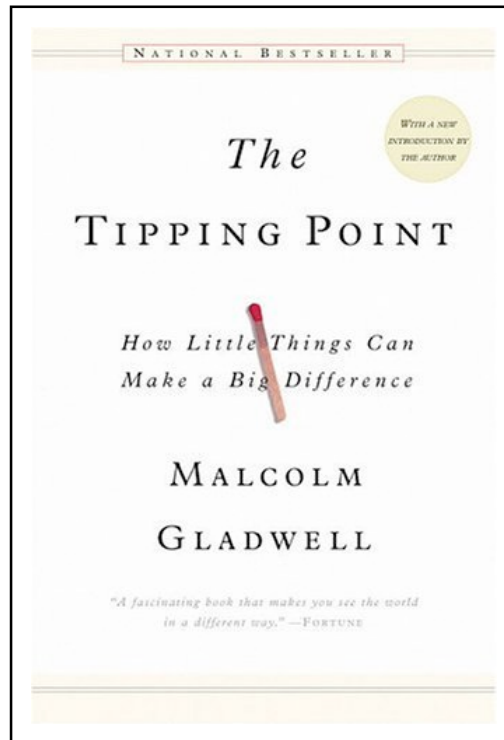

BOOK REVIEW

"The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference" by Malcom Gladwell

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How is it that some products or services take off and others don't? How is it that some sell and others never get off the ground? Furthermore, how is it that a product can be around for a good deal of time and not much happen, and then suddenly, take off?

Gladwell points to the example of Hush Puppies (the brushed-suede shoes with the lightweight crepe sole) which up to the early 1990s were almost a dead brand selling only 30,000 pairs a year. However, by 1995, the company sold 430,000 pairs of shoes and the next year it sold four times that number and the year after still more. In 1996, Hush Puppies won the prize for best accessory at the Council of Fashion Designer's awards dinner at Lincoln Centre. How did this happen?

Furthermore, Gladwell points to the desperately poor New York City neighbourhoods of Brownsville and East New York where violent and dangerous crime was rampant. In 1992, murders and serious crimes were at

their height, but then something happened and within five years, murders had dropped 64.3% and total crimes had dropped by almost half.

Both of these examples highlight a "tipping point" which is the level at which the momentum for change becomes unstoppable. It's almost like a flu virus or an Internet virus. It spreads quickly and is difficult to stop. As Gladwell states, "ideas and products and messages and behaviours spread like viruses do." So what are the factors that can make a product or service to become unstoppable?

Gladwell describes the "three rules of epidemics" (or the three "agents of change"). The **first rule** is that the success of any kind of social epidemic is heavily dependent on the involvement of people with a particular and rare set of social gifts. For example, there are those who could be called "*connectors*" who are people who "link us up to the world and our people with a special gift for bringing the world together". They have an extraordinary knack for making friends and acquaintances and have social networks of over 100 people. In other words, they know a lot of people. There are also those who are "*mavens*" who are information specialists or people we rely upon to connect us with new information. They accumulate knowledge especially about the market patterns and then share it with others. They like to help and they like to solve other people's problems by sharing their information. Finally, there are the "*salesmen*" who are the persuaders. These people are charismatic and generally have powerful negotiation skills. People tend to want to agree with them. It is these kinds of people who are well-connected, with good information, and strongly persuasive who help any epidemic to spread.

The **second rule** has to do with what is called the "stickiness factor" which is the specific content of a message that renders its impact memorable.

The **third rule** has to do with the "power of context" where human behaviour is sensitive to and strongly influenced by its environment. As Gladwell says, "epidemics are sensitive to the conditions and circumstances of the times and places in which they occur." For instance, "zero tolerance" efforts to combat minor crimes such as fare-beating and vandalism on the New York subway led to a decline in more violent crimes city-wide.

There are also two chapters of case studies, situations in which tipping point concepts were used in specific situations. These situations included the athletic shoe company Airwalk, the diffusion model, how rumours are spread, decreasing the spread of syphilis in Baltimore, reducing teen suicide in the South Pacific Islands of Micronesia and teen smoking in the U.S.A.

It is an important read for anyone who is interested in impacting the wider scene with a service or product. Probably it ought to be mandatorily reading for anyone in advertising or marketing. Irrespective, it certainly gives a perspective on human behaviour from a largely psychological and sociological orientation that makes for an interesting read. Gladwell is not short on examples and the book itself is written in a friendly manner. Any book which had sold 1.7 million copies by 2006 has to be good.

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