

The Tipping Point: The Flame of the Word of Mouth in Marketing

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The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference

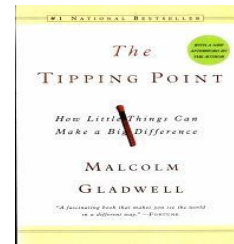
Author: Malcolm Gladwell

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The idea of tipping point has got significant importance in the discourse of sociology, physics, environmental science, natural disaster and epidemic management. Malcolm Gladwell, a British-Canadian journalist, wrote the book titled ‘The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference’ in the year 2000. It caught the attention of readers within a very short period of time and the book triumphed with the best seller list both nationally and internationally. Malcolm defined the tipping point as a magical moment when an idea, trend or behavior crosses a threshold and spreads like the flame of fire. The phenomenon is compared with contagious diseases such as cold, cough and influenza whereas a small idea or incident can create a significant change in our life.

In the first five chapters of the book, Malcolm discusses three rules of tipping points: the law of few, the stickiness factor, and the power of context followed by case studies in the next two chapters. According to the author only very few people can create social epidemics in the world. Those people are rare in type and are identified as gifted personality to the society. Hence, the readers are introduced to three types of people – connectors, mavens and salesmen. Connectors are the people who have a very wide social network. They go beyond the box to build and maintain relationship with various types of people surrounding them. Connectors are also expert in building trust and reliability on their social circles. Malcolm explains the idea linking the historical story of Paul Revere’s *mid-night ride*, Kevin Bacon’s *six-degrees of separation theory* and Stanley Milgram’s *small world phenomenon*. With his compelling storytelling skills, Malcolm unveils the mystery of the re-birth of the world famous shoe brand hush puppies in mid 1990s. The readers also find a new explanation of the syphilis epidemic in Baltimore city in connection to 80/20 principles. The second type of people, Maven, is the hub of market information. They spend good amount of time in reading newspaper, watching TV and roaming in the marketplace. Thus mavens possess extra-ordinary social skills and intelligence in communicating and influencing others. The final group of people that Malcolm brings out is known as salesmen. Although they are not seller by

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profession, salesmen have all the persuasive characteristics successful salespersons. The law of stickiness highlights on the way a message is being delivered. The author explains it with the success story of children's TV show – The Sesame Street – in the USA. He also takes the readers to the efficacious promotional campaign of the cigarette band Winston. Malcolm depicts how a short and simple but catchy pay-off line in an advertisement can take an average brand to a leading position in the market. Finally, the readers are exposed to the power of context that explains the environmental setting in which an event is taking place. The author illuminates the reasons behind the sudden increases in the suicide rate in Micronesia area, the rapid growth of smoking among teenagers in the USA and the sudden dramatic fall of the crime rate in New York City. Malcolm points out how Wilson and Kelling's *broken window theory* and Darley and Latane's *bystander's problem principle* worked out on those incidents.

Although the book is tagged in the category of social psychology, it has significant implication and application opportunity in the field of Marketing. It is needless to mention that in the hypercompetitive world of marketing everyday new players are sharpening the edge of warfare and consumers are bombarded with thousands of messages from companies. In this over-communicated society, a significant portion of advertising messages is ignored by the consumers and researches show that consumers' trust in advertising contents are decreasing day by day. Under such circumstances, marketing experts emphasize on utilization of positive word-of-mouth in which a satisfied consumer spreads the good side of the product in their social surroundings. The technological revolution with Internet and social networks over the last one decade has opened a new window to capitalize on the power of word-of-mouth strategy. The success story of the book '*Divine Secret of Ya-Ya Sisterhood*' can be mentioned here. The author of that book Rebecca Wells was not anyone famous in the field of contemporary literature, except she acted in some dramas in her earlier life and published a short story book that got attention of the readers in her own town Seattle only. After publishing the book in 1996, in her reading sessions for '*Divine Secret of Ya-Ya Sisterhood*', Rebecca found around six to eight people attending and the book ultimately sold around 15,000 copies in hardcover version. Next year, the paperback version of the book sold around 30,000 copies and following the popularity the publisher advertised the book in a magazine. The next result was dramatic; the book took position in the best seller's list and by 1998 in a total of 18 editions, the book was sold around 2.5 million copies. Rebecca received tremendous fame and popularity among readers. Malcolm explains the mystery behind Rebecca's success though the *power of context* rule. The story of the book was interesting and grabbed the attention of the readers, but the real secret of success was on the promotional campaign of the book. The book was promoted as '*to be read in group*' which worked like magic. Readers around the USA shared the story of the book with friends and families whereby so many readers found similarity between the story and their own lives. Even formation of *Ya-Ya Sisterhood Club* became hype among the reading groups. It was the power of the word-of-mouth that transformed an ordinary writer to best-selling author. Only word of mouth tipped the popularity of the book and pushed it to an extraordinary level. In similar fashion, marketers can deploy the theories of The Tipping Point

and get access to success with an unconventional technique through word-of-mouth communications.

Although a good number of critics have mentioned the flaws of Malcolm's propositions for lacking scientific proof and evidences, *The Tipping Point* is highly recommended for the readers who are curious about the power of small things that can make big differences. Even though the book was published about fourteen years back, its impact and power are still so powerful that the Northwestern University in the USA makes it a mandatory book for the students in Consumer Behavior class. I hope the marketing professionals, researchers and students in our country will find a new window for thought by reading this book.