Contagious: Why Things Catch On
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Authors’ big thought: This book is designed for people who want their products, ideas, and behaviors to spread. It will help you understand how to make your products and ideas more contagious. It provides a framework and a set of specific actionable techniques for helping information spread – for engineering stories, messages, advertisements and information so that people will share them.

Introduction: Why Things Catch On

- There are lots of examples of things that have caught on. Social epidemics are instances where products, ideas, and behaviors diffuse through a population. They start with a small set of individuals or organizations and spread, often from person to person, almost like a virus.
- While it’s easy to find examples of social contagion, it’s much harder to actually get something to catch on. Even with all the money poured into marketing and advertising, few products become popular. Most restaurants bomb, most businesses go under, and most social movements fail to gain traction.
- Why do some products, ideas, and behaviors succeed when others fail?
- One reason some products and ideas become popular is that they are just plain better.
- Another reason products catch on is attractive pricing.
- Advertising also plays a role. Consumers need to know about something before they can buy it. People tend to think that the more they spend on advertising, the more likely something will become popular.
- But although quality, price, and advertising contribute to products and ideas being successful, they don’t explain the whole story.

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Social Transmission
- Word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 percent to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions. Consequently, social influence has a huge impact on whether products, ideas, and behaviors catch on.
- Word of mouth is more effective than traditional advertising for two key reasons:
  1. First, it’s more persuasive. Ads will always argue that their products are the best, but they’re not really credible. Our friends, however, tend to tell us straight.
  2. Second, word of mouth is more targeted. Companies try to advertise in ways that allow them to reach the largest number of interested customers. Word of mouth, on the other hand, is naturally directed toward an increased audience.

Generating Word of Mouth
- The best thing about word of mouth is that it’s available to everyone. The challenge is how to do that.
- Research by the Keller Fay Group finds that only 7% of word of mouth happens online. We tend to overestimate online word of mouth because it’s easier to see.
- People are inundated with online content, so they don’t have the time to read every tweet, message or update sent their way.
- The first issue with all the hype around social media is that people tend to ignore the importance of offline word of mouth, even though offline discussions are more prevalent, and potentially even more impactful, than online ones. The second issue is that Facebook and Twitter are technologies, not strategies. Word-of-mouth marketing is effective only if people actually talk.
- Harnessing the power of word of mouth, online or offline, requires understanding why people talk and why some things get talked about and shared more than others. The psychology of sharing. The science of social transmission.

Are Some Things Just Born Word-of-Mouth Worthy?
- Virality isn’t born. It’s made.
- Even regular everyday products and ideas can generate lots of word-of-mouth if someone figures out the right way to do it. Regardless of how plain or boring a product or idea may seem, there are ways to make it contagious.

Studying Social Influence
- With an incredible array of collaborators, the author examined things like:
  o Why certain New York Times articles or YouTube videos go viral
  o Why some products get more word of mouth
  o Why certain political messages spread
  o When and why certain baby names catch on or die out
  o When negative publicity increases, versus decreases, sales

Six Principles of Contagiousness
- This book explains what makes content contagious. By “content,” Berger means stories, news, and information. Products and ideas, messages and videos. Everything from fund-raising at the local public radio station to the safe-sex messages we’re trying to teach our kids. By “contagious,” the author means likely to spread. To diffuse from person to person via word of mouth and social influence. To be talked about, shared, or imitated by consumers, coworkers, and constituents.
- After analyzing hundreds of contagious messages, products, and ideas, the author noticed that the same six “ingredients,” or principles, were often at work. Six key STEPPS, that cause things to be talked about, shared, and imitated.
Principle 1: Social Currency
- To get people talking we need to craft messages that help them achieve these desired impressions. We need to find our inner remarkability and make people feel like insiders. We need to leverage game mechanics to give people ways to achieve and provide visible symbols of status that they can show to others.

Principle 2: Triggers
- We need to design products and ideas that are frequently triggered by the environment and create new triggers by linking our products and ideas to prevalent cues in that environment. Top of mind leads to tip of tongue.

Principle 3: Emotion
- When we care we share. Some emotions increase sharing, while others actually decrease it. So we need to pick the right emotions to evoke. We need to kindle the fire. Sometimes even negative emotions may be useful.

Principle 4: Public
- Making things more observable makes them easier to imitate, which makes them more likely to be popular.

Principle 5: Practical value
- We need to highlight the incredible value of what we offer – monetarily and otherwise. And we need to package our knowledge and expertise so that people can easily pass it on.

Principle 6: Stories
- We need to build our own Trojan horses, embedding our products and ideas in stories that people want to tell. But we need to do more than just tell a great story. We need to make virality valuable. We need to make our message so integral to the narrative that people can't tell the story without it.

These principles can be compacted into an acronym. Taken together they spell STEPPS. Think of the principles as the six STEPPS to crafting contagious content. These ingredients lead ideas to get talked about and succeed.

Chapter 1. Social Currency
- To get people talking, companies and organizations need to mint social currency. Give people a way to make themselves look good while promoting their products and ideas along the way. There are three ways to do that: (1) find inner remarkability; (2) leverage game mechanics; and (3) make people feel like insiders.

Inner Remarkability
- Remarkable things are defined as unusual, extraordinary, or worthy of notice or attention. Something can be remarkable because it is novel, surprising, extreme, or just plain interesting. But the most important aspect of remarkable things is that they are worthy of remark. Worthy of mention. Learning that a ball of glass will bounce higher than a ball of rubber is just so noteworthy that you have to mention it. Remarkable things provide social currency because they make the people who talk about them seem, well, more remarkable.
- The desire for social approval is a fundamental human motivation. If we tell someone a cool Snapple fact it makes us seem more engaging. If we tell someone about a secret bar hidden inside a hot dog restaurant, it makes us seem cool. Sharing extraordinary, novel, or entertaining stories or ads makes people seem more extraordinary, novel, and entertaining. It makes them more fun to talk to, more likely to get asked to lunch, and more likely to get invited back for a second date. Not surprisingly, then, remarkable things get brought up more often.
More remarkable products like Facebook or Hollywood movies were talked about almost twice as often as less remarkable brands like Wells Fargo and Tylenol. Other research finds similar effects. More interesting tweets are shared more, and more interesting or surprising articles are more likely to make the New York Times Most E-Mailed list.

The key to finding inner remarkability is to think about what makes something interesting, surprising or novel.

One way to generate surprise is by breaking a pattern people have come to expect. It’s possible to find the inner remarkability in any product or idea by thinking about what makes that thing stand out.

**Leverage Game Mechanics**

- Game mechanics are the elements of a game, application, or program – including rules and feedback loops – that make them fun and compelling. Good game mechanics keep people engaged, motivated, and always wanting more.
- One way game mechanics motivate is internally. We all enjoy achieving things. Tangible evidence of our progress, such as solving a tough Solitaire game or advancing to the next level of Sudoku puzzles, makes us feel good. Discrete markers motivate us to work harder, especially when we get close to achieving them.
- Game mechanics also motivate us on an interpersonal level by encouraging social comparison.
- Game mechanics help generate social currency because doing well makes us look good. People love boasting about the things they’ve accomplished: their golf handicaps, how many people follow them on Twitter, or their kids’ SAT scores.
- Game mechanics boost word of mouth. People are talking because they want to show off their achievements, but along the way they talk about the brands (Delta or Twitter) or domains (golf or the SAT) where they achieved.

**Building a Good Game**

- Leveraging game mechanics requires quantifying performance. Some domains like golf handicaps and SAT scores have built-in metrics. People can easily see how they are doing and compare themselves with others without needing any help. But if a product or idea doesn’t automatically do that, it needs to be “gamified.” Metrics need to be created or recorded that let people see where they stand— for example, icons for how much they have contributed to a community message board or different colored tickets for season ticket holders.
- Leveraging game mechanics also involves helping people publicize their achievements. Great game mechanics can even create achievement out of nothing. Airlines turned loyalty into a status system.
- Many contests also involve game mechanics.
- Giving awards works on a similar principle. Recipients of awards love boasting about them— it gives them the opportunity to tell others how great they are. But along the way they have to mention who gave them the award.
- Word of mouth can also come from the voting process itself. Deciding the winner by popular vote encourages contestants to drum up support. But in telling people to vote for them, contestants also spread awareness about the product, brand, or initiative sponsoring the contest. Instead of marketing itself directly, the company uses the contest to get people who want to win to do the marketing themselves.
Make People Feel Like Insiders

- Scarcity and exclusivity help products catch on by making them seem more desirable. If something is difficult to obtain, people assume that it must be worth the effort. If something is unavailable or sold out, people often infer that lots of other people must like it, and so it must be pretty good.
- Scarcity and exclusivity boost word of mouth by making people feel like insiders. If people get something not everyone else has, it makes them feel special, unique, high status. And because of that they’ll not only like a product or service more, but tell others about it. Why? Because telling others makes them look good.

Please Don’t Tell? Well, Okay. Maybe Just One Person . . .

- How do we get people talking and make our products and ideas catch on? One way is to mint social currency. People like to make a good impression, so we need to make our products a way to achieve that. Like Blendtec’s Will It Blend? we need to find the inner remarkability. Like Foursquare or airlines with frequent flier tiers, we need to leverage game mechanics. Like Rue La La, we need to use scarcity and exclusivity to make people feel as if they’re insiders. (These were stories well told in the book).

Chapter 2. Triggers

- What most people don’t realize is that they naturally talk about products, brands, and organizations all the time. Every day, the average American engages in more than sixteen word-of-mouth episodes, separate conversations where they say something positive or negative about an organization, brand, product, or service. We suggest restaurants to coworkers, tell family members about a great sale, and recommend responsible babysitters to neighbors. American consumers mention specific brands more than 3 billion times a day. This kind of social talk is almost like breathing. It’s so basic and frequent that we don’t even realize we’re doing it.
- This is exactly why word-of-mouth marketing firms are effective. They don’t force people to say nice things about products they hate. Nor do they entice people to insert product recommendations artificially into conversations. They simply harness the fact that people already talk about and share products and services with others. Give people a product they enjoy, and they’ll be happy to spread the word.

The Difference Between Immediate and Ongoing Word of Mouth

- Some word of mouth is immediate, while some is ongoing. Imagine you’ve just gotten an e-mail about a new recycling initiative. Do you talk about it with your coworkers later that day? Mention it to your spouse that weekend? If so, you’re engaging in immediate word of mouth. This occurs when you pass on the details of an experience, or share new information you’ve acquired, soon after it occurs.
- Ongoing word of mouth, in contrast, covers the conversations you have in the weeks and months that follow. The movies you saw last month or a vacation you took last year. Both types of word of mouth are valuable, but certain types are more important for certain products or ideas. Movies depend on immediate word of mouth.
- For most products or ideas, ongoing word of mouth is also important. interesting products receive more immediate word of mouth than boring products. This reinforces what we talked about in the Social Currency chapter: interesting things are entertaining and reflect positively on the person talking about them.
- But interesting products did not sustain high levels of word-of-mouth activity over time. Interesting products didn’t get any more ongoing word of mouth than boring ones.
- At any given moment, some thoughts are more top of mind, or accessible, than others.
Some things are chronically accessible. Sports fanatics or foodies will often have those subjects top of mind. They are constantly thinking of their favorite team’s latest stats, or about ways to combine ingredients in tasty dishes. But stimuli in the surrounding environment can also determine which thoughts and ideas are top of mind.

Using a product is a strong trigger. Seeing a jar of peanut butter not only triggers us to think about peanut butter, it also makes us think about its frequent partner, jelly. Triggers are like little environmental reminders for related concepts and ideas.

Why does it matter if particular thoughts or ideas are top of mind? Because accessible thoughts and ideas lead to action.

Triggered to Talk

Some word of mouth is motivated by peoples’ desire to look good to others. Mentioning clever or entertaining things makes people seem clever and entertaining. But that isn’t the only factor that drives us to share.

What do we talk about? Whatever is top of mind is a good place to start. If something is accessible, it’s usually relevant to the situation at hand. Did you read about the new bridge construction? What did you think about the game last night?

We talk about these topics because they are going on in the surrounding environment. We saw the bulldozers on our drive in, so construction is on our mind. We bump into a friend who likes sports, so we think about the big game. Triggers boost word of mouth.

More frequently triggered products got 15 percent more word of mouth. Even mundane products like Ziploc bags and moisturizer received lots of buzz because people were triggered to think about them so frequently. People who use moisturizer often apply it at least once a day. People often use Ziploc bags after meals to wrap up leftovers. These everyday activities make those products more top of mind and, as a result, lead them to be talked about more.

So rather than just going for a catchy message, consider the context. Think about whether the message will be triggered by the everyday environments of the target audience. Going for interesting is our default tendency.

The more the desired behavior happens after a delay, the more important being triggered becomes.

Even a bad review or negative word of mouth can increase sales if it informs or reminds people that the product or idea exists.

One product that used triggers brilliantly is Kit Kat. Many things contributed to the campaign’s success. “Kit Kat and coffee” has a nice alliteration, and the idea of taking a break to have a Kit Kat fits well with the existing notion of a coffee break.

Products and ideas also have habitats, or sets of triggers that cause people to think about them.

Most products or ideas have several natural triggers. Mars bars and Mars the planet are already naturally connected. The Mars company didn’t need to do anything to create that link. Likewise, French music is a natural trigger for French wine, and the last day of the workweek is a natural trigger for Rebecca Black’s song “Friday.”

But it’s also possible to grow an idea’s habitat by creating new links to stimuli in the environment. Kit Kat wouldn’t normally be associated with coffee, but through repeated pairing.

Competitors can even be used as a trigger.

What Makes for An Effective Trigger?

Triggers can help products and ideas catch on, but some stimuli are better triggers than others.

One key factor is how frequently the stimulus occurs. Hot chocolate would also have fitted really well with Kit Kat, and the sweet beverage might have even complemented the chocolate bar’s flavor better.
than coffee. But coffee is a more effective trigger because people think about and see it much more frequently. Most people drink hot chocolate only in the winter, while coffee is consumed year-round.

- Frequency, however, must also be balanced with the strength of the link. The more things a given cue is associated with, the weaker any given association.
- Linking a product or idea with a stimulus that is already associated with many things isn’t as effective as forging a fresher, more original link.
- It is also important to pick triggers that happen near where the desired behavior is taking place.

Consider the Context

- It is very important it is to consider the context: to think about the environments of the people a message or idea is trying to trigger. Different environments contain different stimuli. Arizona is surrounded by desert. Floridians see lots of palm trees. Consequently, different triggers will be more or less effective depending on where people live.

Why Cheerios Gets More Word of Mouth Than Disney World

- Triggers help explain why Cheerios get more word of mouth than Disney World. True, Disney World is interesting and exciting. To use the language of other chapters in the book, it has high Social Currency and evokes lots of Emotion (next chapter). But the problem is that people don’t think about it very frequently. Most people don’t go to Disney World unless they have kids. Even those who do go don’t go that often. Once a year if that. And there are few triggers to remind them about the experience after the initial excitement evaporates.
- But hundreds of thousands of people eat Cheerios for breakfast every day. Still more see the bright orange boxes every time they push their shopping carts down the supermarket cereal aisle. And these triggers make Cheerios more accessible, increasing the chance that people will talk about the product.
- Triggers are the foundation of word of mouth and contagiousness. The more something is triggered, the more it will be top of mind, and the more successful it will become.
- Triggers and cues lead people to talk, choose, and use. Social Currency gets people talking, but Triggers keep them talking. Top of mind means tip of tongue.

Chapter 3: Emotion

- The reason people shared an article about coughing was emotion. When we care we share.
- Humans are social animals. As discussed in the chapter on Social Currency, people love to share opinions and information with others. And our tendency to gossip— for good or ill— shapes our relationships with friends and colleagues alike.
- The Internet has become increasingly engineered to support these natural inclinations.
- Most major news or entertainment websites take the extra step of documenting what has been passed along most frequently. Listing which articles, videos, and other content have been most viewed or shared over the past day, week, or month.
- Few people have time to seek out the best content in this ocean of information. So they start by checking out what others have shared. As a result, most-shared lists have a powerful ability to shape public discourse.
- Two reasons people might share things are that they are interesting and that they are useful.
- More interesting articles were 25 percent more likely to make the Most E-Mailed list. More useful articles were 30 percent more likely to make the list.
- It turns out that science articles frequently chronicle innovations and discoveries that evoke a particular emotion in readers: Awe.
The Power of Awe
- Awe is a complex emotion and frequently involves a sense of surprise, unexpectedness, or mystery. Indeed, as Albert Einstein himself noted, “The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead.”
- Awe-inspiring articles are 30 percent more likely to make the Most E-Mailed list.
- Some of the Web’s most viral videos also evoke awe. (e.g. Susan Boyle competing on Britain’s Got Talent).
- There are reasons to believe that experiencing any sort of emotion might encourage people to share. Talking to others often makes emotional experiences better. If we get promoted, telling others helps us celebrate. If we get fired, telling others helps us vent. Sharing emotions also helps us connect.
- Sadness had the opposite effect. Sadder articles were actually 16 percent less likely to make the Most E-Mailed list. Something about sadness was making people less likely to share.
- The most obvious difference between different emotions is their pleasantness or positivity. Awe is relatively pleasant, while sadness is unpleasant.
- Positive articles were more likely to be highly shared than negative ones. Stories about things like newcomers falling in love with New York City were, on average, 13 percent more likely to make the Most E-Mailed list than pieces that detailed things like the death of a popular zookeeper.

Kindling the Fire: The Science of Physiological Arousal
- The idea that emotions can be categorized as positive or pleasant and negative or unpleasant has been around for hundreds if not thousands of years. Even a child can tell you that happiness or excitement feels good and anxiety or sadness feels bad.
- More recently, however, psychologists have argued that emotions can also be classified based on a second dimension. That of activation, or physiological arousal.
- Arousal is a state of activation and readiness for action. The heart beats faster and blood pressure rises. Evolutionarily, it comes from our ancestors’ reptilian brains. Physiological arousal motivates a fight-or-flight response that helps organisms catch food or flee from predators.
- Some emotions, like anger and anxiety, are high-arousal. Other emotions, however, have the opposite effect.
- Rather than finding a simple matter of positive emotions increasing sharing and negative emotions decreasing it, the author found that some negative emotions, like anger or anxiety, actually increased sharing.
- Understanding arousal helps integrate the different results found so far. Anger and anxiety lead people to share because, like awe, they are high-arousal emotions. They kindle the fire, activate people, and drive them to take action. Arousal is also one reason funny things get shared.
- Low-arousal emotions, however, like sadness, decrease sharing. Contentment has the same effect.

Focus on Feelings
- Marketing messages tend to focus on information. But many times, information is enough.
- That is where emotion comes in. Rather than harping on features or facts, we need to focus on feelings; the underlying emotions that motivate people to action. Some products or ideas may seem better suited than others for evoking emotion.
- But any product or service can focus on feelings, even those that don’t possess any obvious emotional hook.
- Want people to talk about global warming and rally to change it? Don’t just point out how big the problem is or list key statistics. Figure out how to make them care. Talk about polar bears dying or how their children’s health will be affected.

**Kindling the Fire with High-Arousal Emotions**
- When trying to use emotions to drive sharing, remember to pick ones that kindle the fire: select high-arousal emotions that drive people to action.
- On the positive side, excite people or inspire them by showing them how they can make a difference. On the negative side, make people mad, not sad. Make sure the polar bear story gets them fired up.
- Simply adding more arousal to a story or ad can have a big impact on people’s willingness to share it.
- Technology has made it easier for people to organize behind a common interest or goal. By allowing people to connect quickly and easily, social media enable like-minded individuals to find one another, share information, and coordinate plans of action. These technologies are particularly useful when people either live far apart or are dealing with an issue that has delicate political or social meaning.
- Certain types of negativity may be more likely to escalate because they evoke arousal and are thus more likely to go viral. Angry tirades about bad customer service, or anxious rumors about how a new health plan may take away benefits, should be more likely to circulate than expressions of sadness or disappointment.

**Exercise Makes People Share**
- Running in place provided the perfect test. Running doesn’t evoke emotion, but it is just as physiologically arousing. It gets your heart rate up, increases blood pressure, etc. So, if arousal of any sort boosts sharing, then running in place should lead people to share things with others. Even if the things people are talking about or sharing have nothing to do with the reason they are experiencing arousal.
- Understanding that arousing situations can drive people to pass things on helps shed light on so-called oversharing, when people disclose more than they should.
- So be careful the next time you step off the treadmill, barely avoid a car accident, or experience a turbulent plane ride. Because you’ve been aroused by these experiences, you may overshare information with others in the aftermath. These ideas also suggest that one way to generate word of mouth is to find people when they are already fired up.
- The same idea holds for online content. Certain websites, news articles, or YouTube videos evoke more arousal than others.
- Ad timing also matters. Although a show may be generally arousing, a specific scene in that show may be more activating than others.
- Emotions drive people to action. They make us laugh, shout, and cry, and they make us talk, share, and buy. So rather than quoting statistics or providing information, we need to focus on feelings.
- Physiological arousal or activation drives people to talk and share. We need to get people excited or make them laugh. We need to make them angry rather than sad. Even situations where people are active can make them more likely to pass things on to others.

**Chapter 4: Public**
- Making something more *observable* makes it easier to imitate. Thus, a key factor in driving products to catch on is public visibility. If something is built to show, it’s built to grow.
- People often imitate those around them. They dress in the same styles as their friends, pick entrées preferred by other diners, and reuse hotel towels more when they think others are doing the same.
People are more likely to vote if their spouse votes, more likely to quit smoking if their friends quit, and more likely to get fat if their friends become obese. Whether making trivial choices like what brand of coffee to buy or important decisions like paying their taxes, people tend to conform to what others are doing.

- People imitate, in part, because others’ choices provide information. To help resolve our uncertainty, we often look to what other people are doing and follow that. We assume that if other people are doing something, it must be a good idea. They probably know something we don’t. Psychologists call this idea “social proof.”
- The famous phrase “Monkey see, monkey do” captures more than just the human penchant for imitation. People can imitate only when they can see what others are doing.
- Observability has a huge impact on whether products and ideas catch on. Say a clothing company introduces a new shirt style. If you see someone wearing it and decide you like it, you can go buy the same shirt, or something similar. But this is much less likely to happen with socks. This is because shirts are public and socks are private. They’re harder to see.
- Observable things are more likely to be discussed. Observability also spurs purchases and action.
- Most products, and behaviors are consumed privately. If people can’t see what others are choosing and doing, they can’t imitate them. Solving this problem requires making the private public. Generating public signals for private choices, actions, and opinions. Taking what was once an unobservable thought or behavior and transforming it into a more observable one.
- One way to make things more public is to design ideas that advertise themselves. For example, Hotmail was one of the first Web-based email services, which allowed people to access their inbox from any computer anywhere in the world.
- But the creators of Hotmail did more than just create a great product. They also cleverly leveraged observability to help their product catch on. Every e-mail sent from a Hotmail account was like a short plug for the growing brand. At the bottom was a message and link that simply said, “Get Your Private, Free E-mail from Hotmail at www.hotmail.com.” Every time current Hotmail customers sent an e-mail, they also sent prospective customers a bit of social proof— an implicit endorsement for this previously unknown service.
- Every time people use the product or service they also transmit social proof or passive approval because usage is observable.
- Large logos like Ralph Lauren or Lacoste aren’t the only way products can advertise themselves. Take Apple’s decision to make iPod headphones white. Because most devices came with black headphones, Apple’s white headphone cords stood out.
- Shapes, sounds, and a host of other distinctive characteristics can also help products advertise themselves. Pringles come in a unique tube.
- Designing products that advertise themselves is a particularly powerful strategy for small companies or organizations that don’t have a lot of resources. Even when there is no money to buy television ads or a spot in the local paper, existing customers can act as advertisements if the product advertises itself. It’s like advertising without an advertising budget.
- Behavioral residue generates social proof that sticks around even when the product is not being used or the idea is not top of mind.
- Items like the yellow Livestrong wristband provide insight into who people are and what they like. When publicly visible, these remnants facilitate imitation and provide chances for people to talk about related products or ideas.
- It’s hard to get people to vote. Not much social proof. But in the 1980s election officials came up with a nice way to make voting more observable: the “I Voted” sticker. Simple enough, but by creating behavioral residue, the sticker made the private act of voting much more public, even after people left
the polling station. It provided a ready reminder that today is the day to vote, others are doing it, and you should too.

- Behavioral residue exists for all types of products and ideas. Tiffany, Victoria’s Secret, and a host of other retailers give customers disposable shopping bags to carry their purchases home.
- Clothing retailer Lulu Lemon takes this idea one step further. Rather than make paper bags that are relatively durable, it makes shopping bags that are hard to throw away.
- Giveaways can also provide behavioral residue e.g. conference swag.
- As with many powerful tools, making things more public can have unintended consequences when not applied carefully. If you want to get people not to do something, don’t tell them that lots of their peers are doing it. E.g. Say No to Drugs.
- Rather than making the private public, preventing a behavior requires the opposite: making the public private. Making others’ behavior less observable. One way is to highlight what people should be doing instead.
- When people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate one another. We look to others for information about what is right or good to do in a given situation, and this social proof shapes everything from the products we buy to the candidates we vote for.
- The phrase “Monkey see, monkey do” captures more than just our tendency to follow others. If people can’t see what others are doing, they can’t imitate them. So to get our products and ideas to become popular we need to make them more publicly observable. For Apple, this was as easy as flipping its logo. By cleverly leveraging moustaches, Movember drew huge attention and donations for men’s cancer research. So, we need to be like Hotmail and Apple and design products that advertise themselves. We need to be like Lulu Lemon and Livestrong and create behavioral residue, discernible evidence that sticks around even after people have used our product or engaged with our ideas. We need to make the private public. If something is built to show, it’s built to grow.

Chapter 5: Practical Value

- People share practical valuable information to help others. Whether by saving a friend time or ensuring a colleague saves a couple of bucks next time he goes to the supermarket, useful information helps.
- Sharing something useful with others is a quick and easy way to help them out. Even if we’re not in the same place. Our friends see we know and care about them, we feel good for being helpful, and the sharing cements our friendship.
- If Social Currency is about information senders and how sharing makes them look, Practical Value is mostly about the information receiver. It’s about saving people time or money, or helping them have good experiences. It even reflects positively on the sharer, providing a bit of Social Currency. But at its core, sharing Practical Value is about helping others.
- When most people think about Practical Value, saving money is one of the first things that comes to mind— getting something for less than its original price or getting more of something than you usually would for the same price.
- One of the main tenets of prospect theory (developed by Kahneman and Tversky) is that people don’t evaluate things in absolute terms. They evaluate them relative to a comparison standard, or “reference point.”
- People use the price they expect to pay for something as their reference point. As an example, a grill seemed like a better deal when it was marked down from $350 to $250 rather than when it was discounted from $255 to $240, even though it was the same grill. Setting a higher reference point made the first deal seem better even though the price was higher overall.
• **Diminishing sensitivity** reflects the idea that the same change has a smaller impact the farther it is from the reference point. Diminishing sensitivity helps explain why people are willing to drive to save the money on a small item like a clock radio.
• Deals seem more appealing when they highlight incredible value. As discussed in the Social Currency chapter, the more remarkable something is, the more likely it will be discussed.
• As Prospect Theory illustrates, one key factor in highlighting incredible value is what people expect. Promotional offers that seem surprising or surpass expectations are more likely to be shared.
• Another factor that affects whether deals seem valuable is their availability. Restricting availability through scarcity and exclusivity makes things seem more valuable.
• Offers that are available for only a limited time seem more appealing because of the restriction. Just like making a product scarce, the fact that a deal won’t be around forever makes people feel that it must be a really good one.
• Quantity limits work the same way. Even restricting who has access can make a promotional offer seem better. Like restrictions on quantity or timing, the mere fact that not everyone can get access to this promotion makes it seem more valuable. This increases Practical Value, which in turn, boosts sharing.

**The Rule of 100**
• Another framing factor that impacts Practical Value is how promotional offers are expressed.
• A simple way to figure out which discount frame seems larger is by using something called the Rule of 100. If the product’s price is less than $100, the Rule of 100 says that percentage discounts will seem larger. For a $30 T-shirt or a $15 entrée, even a $3 discount is still a relatively small number. But percentagewise (10 percent or 20 percent), that same discount looks much bigger.
• If the product’s price is more than $100, the opposite is true. Numerical discounts will seem larger. Take a $750 vacation package or the $2,000 laptop. While a 10 percent discount may seem like a relatively small number, it immediately seems much bigger when translated into dollars ($75 or $200).
• So, when deciding how good a promotional offer really is, or how to frame a promotional offer to make it better, use the Rule of 100. Think about where the price falls relative to $100 and how that shifts whether absolute or relative discounts seem more attractive.

• Practical Value is more effective the easier it is for people to see.
• Useful information, then, is another form of Practical Value. Helping people do things they want to do, or encouraging them to do things they should do. Faster, better, and easier.
• In thinking about why some useful content gets shared more, a couple of points are worth noting. The first is how the information is packaged. Short lists focused around a key topic works best.
• The second key is the audience. Some stories or information have a broader audience than others. You might think that content that has a broader audience is more likely to be shared. The problem with this assumption, though, is that just because people can share with more people doesn’t mean they will. In fact, narrower content may actually be more likely to be shared because it reminds people of a specific friend or family member and makes them feel compelled to pass it along.
• While broadly relevant content could be shared more, content that is obviously relevant to a narrow audience may actually be more viral.
• The next time someone tells you about a miracle cure, or warns about the health risks of a particular food or behavior, try to verify that information independently before you pass it on. False information can spread just as quickly as the truth.
• Practical Value is about helping. This chapter discussed the mechanics of value and the psychology of deals, but it’s important to remember why people share that type of information in the first place.

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People like to help one another. We go out of our way to give advice or send others information that will make them better off. Sure, some of this may be selfish. We think we’re right and we can’t help but toss our two cents into other people’s lives. But not all of it is about us. It’s also about altruism, the inherent goodness of people. We care about others and we want to make their lives better.

Of the six principles of contagiousness that we discuss in the book, Practical Value may be the easiest to apply.

The harder part is cutting through the clutter. There are lots of good restaurants and helpful websites, so we need to make our product or idea stand out. We need to highlight incredible value and use the Rule of 100. Like Vanguard, we need to package our knowledge and expertise so that people learn about us while they pass it along. We need to make it clear why our product or idea is so useful that people just have to spread the word. News you can use.

Chapter 6: Stories

The story of the Trojan Horse has been passed on for thousands of years. Scientists and historians estimate that the battle took place around 1170 BC, but the story was not written down until many years later. For centuries, the tale was transmitted orally as an epic poem, spoken or sung to music.

The story reads like a modern-day reality show. It’s full of twists and turns that include personal vendettas, adultery, and double crosses. Through a potent mixture of drama, romance, and action, it holds listeners’ interest. But the story of the Trojan Horse also carries an underlying message: “never trust your enemies, even when they seem friendly.” In fact, it is exactly when they are making such overtures that you should be especially suspicious. So, the tale of the Trojan Horse is more than just an entertaining story. It also teaches an important lesson.

By encasing the lesson in a story, these early writers ensured that it would be passed along— and perhaps even be believed more wholeheartedly than if the lesson’s words were spoken simply and plainly. That’s because people don’t think in terms of information. They think in terms of narratives. But while people focus on the story itself, information comes along for the ride.

Narratives are inherently more engrossing than basic facts. They have a beginning, middle, and end. If people get sucked in early, they’ll stay for the conclusion. When you hear people tell a good story you hang on every word.

Lessons or morals are embedded in thousands of fairy tales, fables, and urban legends. “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” warns about the dangers of lying. “Cinderella” shows that being good to others pays off. The Three Little Pigs is about effort that pays off. Shakespeare’s plays carry valuable lessons about character and relationships, power and madness, love and war. These are complex lessons, but they are instructive nevertheless.

The ordinary stories we tell one another every day also carry information.

Stories are an important source of cultural learning that help us make sense of the world. At a high level, this learning can be about the rules and standards of a group or society. How should a good employee behave? What does it mean to be a moral person? Or on a more basic level: who’s a good mechanic who won’t overcharge? Beyond stories, think about other ways that people could acquire this information. Trial

Stories provide a quick and easy way for people to acquire lots of knowledge in a vivid and engaging fashion. One good story about a mechanic who fixed the problem without charging is worth dozens of observations and years of trial and error. Stories save time and hassle and give people the information they need in a way that’s easy to remember.

People are also less likely to argue against stories than against advertising claims. First, it’s hard to disagree with a specific thing that happened to a specific person. Second, we’re so caught up in the drama of what happened to so-and-so that we don’t have the cognitive resources to disagree. We’re
so engaged in following the narrative that we don’t have the energy to question what is being said. So, in the end, we’re much more likely to be persuaded.

• Stories thus give people an easy way to talk about products and ideas. Subway might have low-fat subs, and Lands’ End might have great customer service, but outside of triggers in a conversation, people need a reason to bring that information up. And good stories provide that reason. They provide a sort of psychological cover that allows people to talk about a product or idea without seeming like an advertisement.

• So how can we use stories to get people talking? We need to build our own Trojan Horse— a carrier narrative that people will share, while talking about our product or idea along the way.

• When trying to generate word of mouth, many people forget one important detail. They focus so much on getting people to talk that they ignore the part that really matters: what people are talking about. That’s the problem with creating content that is unrelated to the product or idea it is meant to promote. There’s a big difference between people talking about content and people talking about the company, organization, or person that created that content.

• The key, then, is to not only make something viral, but also make it valuable to the sponsoring company or organization. Not just virality but valuable virality. In trying to craft contagious content, valuable virality is critical. That means making the idea or desired benefit a key part of the narrative.

• The importance of these different types of details becomes even clearer when people retell the story. Think about the story of the Trojan Horse. It has survived for thousands of years. There is a written account of the story, but most of the details people know come from hearing someone else talk about it. But which details people remember and retell? It isn’t random. Critical details stick around, while irrelevant ones drop out.

• If you want to craft contagious content, try to build your own Trojan Horse. But make sure you think about valuable virality. Make sure the information you want people to remember and transmit is critical to the narrative. Sure, you can make your narrative funny, surprising, or entertaining. But if people don’t connect the content back to you, it’s not going to help you very much. Even if it goes viral.

• So, build a Social Currency– laden, Triggered, Emotional, Public, Practically Valuable Trojan Horse, but don’t forget to hide your message inside. Make sure your desired information is so embedded into the plot that people can’t tell the story without it.

Epilogue:

• If you want to apply this framework, here’s a checklist you can use to see how well your product or idea is doing on the six different STEPPS.

• Follow these six key STEPPS, or even just a few of them, and you can harness social influence and word of mouth to get any product or idea to catch on.

• One last note. The best part of the STEPPS framework is that anyone can use it. It doesn’t require a huge advertising budget, marketing genius, or some sort of creativity gene. Yes, the viral videos and contagious content we’ve talked about were created by particular individuals, but not all of them were famous or could boast ten thousand followers on Twitter. They relied on one or more of the six key STEPPS and this made their products and ideas more contagious.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Currency</th>
<th>Does talking about your product or idea make people look good? Can you find the inner remarkability? Leverage game mechanics? Make people feel like insiders?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Triggers</td>
<td>Consider the context. What cues make people think about your product or idea? How can you grow the habitat and make it come to mind more often?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>Focus on feelings. Does talking about your product or idea generate emotion? How can you kindle the fire?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Does your product or idea advertise itself? Can people see when others are using it? If not, how can you make the private public? Can you create behavioral residue that sticks around even after people use it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical Value</td>
<td>Does talking about your product or idea help people help others? How can you highlight incredible value, packaging your knowledge and expertise into useful information others will want to disseminate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories</td>
<td>What is your Trojan Horse? Is your product or idea embedded in a broader narrative that people want to share? Is the story not only viral, but also valuable?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Many stories in this book make it worth buying to read more:
  - Howard Wein needed a way to help a new restaurant break through the clutter, a way to raise awareness while staying true to the Barclay Prime brand. The hundred-dollar cheesesteak did just that. It not only provided a remarkable (Social Currency), surprising (Emotion) narrative (Story) but also illustrated the type of quality product that the steakhouse offered (Practical Value). And the prevalence of cheesesteaks in Philadelphia offered ready reminders for people to pass it on (Triggers). The hundred-dollar cheesesteak got people talking and helped make Barclay Prime a rousing success.
  - George Wright had almost no marketing budget. He needed a way to generate buzz about a product most people wouldn’t ordinarily talk about: a blender. By thinking about what made his product compelling and wrapping that idea in a broader narrative, he was able to generate hundreds of millions of views and boost sales. The Will It Blend? clips are amazing (Emotion) and remarkable (Social Currency). But by making the product’s benefits (Practical Value) integral to a broader narrative (Stories), the videos provided a perfect Trojan horse to get people talking about an everyday household appliance and make Blendtec catch on. Regular people with regular products and ideas. But by harnessing the psychology of word of mouth, they were able to make their products and ideas succeed.

**Recommendation:** Full of amazing stories of ideas and products that became viral i.e. likely to spread from one person to another. This book provides cutting edge science about how word of mouth and social transmission work. And how you can leverage them to make your products

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About the reviewer: Frumi Rachel Barr, MBA, PhD

Dr. Frumi Rachel Barr is truly an entrepreneur having started and run 5 entrepreneurial adventures prior to following her passion for guiding the success of CEOs and their teams to Scale Up.

Money and a plan don’t guarantee execution

Execution depends on communication, cascading priorities throughout the organization and an external guide that holds the team accountable and keeps the momentum going. Lots of companies know what to do – it’s the doing that needs an external guide. That’s what we provide. We use the best systems on the planet, Gazelles and the Rockefeller Habits, as well as software to track team initiatives and progress.

Dr. Frumi’s "Why" is to create a safe place for leaders and teams to discuss what matters most. She is known as The CEO’s Secret Weapon. Her Who: Dr. Frumi guides leaders and their teams who are under 40 and have a thirst for both discipline and learning. These creative, ambitious leaders want to grow their businesses so they have more freedom and a fabulous culture. The Gazelles system focuses on People, Strategy, Execution and Cash, using practical tools to create greater revenue and profitability, with greater collaboration and accountability.

Dr. Frumi is the author of a CEO’s Secret Weapon: How to Accelerate Success. The book was ranked top business book of 2012 by ExecRank and has a forward by her colleague Simon Sinek, international author of best-selling Start with Why.