Contagious:
Why Things Catch On
Jonah Berger

SYNOPSIS

Why do people talk about certain products and ideas more than others? Why are some stories and rumors more infectious? And what makes online content go viral?

Wharton Marketing professor Jonah Berger has spent the last decade answering these questions and in this book he reveals the secret science behind the answers to these questions through groundbreaking research and powerful stories. Keep this in mind as you review the six specific, actionable techniques for designing messages that people will share:

Social Currency – We share things that make us look good

Research shows that more than more than 40% of what people talk about is their personal experiences or relationships. One important thing to note: only 7% of word-of-mouth happens online. While on average people spend two hours a day online, we spend a great deal more time off-line and talking to people.

Most people would rather look smart than dumb, rich than poor, and cool than geeky, so we need to design messages that help people achieve these desired impressions. Just as people use money to buy products and services, they use social currency to achieve positive impressions with families, friends and colleagues.

Triggers – Top of mind, tip of tongue

Triggers are stimuli that prompt people to think about our products and ideas. The word "dog" reminds us of "cat." We associate the color pink with a cure for breast cancer. People talk about what comes to mind, so the more often people think about a product or idea, the more it will be talked about.

If you want to get a better sense for yourself, try keeping a conversation diary for a day and write down all of the things you mention. You may be surprised at all the products and ideas you talk about. What triggered those mentions?

Emotion – When we care, we share

Contagious content usually evokes some sort of emotion, and emotion that results in action is the most powerful. Anger and love invoke action, while sadness and contentment often result in deactivation. Rather than focusing on facts and function, we need to focus on how people will feel when receiving our message.

SAMPLE LEARNINGS

Contagious introduces the STEPPS framework and this quick reference helps you test your message to see if it's contagious.

Social Currency	Does talking about your product or idea make people feel good? Can you find ways to make it remarkable or make people feel like insiders?
Triggers	What cues make people think about your message much like people think about jelly when you say peanut butter?
Emotion	Does your message generate emotion?
Public	Does your product or idea advertise itself? Do people see others talking about it or using it?
Practical Value	Does talking about your idea help people help others? How can you package your information in a way that makes it easy to share?
Stories	How can you embed your product or idea in a broader story that people want to share --making sure your idea is an integral part of the story and travels with it?

Public – Built to show, built to grow

It's hard to copy something you can't see, so making things more observable makes them easier to imitate, which makes them more likely to become popular. Behavior is public and thoughts are private, so we need to design products and ideas that are public.

For example, when first designing the Apple laptop, the logo on the top faced the user when the lid was closed. However, Steve Jobs quickly realized that it's when the laptop is in use and the lid is open that people observe the computer a person is using, yet at that point the logo was upside down, so they rotated it. In addition, Nike, Burberry and Izod all garnish their products with visible brand names.

Practical value – News you can use

People like to help others, so if we can show them how our ideas will save time, improve health, or save money, they will spread the word. Because people are so inundated with information, it's also important that we package our information in a way that is easy to share. For example, "ten ways to lose weight" or "the five top apps for 2013" provide useful information that is easy to share.

Ideas or deals that seem to have a substantial financial or social currency or are available for a limited amount of time have a high value.

Stories – Information travels under the guise of idle chatter

People don't just share information, they tell stories. Information travels under the guise of what seems like idle chatter, so we need to embed our messages in stories that people want to tell. We also need to make our message so integral that the story can't be told without including it. Think about online reviews. They're supposed to be about product features, but this informational content often ends up embedded in a background narrative.

Stories can incorporate many of the other components we've discussed. For example, a story might be remarkable (social currency), evoke surprise or amazement (emotion), and provide useful information (practical value.)

The concept is really a simple one. If you can get people to talk about your idea or share your content, it will spread through social networks like a virus, making your product or idea "popular." Harnessing the power of word of mouth, online and offline, requires understanding why people talk and why some things get talked about and shared more than others. This book helps you understand the psychology of sharing or the science of social transmission so you can make your messages "contagious!"

Review by Chris Gay, Bridge Consulting