Viral Marketing …. Social Transmission and Brands

Jonah Berger Is Over Twitter

**How the science of social transmission will help your brand catch on—and why tweeting alone is not enough.**

[by Laura W. Geller](http://www.strategy-business.com/article/00217?pg=all#authors)



Photograph courtesy of Jonah Berger

Social media will carry your company’s marketing strategy into the future, guaranteeing that more and more people will engage with your brand and purchase your products. Right? Tempting as that is to believe, says [Jonah Berger](http://jonahberger.com/), associate professor of marketing at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, companies routinely expect too much from their mere presence on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Berger warns that many companies are getting caught up in the hype and ignoring the important question: Why do certain brands go viral, while others lag?

In his new book, [*Contagious: Why Things Catch On*](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1451686579/ref=as_li_qf_sp_asin_il_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1451686579&linkCode=as2&tag=strategybusin-20) (Simon & Schuster, 2013), Berger, who has a psychology background, codifies his framework for understanding and marshaling the power of word of mouth—the willingness of people to spread your message—to reach and influence customers. It’s a marketing strategy that his research has shown to be 10 times as effective as traditional advertising. Berger recently sat down with *strategy+business* to explain why generating word of mouth is more important than accumulating likes and followers.

**S+B: In *Contagious*, you posit that there’s a science behind why certain things spread.  
BERGER:** For the past decade, I’ve studied word of mouth—why people talk about certain brands more than others. It’s not random; there’s a structure behind it, a formula. And if we understand that formula, we can be much more effective. Again and again, I found the same six key drivers: social currency, triggers, emotions, public, practical value, and stories.

*Social currency* is the idea that people are more likely to talk about something the better and smarter it makes them look, and the more special it makes them feel. *Triggers* are why peanut butter makes us think of jelly—linking products and ideas to cues in the environment increases word of mouth. The more you can get people fired up, excited, or even feeling negative about something, the more likely they’ll be to pass it on: That’s *emotion*. *Public* refers to the idea that by making behavior more observable, so that it can be imitated, you make it more likely that your idea will catch on. When something has *practical value*—when it is useful—people share it with others to help them. And finally, *stories* enable you to wrap your product or idea in a narrative that carries your brand along for the ride.

**S+B: What does this mean for companies’ marketing strategies?  
BERGER:** Marketers often believe that they need to tell people why they should buy a product or focus on features that will benefit consumers. But people don’t want to share things that look or sound like ads. One of the biggest problems today is that companies spend way too much money on traditional advertising. They need to shift to thinking about how to turn customers into advocates—how they can get the people who use and like their product to share it with more individuals, both online and off.

To get that to happen, however, you have to understand why people are talking in the first place. This is where science comes in.

**S+B: How does that tie into other ideas about social spreading?  
BERGER:** I read [Malcolm Gladwell](http://gladwell.com/) when I was in college, and it inspired me. But *The Tipping Point* doesn’t talk about how to get more word of mouth. It popularized the idea of social epidemics, but it didn’t explain why people talk about some things rather than others. A good analogy is that social epidemics are like cars. They can go fast, but only because of the engine—and word of mouth is that engine.