

SUMMARY

CONTAGIOUS

JONAH BERGER



Summary of “Contagious” by Jonah Berger

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Learn why certain ideas are infectious.

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Introduction

Has this ever happened to you? You open Facebook one day to find that 17 of your friends have all shared the same meme, funny cat video, or news story. In fact, it's everywhere you look! Your mom calls to ask if you've seen it. Even your dog and your grandma have seen it! When these things happen, we say it's "gone viral." And if you enjoy creating social media content or you hope to launch a product yourself, you might wonder what it takes to go viral and if it's possible for your content to do the same. But what does "going viral" really mean in practice? Is it a matter of having the right marketing team or the right budget? Or is there some formula you can follow that will make your content contagious? The author posits that there is and over the course of this summary, we'll investigate his theories of contagion and how you can apply them in your life.

Take The Right STEPPS

If you've noticed that "steps" appears to be spelled incorrectly, you're right. That's because, in this case, STEPPS is an acronym. In fact, it's the author's formula for creating viral content. Throughout this book, we're going to examine each component of this formula in detail, but for now, let's take a look at what it stands for.

S: Social Currency

T: Triggers

E: Emotions

P: Public

P: Practical Value

S: Stories

If you want to go viral, you need all of these components. But how do you put them into practice? The author observes that promoting through word-of-mouth is one great way to pack every component of STEPPS into a single strategy! Here's how it works: imagine that you just discovered an awesome restaurant. Maybe it's a hole-in-the-wall kind of place, tucked away where no one realizes it's there. But the food is delicious, the customer service was incredible, and you can't wait to go back. So, what do you do? You tell your friends about it! Because you're so excited to have discovered a hidden gem, your instinct is to let your friends know so they can enjoy it too. And from a marketing perspective, there are several reasons why this is the most effective way to promote any product. You might be surprised to learn that word-of-mouth even trumps social media!

Here's why: for starters, a social media campaign has very limited reach. This is true even if you put your ad on Facebook in front of millions of users and even if you use Facebook's highly specific settings to target your ideal customers. That's because social media marketing can only put you in front of potential customers. It doesn't guarantee that they'll listen, engage with your ad, or like what you have to offer. And it definitely doesn't guarantee

that your ad will convert all those viewers into paying customers. Sure, your ad might pop up on their feed, but they could very easily swipe out of your ad and ask Facebook not to show it to them again. Whether you're a marketing specialist or not, the truth is that you probably do the same when you're confronted with an ad that doesn't interest you.

But what if your friend recommended something to you? Maybe your friend tells you that they've had a great experience with a certain restaurant or that a certain product met their needs. Because you trust your friends and value their opinions, you're more likely to listen to what they have to say. You're also more receptive to the suggestion because it isn't pitched at you in an advertising format. As modern consumers, we already know that our attention is a valuable commodity. Everybody's selling something and every single one of those sellers wants our attention. That's why they scream at us from billboards and pop-ups and commercials; everybody wants prospective customers to engage long enough for an ad to get its hooks in. As a result, we've become desensitized to advertising. We tune things out or assume that advertisers have ulterior motives. (And often, they really do!) But when our friends tell us about a product, we don't assume they're doing so because they have something to gain from it. As friends, we simply share information because we think it will interest someone else or because we hope to improve our friends' quality of life. So, when our friends tell us, "Hey, you should try this thing!" we're much more inclined to listen.

So, word of mouth marketing already has the "social currency" aspect in the bag. It also neatly encapsulates the appeal of stories and emotions because of the way our friends present the information. This also makes it more effective because, if you're an advertiser, you have to spend a lot of time and money coming up with a good story that will invite people to engage with your product or get emotionally invested. But what if your friend tells you, "I went to this awesome little Italian place and they had the most amazing breadsticks!" Or what if they tell you a funny story about their time at the Italian place and the cute waiter who served them? You're more inclined to listen to your friend's story than to a commercial, so you'll want to hear about the Italian place. And once you hear about it, you'll be invested in

your friend's story and in the emotional experience you two shared while she was telling you the story. That means there's a pretty good chance that you'll want to try the Italian place yourself!

So, the first lesson for creating viral content is to rely on word of mouth marketing. However, that's not to say that you shouldn't invest in social media at all; you need to be available online when all those prospective customers hear about you and want to check you out! But it is a good reminder that you shouldn't count on social media as your primary form of advertising. Instead, concentrate on creating an experience or a product that people will want to tell their friends about. And then sit back and relax while your customers do most of your advertising for you!

Trigger New Ideas

In this day and age, people often use the word “triggered” to reflect their engagement with information that upsets or traumatizes them. Usually, this means that they have encountered stimuli which connects to a traumatic memory and prompts them to re-live painful experiences. In this respect, being triggered is definitely a bad thing and you would never want to intentionally trigger others! But the author observes that, in the marketing world, “triggering” has a different, positive connotation. In the marketing world, triggering can have a positive effect because it involves using one type of stimuli to “trigger” or set off a connection with something else. This generally creates new types of product associations or partnerships.

Let’s take a closer look at how triggering works in practice by looking at the example of Dunkin Donuts. In fact, even the brand name is a trigger! Here’s how it works: when you hear the phrase “dunkin’ donuts,” you immediately envision both coffee and donuts, even though no one ever said the word “coffee.” Why? Because the words create a mental image of someone dunking their donut in their coffee. This word image is therefore effective in a couple of ways: firstly, because we associate coffee with donuts in the same way that we connect peanut butter with jelly or salt with pepper. When we hear “donuts,” we also think “coffee” because we’ve been conditioned to believe that the two are inseparable. It’s also effective because it produces an image that you associate with a taste and with positive experiences. So, because that sounds so good to you, you might suddenly find yourself craving both coffee and a donut just because you saw an ad for Dunkin Donuts while driving down the road! So, in this respect, the brand name “Dunkin Donuts” serves as a trigger because it taps into your brain’s tendency to associate coffee with donuts.

But Dunkin Donuts is an effective trigger for one more important reason: its universality. Pretty much everybody in the world has had the experience of eating a donut or drinking coffee. Even if you don’t make a habit of dunking your donut in your coffee, you’re familiar with the experience of

eating the two together. So, this is an effective marketing strategy because it taps into an experience that everybody can relate to. It's also an experience that pretty much everybody likes. The author observes that triggers can only be effective if they connect a product with a familiar or universal experience. If you attempt to employ this strategy with an experience that's too specific or unique, it won't be relatable enough. Instead of bringing people together or causing them to connect your brand with an experience they know and love, they might feel isolated or weirded out. So, if you want to create an effective trigger, make sure you associate your brand with something people can relate to.

It's also worth noting that it doesn't necessarily have to be a positive experience. People love bonding over a common enemy and there are quite a few pet peeves in the world that are universal. So, if you position your product as being the solution to another hectic Monday morning or a commute in rush-hour traffic, people will happily sigh along with your ad like, "Ugh, yeah, we all know how that feels!" They'll also be more likely to remember your product fondly-- and maybe even buy it-- if you advertise it as being something that makes a universally negative experience better.

So, the lesson from this chapter is that if you want your content to go viral, create a universal trigger that will inspire people to connect a common experience with your brand!

The Practical Appeal

So far, we've learned about the value of advertising that connects social currency, triggers, emotion, and public appeal. But the one part of STEPPS we haven't considered is its practical value. The practical aspect is often likely to be overlooked in favor of its flashier counterparts, but don't discount the value of practical content! In fact, the author observes that practical content is often more likely to go viral than things that grab our emotions or even things we find relatable. That's because practical content often addresses a problem everyone has and shows an easier way to do something or presents a useful product as a much-needed solution. Because such content can make our lives easier, we're more likely to share it with family and friends. So, whether you're promoting a new piece of information, a labor-saving device, or a new way to save money, if your product has a practical use, it has a lot of potential for going viral!

And if you're marketing a product for sale, the author observes that discount codes are a great way to get people interested. If you're active on Facebook or Instagram, you may have noticed that many brands partner with social media users and offer them exclusive discounts to promote to their friends and family. As a result, you might often see people posing with new products or articles of clothing and telling their followers that they can use a personalized discount code to get 20% off that product. However, the presence of the code isn't the only sales strategy that makes a difference. The manner in which the code is presented matters too. That's because "saving 20% off a product" makes people feel like they're saving a substantial amount of money. In the end, they might only be saving \$10, but most people aren't going to do the math on the spot. It's easier to imagine that you're saving more than you are and that's what most people do.

But this strategy is also effective because it's basically an updated version of word of mouth marketing. That's because the people who receive personalized discount codes feel important. They, in turn, are excited to

share their code with others and the business receives an increase in sales and exposure. So, if you want to boost your sales, remember that presenting your discount as a percentage is more attractive to customers. You should also remember that partnering with customers and social media users by providing them with small, personalized discounts is another great way to help your product go viral.

Final Summary

We often hear that content, ideas, or products “go viral,” but most of us aren’t sure what that really means. This can be especially confusing if you’re trying to make your own content contagious. Fortunately, however, Jonah Berger has the answer: by following the STEPPS method and creating content that incorporates social currency, triggers, emotional appeal, a public platform, practical value, and a story, you can make your product go viral too.



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