

Finding The Few May Be The Key To Reaching The Many

Target Marketing Redefined

In his groundbreaking book, *The Tipping Point*, author Malcolm Gladwell introduces readers to the powerful notion of “social epidemics,” and presents compelling, real-world evidence that illustrates how they begin, and - more importantly - *how they spread*.

His theories have created an unexpected buzz in the business world by challenging the way companies define target markets and the methods they employ to craft and communicate marketing messages.

This article summarizes the key ideas from the book so that your company can put them into practice and tip the balance of business conditions in your favor.

What Is A Tipping Point?

Gladwell defines a tipping point as “that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.” Suddenly popular fashions, products, and music groups are all examples of socially driven epidemics that have reached their tipping points. But how did they get there? And can tipping points be induced?



From extensive research, the author poses three factors he suggests significantly contribute to social epidemics reaching their tipping points:

- **The Law of the Few:** Social epidemics are “controlled by a handful of people” with strong social connections.
- **The Stickiness Factor:** The idea, trend, or social behavior must be memorable in order to spread quickly and effectively.
- **The Power of Context:** Subtle changes in environment can make a big difference in how people act in a particular context.

To support these contentions, Gladwell presents powerful arguments backed by exacting evidence from human history. In the process, he leaves little doubt that his theories are valid and illustrates why maintaining an active awareness of these constructs can lead to enormously positive results.

But while all three of these factors are collectively crucial to reaching a tipping point, it is Gladwell’s notion of “The Law of The Few” that grabs our attention – and demands a closer look at how it relates to conventional business practices.

As such, we will focus in on this idea and examine what it means to classic target marketing.

The target audience is typically defined by factors such as age, sex, geographic location, and income. But what if those factors aren’t enough? – Furthermore, what if they’re *not relevant* to reaching the tipping point?

The Few That Lead You To The Many

In making his case for “The Law Of The Few,” Gladwell reveals the surprisingly large role a small cadre of influencers he calls *Connectors*, *Mavens*, and *Salespeople* play in reaching tipping points. Connectors are defined as “people who know lots of people, people with a special gift of bringing the world together”; Mavens are “information specialists, people we rely upon to connect us with new information”; and *Salespeople* are “people with the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing.”

He tells us that each of these players can serve to ignite a cause in their own unique way – whether it’s introducing a new product, enrolling others in a project, or getting the word out about an important issue - but first you have to identify them, then you need to create the right marketing message, and then you need to communicate that message to them in an appropriate and effective way. This is the tough part. While Gladwell provides great detail on and evidence of *The Few*, he leaves it to the reader to accept *The Law* and apply its teachings to their own situations. Perhaps it is a good time to rethink how you categorize the contacts in your PDA or email database.

The “Real” Target Audience

It is common for marketers, in developing strategies and tactics for their products and services, to identify the “target audience” and focus

communications on a mass scale on that segment of the population. The target audience is typically defined by factors such as age, sex, geographic location, and income. But what if those factors aren’t enough? – Furthermore, what if they’re not relevant to reaching the tipping point?

The “Law of the Few” tells us there is a smaller, inner circle of people *within* a larger target audience that holds the key to influencing the entire group. This means that, while identifying the target audience is important, it is critical to find those people – the Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople – within the target audience that will bring success to your marketing efforts. Whatever you call them, these are the people others look to for guidance - if they are not sold on your products or services, your chances of reaching a tipping point are slim.

And keep in mind - this concept applies as much to the internal marketing programs your company directs at its employees as it does to the external campaigns it promotes to consumers and other businesses. Gaining buy-in to a new initiative among the inner circle of employee influencers can be the difference between success or failure of that program.

One Approach Doesn’t Fit All

The key lesson *The Tipping Point* offers for marketers is that they must reconsider the entire target marketing process by thinking more about the “Few” and the influence they have over the “many.” Gladwell says that strategies grounded in “spreading the word” offer a better chance of tipping

than the “one approach fits all,” mass communications philosophy commonly practiced when promoting products and services, or even important internal corporate initiatives.

So next time you’re looking to start a social epidemic of your own, identify the Connectors, Mavens, and Salespeople within your target audience and aim your communications directly at them. With any luck, you’ll infect them with your message and they’ll take care of spreading it to the rest of the population.

[Authors’ note: *The Tipping Point, How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, Malcolm Gladwell, Little, Brown and Company, 2000 is reviewed in the “Bookshelf” section of the Timely Ideas Web site. The Web site also includes a link to Amazon.com’s complete listing on the book.]



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