody." We all know somebody like that. Walk down the street with a connector and they always seem to run into someone they know. One famous connector played a pivotal role in the American Revolution.

### Midnight Connections

Many of us learned that Paul Revere rode through Massachusetts shouting "The British are coming" to warn early Americans of the impending British invasion. Revere's midnight ride is credited with alerting our militia early enough to defeat the British in the first battle of the American Revolution.

Few people are aware that another rider, William Dawes, made a similar ride along a different route on the same night. The difference? Virtually nobody responded to the call of Dawes, and his name has been lost to history. Why?

### Reverse the Connector

Paul Revere was a connector, and William Dawes was not. Dawes was typical of most people: acquainted with a few folks in his immediate neighborhood. When the time came for him to warn others of the attack, Dawes was stymied. Especially since the warning came in the middle of the night.

Revere, on the other hand, knew everybody. He was active in professional, religious, and social societies in the Boston area, and he had acquaintances in the surrounding towns. When Revere rode into a town, he knew which houses to go to (at midnight) and whom to awaken. The people he woke up welcomed his message because they knew his character from previous dealings. As a result, the young American colonies were alerted to the

## Tipping Points Depend on Three Key Groups of People

**Connectors:** People who know "everybody."

**Mavens:** The experts who store information.

**Salesmen:** Those who persuade others to try new products or services.

coming British attack, and we won the first battle of the Revolutionary War.

### Mavens Store Information

Mavens are storehouses of information. Mavens are experts. If you're planning to buy a flat screen TV, you seek advice from the friend that reads all about flat screen TVs just for fun. She'll give you the scoop on all the manufacturers, retailers, features, and defects.

Mavens typically won't share what they know unless they're asked. Further, they're so busy gathering and learning new information that they don't have much time to promote what they know. Mavens are linked by connectors to our third group of special people: salesmen.

### Salesmen Spread the Word

If you've ever met a person who bought a new computer and refused to shut up about it, you've met a salesman. A salesman who has discovered a new product or service that he likes feels compelled to tell others about it, regardless of personal gain. It's just in his nature.

In summary, mavens gather new information about products and services, salesmen tell the world about it, and connectors link everybody together.

### Leveraging What We Know

Marketing to everybody everywhere is very, very expensive. It's far better to leverage what we know about our three special groups of people, and help them do what they do naturally.

### Mavens Crave Information

Identify the mavens among your customers and make it easy for them to get information about your products.

Microsoft does this very well with the Microsoft Certified Partner program. For a small annual subscription fee, IT mavens receive a copy of every software package produced by Microsoft. Mavens love this. When the time comes

for an IT maven to recommend software to friends and clients, she'll go with what she knows.

### Connectors Crave Contact

Connectors, by nature, are self identifying. They may seek you out! The key is to give them something to connect to, and a reason to come back and connect again.

Apple does this very well with user groups. The company doesn't run the groups; each group is autonomous. The groups are a great place for connectors to meet each other and form alliances that will strengthen the message for your product.

### Salesmen Crave an Audience

The latest soapbox for salesmen: Blogs. Google your industry and you'll certainly see bloggers promoting their point of view.

With bloggers, make sure they have access to up to date information through your web site and other means. If your product warrants it, make video demonstrations available that the bloggers can link to or embed in their own sites.

### Conclusion

As with any effort involving people, results can never be guaranteed. However, by understanding the theory of The Tipping Point, we can certainly raise the odds of success.

### Suggested Reading

*The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, by Malcolm Gladwell.

### About the Author

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