The Law of the Few Case Study #1 – Paul Revere

One of the most famous stories in history is the midnight ride of Boston silversmith Paul Revere to Lexington. This took place on the night of April 18, 1775. In two hours, Paul Revere rode thirteen miles alerting the colonial leaders in Charlestown, Medford, North Cambridge and Menotomy. The news spread like a virus and was in Lincoln, Massachusetts by 1 a.m., Sudbury by 3 a.m., Andover (40 miles from Boston) by 5 a.m. and Ashby by nine in the morning. As a result, when the British finally began their march towards Lexington to arrest John Hancock and Samuel Adams, to their utter astonishment they were met with organized and fierce resistance. From this exchange came the war known as the American Revolution.

At first glance, this may seem like the most famous example of the spread of a word-of-mouth epidemic in history. Most people assume the message (“The British are coming!”) in and of itself was so sensational Paul Revere couldn’t miss. That explanation, however, ignores other facts about that evening’s events.

At the same time as Paul Revere left Boston and rode north, a fellow revolutionary, William Dawes, rode west. He had the same message as Paul Revere, and worked his way through the towns to the west of Boston towards Lexington. Dawes covered just as many miles as Paul Revere, and yet when the militia assembled the next day to fight the British, there was hardly anyone there from the towns Dawes alerted. And, while history reserves a notable spot for Paul Revere, hardly anyone has ever heard of William Dawes. So why did Dawes fail where Paul Revere was such a great success? If the spread of a word-of-mouth virus is dependent on the quality of the message, both men should have been equally successful. Nor were the villages Dawes visited more pro-British than the towns Dawes alerted. In fact, when the men in the towns to the west of Boston heard the war had commenced, they flocked to join up.

The difference was Paul Revere was a Connector. He was intensely social and gregarious. Revere was also an avid fisherman, hunter, card-player, theater patron and a successful businessman. Paul Revere was well connected, and had the 18th century equivalent of a very fat Rolodex because he moved in so many circles. He was one of the community’s most prominent citizens, and his silversmith shop was a natural place where people would congregate to swap little snippets of information about the British army.

Therefore, when a stable hand overheard a British officer say to another there would be “hell to pay tomorrow”, he passed that piece of information on to Paul Revere. When Revere set out on his horse ride through various towns in the dead of night, he would have known exactly whose doors to knock on. Revere knew who all the key players were in each town – people who would act as Connectors themselves in passing the message on as rapidly as possible.

William Dawes, by contrast, wasn’t so well networked. When he would ride into a town, he just didn’t know whose door to knock on. Therefore, he did what he could to spread the message, but in all likelihood the recipients weren’t sure what to make of it. And as a result, Dawes was much less successful in starting any kind of epidemic at all, despite having a message of great significance.
In the mid-1980s, two entrepreneurs decided to start manufacturing shoes for skateboarders. They named their company Airwalk after a move where a skateboarder takes off from a ramp, slips his board out from under his feet and takes one or two exaggerated steps in the air before landing. The company rapidly developed a cult following among skateboarders and within a few years was doing $13 million per year in sales.

In the early 1990s, the owners of Airwalk decided they wanted to grow the company. They developed shoes for surfing, snowboarding, mountain biking and bicycle racing. Within the space of four years, Airwalk’s sales went from $16 million to $175 million. The cause of this impressive growth was not only the expansion into new markets but also an inspired advertising campaign which projected Airwalk past the Tipping Point.

This advertising campaign consisted of a series of dramatic images of people using their Airwalk shoes in unique ways. These images also included the new trends and ideas which were just starting to become popular with the in-crowd. For example, to become aligned with the public interest in aliens, one Airwalk ad showed a young man driving into Roswell, New Mexico and having his Airwalks confiscated by aliens. By piggy-backing on these emerging trends, Airwalk managed to position itself as a cutting edge company which was in touch with youth. As a result, the company’s sales soared.

Airwalk initially did a great job of segregating its channels of distribution. The company put its more durable and more expensive skateboard shoes through the small, innovative skate board shops who had a reputation for being at the cutting edge. Airwalk also put less elaborate, less expensive models through the malls. This worked well because it allowed the most innovative skateboarders to wear a different, more exclusive shoe than everyone else. And at the same time, the mainstream customers were wearing the same brand as the cool kids.

Then, right at the height of its popularity, Airwalk made a major mistake. The company stopped giving the speciality shops their own shoes. With that single move, Airwalk stopped being the brand of choice for all the most innovative kids. And the company lost its main point of differentiation. Soon, there was a rapid decline in sales. This coincided with production problems meaning there was not enough product for the critical back-to-school retail season. Airwalk’s sales feel dramatically in sync with these developments.

"Starting epidemics requires concentrating resources on a few key areas. The Law of the Few says that Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen are responsible for starting word-of-mouth epidemics, which means that if you are interested in starting a word-of-mouth epidemic, your resources ought to be solely concentrated on those three groups. No one else matters."

– Malcolm Gladwell

"A critic looking at these tightly focused, targeted interventions might dismiss them as Band-Aid solutions. But that term should not be considered a term of disparagement. The Band-Aid is an inexpensive, convenient and remarkably versatile solution to an astonishing array of problems. In their history, Band-Aids have probably allowed millions of people to keep working or playing tennis or cooking or walking when they would otherwise have had to stop. The Band-Aid solution is actually the best kind of solution because it involves solving a problem with the minimum amount of effort and time and cost. We have, of course, an instinctive disdain for this kind of solution because there is something in all of us that feels that true answers have to be comprehensive. There are times when we need a convenient shortcut; a way to make a lot out of a little, and that is what Tipping Points, in the end, are all about."

– Malcolm Gladwell
Stickiness Case Study #1 – The tetanus shots

A social psychologist at Yale University was attempting a study to try and persuade seniors at Yale University to get a tetanus shot. He began by distributing to the students a 7-page booklet which explained the dangers of tetanus, the importance of being inoculated and the availability of free tetanus shots at the campus health center.

Two versions of the information booklet were made. The “high fear” version had color photographs of people suffering a tetanus seizure and described tetanus in dramatic and emotive terms. The second “low fear” version was more restrained in its description and contained no photographs. Surprisingly, however, both versions of the booklet produced the same results – a mere 3-percent of the students actually followed through and got tetanus shots.

When the experiment was repeated the next year, the same two versions of the booklet were used but a map of the campus was included with the university health building circled. With that one seemingly insignificant change, the inoculation rate jumped from 3-percent to 28-percent. And once again, both the high fear and low fear versions were equally effective.

"The interesting thing about this experiment is that, of course, as seniors they must have already known where the health center was, and doubtless had visited it several times already. It is doubtful that any of them would have actually used the map. In other words, what the tetanus information needed in order to tip was not an avalanche of new or additional information. What it needed was a subtle but significant change in presentation. The students needed to know how to fit the tetanus stuff into their lives; the addition of the map and the times when the shots were available shifted the booklet from an abstract lesson in medical risk to a practical and personal piece of medical advice. And once the advice became practical and personal, it became memorable.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

Stickiness Case Study #2 – The gold box

In the 1970s, a direct marketer named Lester Wunderman was competing against a prestigious advertising firm McCann Erickson for the Columbia Record Club account. Wunderman proposed a competition. He would run print ads in thirteen media markets while McCann ran television commercials in thirteen different markets. Whoever produced the greatest increase in response to Columbia’s commercials would take the whole account.

Conventional thinking about the effectiveness of television advertising suggested McCann’s TV ads would be far more effective, but Wunderman’s print ads produced 80-percent more business while McCann’s television ads generated only a 20-percent increase. What was the key to Wunderman’s success? He used a simple device he called a “treasure hunt”.

The treasure hunt consisted of a little gold box which was printed in the corner of the order coupon. Wunderman then ran advertisements telling customers if they found an order form with a gold box printed in the corner, they could write in the name of any record on the Columbia list and get that record for free when they joined the club. This set off a frenzy of excitement as people started looking for Columbia order forms which had a little gold box printed in the corner – which all of them did. It became like a game for many people.

"The gold box made the reader/viewer part of an interactive advertising system. Viewers were not just an audience but had become participants. It was like playing a game. The effectiveness of the campaign was startling. In 1977, none of Columbia’s ads in its extensive magazine schedule had been profitable. In 1978, with Gold Box television support, every magazine on the schedule made a profit, an unprecedented turnaround.”

– Lester Wunderman
Stickiness Case Study #3 – Sesame Street

The concept of a television show for preschoolers was first mooted in the late 1960s. A television producer came up with the idea of a show that would give children from disadvantaged homes the opportunity to learn how to read. She teamed up with a Harvard University psychologist and a third partner to further refine the concept. What they came up with was Sesame Street.

The original idea was to separate segments of the show where human actors were speaking and where Jim Henson’s Muppets were on screen. This was on the advice of child psychologists who said mixing fantasy and reality would be dangerous for children. However, when the pilot episodes of Sesame Street were made and shown to children, inevitably they lost interest when real people were speaking and took notice whenever the Muppets came back on. A decision was made to ignore the advice of the specialists and mix the Muppets with real people in order to retain the attention of children viewers.

Jim Henson and his team then created a series of real life sized Muppets who could walk and talk with the adults. This is how characters like Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch and Snuffleupagus came into being. Sesame Street went on to be hugely successful as a result.

"Sesame Street is best known for the creative geniuses it attracted, people like Jim Henson and Joe Raposo and frank Oz, who intuitively grasped what it takes to get through to children. They were television’s answer to Beatrix Potter or L. Frank Baum or Dr. Suess. But it is a mistake to think of Sesame Street as a project conceived in a flash of insight. What made the show unusual, in fact, was the extent to which it was exactly the opposite of that – the extent to which the final product was deliberately and painstakingly engineered. Sesame Street was built about a single, breakthrough insight: that if you can hold the attention of children, you can educate them. What we now think of as the essence of Sesame Street – the artful blend of fluffy monsters and earnest adults – grew out of a desperate desire to be sticky."

– Malcolm Gladwell

Stickiness Case Study #4 – Blue’s Clues

In the mid-1990s, three young television producers at the Nickelodeon Network asked whether it was possible to make a kids TV show which was even stickier than Sesame Street. They decided to give it a go, and came up with a new show titled Blue’s Clues. Whereas Sesame Street used a "magazine" format in which the show had around 40 distinct and standalone segments fused together, the format for Blue’s Clues was much simpler. It consisted of one presenter or host named Steve and an animated dog named Blue. At the start of each show, Steve poses a single question. The rest of each episode then presents three clues which answer that question. Each show ends with Steve sitting in his thinking chair and running through the clues to come up with the right answer.

For example, in one show, the question was: What was Blue’s favorite story. One of the clues involved Steve sitting down with the Three Bears whose bowls of porridge had been mixed up. The show’s audience were invited to help match the small bowl with baby bear, the middle sized with momma bear and so on. By the end of the show, the viewers at home are practically jumping out of their seats shouting out the answers to the puzzles.

Blue’s Clues also does something else quite extraordinary. Instead of running a new episode each day, the same episode gets repeated for five days in a row. The following week, another episode runs for five days in succession. This aligns with the fact the show’s producers found preschoolers’ comprehension increased with repetition over the course of the week. In fact, with each successive viewing of the episode, the kids actually become more animated and more actively involved in answering the questions put to them. At that age especially, it seems kids value predictability and understanding higher than the novelty of learning something new, so Blue’s Clues caters to those needs quite innovatively.

Within months of its debut in 1996, Blue’s Clues was doing far better in the ratings than Sesame Street.
"If you think about the world of a preschoo... they are not only understanding it better, which is a form of power, but just by predicting what is going to happen, I think they feel a sense of affirmation and self-worth. And Blue’s Clues doubles that feeling, because they also feel like they are participating in something. They feel like they are helping Steve."

– Daniel Andersen, Blue’s Clues developer

As these four case studies show, the concept of stickiness is somewhat counterintuitive. For example, the idea that consumers would get involved in a treasure hunt to find a gold box on their order form sounds rather strange. Similarly, the concept that giving students a map they don’t need to a clinic they already knew about would be more motivational to getting a tetanus shot than scaring them with vivid pictures sounds bizarre. And the idea that a very simple TV show (repeated five times in a row) would outpull the enormously clever Sesame Street is quite extraordinary. Yet, all of these examples illustrate what stickiness is all about.

"We all want to believe that the key to making an impact on someone lies with the inherent quality of the ideas we present. But in none of these cases did anyone substantially alter the content of what they were saying. Instead, they tipped the message by tinkering, on the margin, with the presentation of their ideas. The line between hostility and acceptance, in other words, between an epidemic that tips and one that does not, is sometimes a lot narrower than it seems."

– Malcolm Gladwell

"The Law of the Few says that there are exceptional people out there who are capable of starting epidemics. The lesson of stickiness is the same. There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it."

– Malcolm Gladwell

"The theory of Tipping Points requires that we reframe the way we think about the world. The world – much as we want it to – does not accord with our intuition. Those who are successful at creating social epidemics do not just do what they think is right. They deliberately test their intuitions."

– Malcolm Gladwell

"To make sense of social epidemics, we must first understand that human communication has its own set of very unusual and counterintuitive rules."

– Malcolm Gladwell
**Context Case Study #1 – The “Broken Windows” Theory**

New York City, like many other cities around the world, had a serious problem with violent crime. In the 1990s, however, two criminologist James Wilson and George Kelling developed a theory they called the “Broken Windows” Theory. In essence, they said crime is the inevitable result of disorder. Therefore, if people see a building with a broken window which is not repaired, then they will conclude no one cares. Soon, more windows will be broken and eventually that spirit of disorder will spread elsewhere.

"Muggers and robbers, whether opportunistic or professional, believe they reduce their chances of being caught or even identified if they operate on streets where potential victims are already intimidated by prevailing conditions. If the neighborhood cannot keep a bothersome panhandler from annoying passers by, the thief may reason, it is even less likely to call the police to identify a potential mugger or to interfere if the mugging actually takes place."

– James Wilson and George Kelling

George Kelling was hired as a consultant by the New York Transit Authority to put this theory into practice. It was decided the key to making the New York subway safer was to eliminate all the graffiti.

"The graffiti was symbolic of the collapse of the system. When you looked at the process of rebuilding the organization and morale, you had to win the battle against graffiti. Without winning that battle, all the management reforms and physical changes just weren’t going to happen. We were about to put out new trains that were worth about ten million bucks apiece, and unless we did something to protect them, we just knew what would happen. They would last one day and then they would be vandalized.”

– David Gunn, new subway director

Cleaning stations were set up where the trains were turned around so any trains which came in with graffiti could be cleaned immediately or replaced. The clean up took seven years from 1984 to 1990, and it was reinforced by many other moves, but over that period the rate of crime on the New York subways fell dramatically.

"During the 1980s, New York City averaged well over 2,000 murders and 600,000 serious felonies a year. Underground, on the subways, conditions could only be described as chaotic. Fare beating was so commonplace that it was costing the Transit Authority as much as $150 million in lost revenue annually. There were about 15,000 felonies on the system a year – a number that would hit 20,000 a year by the end of the decade – and harassment of riders by panhandlers and petty criminals was so pervasive that ridership of the trains had sunk to its lowest level in the history of the subway system. This was New York City in the 1980s, a city in the grip of one of the worst crime epidemics in its history. But then, suddenly and without warning, the epidemic tipped. From a high in 1990, the crime rate went into precipitous decline. Murders dropped by two-thirds. Felonies were cut in half. Other cities saw their crime drop in the same period. But in no place did the level of violence fall farther or faster. On the subways, by the end of the decade, there were 75-percent fewer felonies than there had been at the decade’s start. New York had rapidly become the safest big city in the country.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

"The Power of Context is an environmental argument. It says that behavior is a function of social context. It says that what really matters is little things. The Power of Context says you don’t have to solve the big problems to solve crime. You can prevent crimes just by scrubbing off graffiti and arresting fare-beaters: crime epidemics have Tipping Points which are simple and straightforward."

– Malcolm Gladwell
Context Case Study #2 – The “Good Samaritan” Test

Two Princeton University psychologists decided to conduct a study inspired by the story of the Good Samaritan from the New testament account of Luke. In the Biblical account, a traveler who was beaten and robbed was ignored by pious Jewish men but helped by a Samaritan who was a member of a despised minority ethnic group.

The psychologists took a group of people from the Princeton Theological Seminary. It was assumed since all of these students were studying to enter into the ministry, they would be predisposed towards helping others. The students were told they had to give a presentation on the parable of the Good Samaritan to a group of influential people in another building. The theological students were then sent to the other building one-by-one with one of two sets of instructions:

- Some of the students were told they were running late, therefore they had better hurry over to the other building and get started.
- The rest of the students were told they had plenty of time, but they might as well head over to the other building and start getting ready.

On their path between the two buildings was placed an actor who sat slumped, head down, eyes closed, coughing and groaning. The psychologists then recorded whether or not the theology students, having just been reminded of the story of the Good Samaritan, put those beliefs into action.

The results of the experiment were quite surprising. Of the group of students who were told to rush, only 10-percent stopped to help the man, despite having just been reminded of the Good Samaritan story. Of the second group (who had a few minutes to spare), 63-percent stopped to help the actor.

"It is hard to think of a context in which norms concerning helping those in distress are more salient than for a person thinking about the Good Samaritan, and yet it did not significantly increase helping behavior. Indeed, on several occasions, a seminary student going to give his talk on the Good Samaritan literally stepped over the victim as he hurried on his way."

– John Darley and Daniel Beatson, psychologists

“What this study is suggesting, in other words, is that the convictions of your heart and the actual contents of your thoughts are less important, in the end, in guiding your actions than the immediate context of your behavior. The words ‘Oh, you’re late’ had the effect of making someone who was ordinarily compassionate into someone who was indifferent to suffering – of turning someone, in that particular moment, into a different person. Epidemics are, at their root, about this very process of transformation. When we are trying to make an idea or attitude or product tip, we’re trying to change our audience in some small yet critical respect; we’re trying to infect them, sweep them up in our epidemic, convert them from hostility to acceptance. This can be done through the influence of special kinds of people, people of extraordinary personal connection. That’s the Law of the Few. It can be done by changing the content of communication, by making a message so memorable it sticks in someone’s mind and compels them to action. That’s the Stickiness Factor. I think both of these laws make intuitive sense. But we need to remember that small changes in context can be just as important in tipping epidemics, even though that fact appears to violate some of our most deeply held assumptions about human nature."

– Malcolm Gladwell

Context Case Study #3 – The Rule of 150

What is the most effective group size if you’re making an attempt to start an epidemic? Most people would assume the larger the group the better, but that’s not the way things work out. In fact, many organizations have found the optimum size for any organizational structure is actually about 150 people.
"Over the years, military planners have arrived at a rule of thumb which dictates that functional fighting units cannot be substantially larger than 200 men. This, I suspect, is not simply a matter of how the generals in the rear exercise control and coordination, because companies have remained obdurately stuck at this size despite all the advances in communications technology since the first world war. Rather, it is as though the planners have discovered, by trial and error over the centuries, that it is hard to get more than this number of men sufficiently familiar with each other so that they can work together as a functional unit."

– Robin Dunbar, anthropologist

"Keeping things under 150 just seems to be the best and most efficient way to manage a group of people. When things get larger than that, people become strangers to one another. In smaller groups, people are a lot closer. They’re knit together, which is very important if you want to be effective and successful at community life. If you get too large, you don’t have enough work in common. You don’t have enough things in common, and then you start to become strangers and that close-knit fellowship starts to get lost. What happens as you approach that 150 mark is the group starts, on its own, to form a clan. You get two or three groups within the larger group. That is something you really try to prevent, and when it happens it is a good time to branch out."

– Bill Gross, leader of a Hutterite colony

In simple terms, once you get about the 150 Tipping Point, there starts to be structural impediments to the ability of the group to think and act with one voice. Many companies are aware of this phenomena, and work aggressively to limit the size of their business units to about 150 people. Whenever any of their units exceed that threshold, they are split. A good example of this approach is Gore Associates, a privately held company based in Newark Delaware. Gore is the manufacturer of the water-resistant Gore-Tex fabric, Glide dental floss and other specialist products. Despite the fact Gore has a multi-billion-dollar turnover, the company attempts to behave like a small entrepreneurial start-up. The company engenders that mind set by adhering to the Rule of 150.

"We found again and again that things get clumsy at a hundred and fifty."

– Bill Gore, founder

"People used to ask me, how do you do your long-term planning? And I’d say, that’s easy. We put a hundred and fifty parking spaces in the lot, and when people start parking on the grass, we know it’s time to build a new plant."

– Bob Hen, associate, Gore Associates

Gore often builds new plants very close to its old ones so that each can have a maximum of 150 staff. Within a twelve mile radius in Delaware, Gore has fifteen plants. Some of them are just separated by a parking lot, but that’s sufficient to create a sense of independence.

As the company grows, Gore undergoes a process of division and redivision with the work being split into smaller and smaller pieces. And even better, since everyone knows everyone else at these small plants, there is no need for a formal management structure. Most things get done by peer pressure, or on the strength of face-to-face personal relationships.

"The pressure that comes to bear if we are not efficient at a plant, if we are not creating good earnings for the company, the peer pressure is unbelievable. This is what you get when you have small teams, where everybody knows everybody. Peer pressure is much more powerful than the concept of a boss. Many, many times more powerful. People want to live up to what is expected of them."

– Jim Buckley, associate, Gore Associates
Having the work divided amongst small teams also allows an implicit joint memory system to develop naturally. This type of system is based on an understanding of who is the person best suited to remember various kinds of things. Gore has a highly effective institutional transactive memory in which people remember the facts that match their skills, abilities and passions. Others trust them to know things in their specialty area. Since everyone is familiar with who knows what, over time a very good system develops where various people take responsibility for retaining knowledge in their specialist areas. The end result is the entire organization gets very smart because people are focused rather than generalists. This kind of institutional memory also allows Gore to innovate rapidly enough to respond to the changing needs of demanding and sophisticated customers.

"It makes the company incredibly efficient. It means that cooperation is easier. It means that you move much faster to get things done or create teams of workers to find out an answer to a problem. It means that people in one part of the company can get access to the impressions and experiences of people in a completely different part of the company. What Gore has created, in short, is an organized mechanism that makes it far easier for new ideas and information moving around the organization to tip – to go from one person or one part of the group to the entire group all at once. That's the advantage of adhering to the Rule of 150. You can exploit the bonds of memory and peer pressure. Were Gore to try to reach each employee singly, their task would have been much harder. And had Gore tried to put everyone in one big room, it wouldn’t have worked either. In order to be unified – in order to spread a specific, company ideology to all of its employees – Gore had to break itself up into semi-autonomous small pieces. That is the paradox of the epidemic: that in order to create one contagious movement, you often have to create many small movements first.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

"Once you understand that context matters, that specific and relatively small elements in the environment can serve as Tipping Points, defeatism is turned upside down. Environmental Tipping Points are things that we can change: We can fix broken windows and clean up graffiti and change the signals that invite crime in the first place.”

– Malcolm Gladwell

"A world that follows the rules of epidemics is a very different place from the world we think we live in now. Consider, for example, the following puzzle. I give you a large piece of paper, and I ask you to fold it over once, and then take that folded paper and fold it over again, and then again and again, until you have refolded the original paper 50 times. How tall do you think that final stack is going to be? In answer to that question, most people will guess the pile will be as thick as a phone book or, if they're really courageous, as tall as a refrigerator. But the real answer is that the height of the stack would approximate the distance to the sun. This is an example of what in mathematics is called a geometric progression. Epidemics are another example of geometric progression: when a virus spreads through a population, it doubles and doubles again, until it has (figuratively) grown from a single sheet of paper all the way to the sun in fifty steps. As human beings, we have a hard time with this kind of progression because the results seems far out of proportion to the cause. We need to understand that sometimes, big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly.”

– Malcolm Gladwell