Co-creation

Wisdom from wherever

The Tipping Point

by Malcolm Gladwell

A quote on the back of my copy of *The Tipping Point* describes it as "brimming with new theories on the science of manipulation." I think it would be just as true, and a whole lot more helpful, to describe the book as "brimming with new theories on the science of service." That's why I chose to share a bit of this book in this newsletter.

Plus the fact that it's one of most enjoyable pieces of nonfiction you're likely to pick up. It is a book crammed with interesting stories on a wide range of topics – everything from the epidemic of teen suicide in Micronesia to the re-popularization of the once-geeky shoe, Hush Puppies, to the long-term success of Sesame Street.

What makes something (like Hush Puppies or Sesame Street) suddenly and immensely popular? How does any large-scale change in human behaviour take hold? These are the core questions that Gladwell approaches again and again from lots of different angles. Each story he tells has new light to shed on the phenomena of rising (or falling) popularity. Marketers and salespeople (of all kinds) will find these stories and the associated lessons interesting and pertinent to their work. However, anyone interested in leadership, who want to serve by finding ways to access the passion and commitment of groups, will also find these stories compelling and useful.

Cans Seurat, 2007

Depicts 106,000 aluminum cans, the number used in the US every thirty seconds

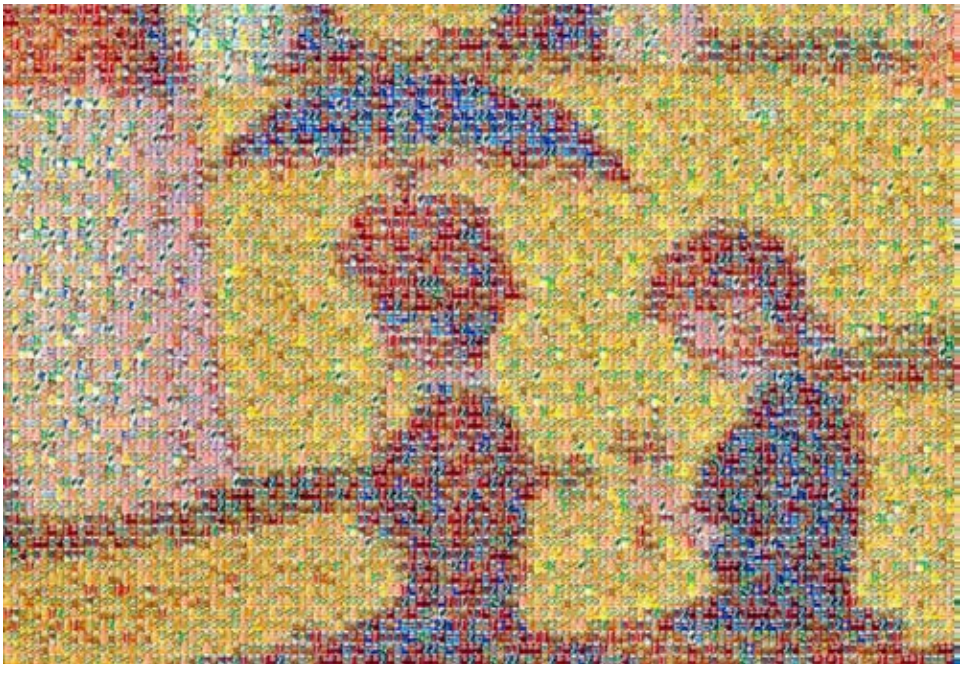
See following pages for detail

New York City and the Power of Context

In the 1980's, New York City was in the throes of an epidemic of violence, with well over 2,000 murders and 600,000 serious felonies a year. But then things suddenly shifted. From the peak in 1990, crime dropped precipitously: murders declined by two-thirds, felonies by half. In the subways, the drop was even more remarkable – by the end of the 1990's, subway violence had declined 75%.

None of the usual statistical culprits could account for drops of this kind. Yes, the nation was aging during the period, but New York City (because of immigration) was somewhat younger. The decline in the crack trade was marginal. The economy was slightly better, but there were welfare cutbacks leaving many in more severe poverty. One simply cannot argue that the "supply" of unstable, poor, or young people had changed significantly enough to account for the sharp drops in violence. There was extra policing, but this was likewise marginal. So what happened? What accounted for the dramatic and positive shifts in the rate of violence?

Gladwell points to the power of context. If a street has one broken window, there is a multiplier effect – more windows get broken, more trash gets deposited, people start to avoid the area, and a vicious cycle starts with the net result of "inviting" more crime. In 1990's New York, whole neighbourhoods were able to turn themselves around, by fixing the windows, painting over the graffiti, and putting flower boxes out. People returned to those streets at night, and crime receded.



In the subways, the transit authority cracked down not on the symptom – assaults and violent crime in the subways – but on the environment and context. In the 1980's virtually every subway car was covered with graffiti. Line by line, the transit authority would enforce a zero graffiti policy – if a car had graffiti, it was immediately taken out of service and repainted that very night. Understandably, graffitists were a lot less motivated as a result.

At the same time, there was a crackdown on toll jumping. In the 1980's, the situation was pretty awful:

> … I tried to put a coin into a turnstile and found it had been purposely jammed. Unable to pay the fare to get into the system, we had to enter through a slam gate held open by a scruffy looking character with his hand out; having disabled the turnstiles, he was now demanding that riders give him their tokens. Meanwhile, one of his cohorts had his mouth on the coin slots, sucking out the jammed coins and leaving his slobber. Most people were too intimidated to take these guys on … It was like going into the transit version of Dante's Inferno.

By policing the entrances to the system, the transit authority was able to effectively cut down on the violent crime taking place within the system. So changes to the environment like these were to have profound effect upon the people travelling in the subways and their propensity to become violent.

The power of context is well understood by facilitators and change-management consultants. Fresh thinking needs fresh environments. There are profound differences between small-groups of two, four or six. It makes a difference when the tablecloths are white (formal) or

All photos courtesy of Chris Jordan

www.chrisjordan.com

colourful (informal). Is the purpose of your meeting to open up new ideas or to nail down action plans, or both?

Sesame Street excels at Stickiness

One of the most oft-cited reasons for the popularity of *Sesame Street* is that it appeals to toddlers and their parents. The cameo appearances of rock stars and actors, the mature subthemes and double entendres keep the parents as amused as the children.

Another reason given for the program's success was the genius of Jim Henson. But few know that the show would not have become popular – in fact, it probably would not have gotten past its first season – had it not been for the genius of Oregon psychologist Ed Palmer.

Palmer invented the "Distracter" – a slide show that was shown beside the TV screen used with toddler test audiences. The slides were as varied as possible and would switch every seven-and-a-half seconds. Adult observers would note whether the children were watching the TV, the slide show or something else. The show's target was to get the attention rate over 85% under these circumstances. Lots of things flunked the Distractor test. Live animals were thought to be very captivating to young children – they weren't. An early character had the specialty of making puns – the children hated him. Three minutes was shown to be the limit for segment length. One standard device – having two or three characters talking contentiously at once to heighten the drama – was a bomb with children.

Sometime stickiness is related to that extra bit of service

In fact, before the first season, pilots were shown to children, and the show had terrible attention ratings. Following current (1969) psychological advice, the show strictly separated the fantasy characters from the real ones. The fantasy characters did fine on the distracter test, but the adult characters lost the children's interest almost immediately. The street – where the adults lived – was the binding theme of the show, and it wasn't working. Finally they decided to blend Muppets and real people, and the rest, as they say, is history.

The producers of *Sesame Street* and a later children's television show *Blue's Clues* paid particular attention to what made their product "sticky" and what didn't. Their ways of measuring stickiness got more and more sophisticated. Now we can't all submit all of our actions to a Distracter test, but we can pay attention to what makes them sticky. PowerPoint presentations for example are notoriously un-sticky, and it is probably a good idea to read about and practice making them as sticky as possible.

Sometimes stickiness is related to that extra bit of service or

connection to your audience. What is the next step you want people to take? Have you made that next step as easy as it can possibly be?

Connectors, Mavens and the Law of the Few

The notion of "six degrees of separation" started with an experiment in the late 1960's. The experiment involved sending 160 packages to people selected at random in Omaha, Nebraska. The instructions were to forward the package to someone they felt would be closer to a specific person in Sharon, Massachusetts. Most of the packages were received by that person in five or six steps.

Because the phrase, "six degrees of separation," is now commonly understood, this result is not that surprising. But previous estimates of the number of required steps sometimes exceeded 100.

Who are the connectors in your work and world?

A closer look at the data showed that, of the letters that arrived, more than half were delivered by the same three people. This, Gladwell writes, demonstrates that some people are "connectors," people who know lots of people: "Six degrees of separation doesn't mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few."

Related to the notion of connector is the maven, someone who can advise you on which car to buy, where the best vacation deals are right now, or what's the most environmentally friendly shampoo. Mavens are information storehouses, happy to share what they've learned, and key to marketing any product or service.

Who are the connectors in your work and world? What attention do you need to bring to bear on your own connectedness? Are there mavens you need to relate with? Serving your connections – even in small ways – is the best way to foster further connections.

The upshot

Creating any kind of large-scale change requires the alignment of many forces. Gladwell's book points to a few key factors to consider when attempting to do that. When the right combination of factors align, then there is a chance to move beyond the point of equilibrium (the "tipping point") and to gain momentum. This need not be manipulation in the negative sense – it is merely knowing what is involved in getting larger projects moving.