

Why bad ads work, and other things we can learn from epidemics

A stop sign is not the greatest ad in the world, but it works reasonably well (except for taxi drivers, but then they're not the target market). You could even say, that because so many people stop at stop signs, it has become an epidemic.

 By Sid Peimer 20 Nov 2003

Malcolm Gladwell (in his original and brilliant book, *The Tipping Point*) provides a vision of epidemics that has much to teach students of marketing, because we can literally 'catch' anything - ideas, products and even messages, as he so clearly demonstrates:

"Have you ever thought about yawning, for instance? Yawning is a surprisingly powerful act. Just because you read the word "yawning" in the previous two sentences - and the two additional "yawns" in this sentence - a good number of you will probably yawn within the next few minutes. Even as I'm writing this, I've yawned twice. If you're reading this in a public place, and you've just yawned, chances are that a good proportion of everyone who saw you yawn is now yawning too, ..."

The Tipping Point is a term that was first used in the 1970's to describe the sudden flight of white people from the suburbs in the American Northeast. When the number of black neighbours in a particular area reached certain point - say, 20 percent - the community would 'tip' - most of the remaining whites would leave almost immediately.

There are three principles to Tipping Points:

1. The law of the few

Information in the hands of only a few people can guarantee its transmission at lightning speed. The office gossip is a great example. Medical advertisers are particularly aware of this fact - they seed the opinion leaders (usually specialists) with information (usually the result of clinical trials) to pass on to GPs (usually too lazy to read them).

2. Stickiness

Why do some messages stick and others don't? People know that you get a great night's sleep on most mattresses - they just need to know where to go for the best value. When you flight ads for furniture stores on a Saturday morning - any attempt to be creative often obscures the core message with a resultant decline in sales on the day. Bad ads usually focus on product, price and store name - any attempt at embellishing the process (i.e. making a better ad) works against you, by diluting the aspects of the message that make work. That's why bad ads survive. Sorry for you.

3. The power of context

This claims that an epidemic can be reversed by tinkering with the smallest detail. Small change. Big result. But that doesn't interest us as marketers - we want to know how to start one! Two, young unemployed black men in Johannesburg showed us how.

Loxion Kulca, the hottest street label in Johannesburg, is the result of two broke and bored young men making a small change to a cap. Chabi Mogale and Wandu Nzimande wore caps that were crocheted by the family, but which they described as "very special" - the small rims could flop up or down close to the head. Even they admit: "This was nothing new, we just added new colours in new combinations and they took off. And then a clothing range followed. But their timing was also spot-on; "We were tired of the international brands, we wanted something local." Today, Loxion Kulca clothing can be bought across the country from 150 mainstream brand outlets.

Small change. Big result.

ABOUT SID PEIMER

Sid Peimer cannot understand why he can get a drink at any time of the day or night, but the library is always closed. He would like to open a bottle store in a library to overcome this problem. It's not as crazy as it sounds. OK, it is, but when last did you read a good drink? He is the mayor of stratplanning.com, which may soon become a sister city of Bizcommunity, like Cape Town is the sister city to the one in Korea that no one can remember.
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