

Book Review: *The Tipping Point. How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*, by Malcolm Gladwell, hardcover, Little, Brown and Company, March 2000; paperback edition, First Back Bay, January 2002.

This book examines, in quite a lot of detail, how change happens. The author uses a diverse set of examples, from the adoption of Hush Puppies as a new “fad”, to the outbreak of various flu viruses to the gradual rise and dramatic fall of crime statistics in New York City, to the rise of Airwalk, a skateboard company. Gladwell calls all of these types of changes “epidemics” and gives the concept of the epidemic three distinct characteristics:

- 1) It is contagious
- 2) Little causes have big effects
- 3) Change does not happen gradually but in one dramatic moment.

He says that number three, that change happens in one dramatic moment is the most important because it enables the first two characteristics and gives us the greatest insight as to why change happens the way it does.

There are three other conditions that must be met—*The Law of the Few*, *The Stickiness Factor* and *The Power of Context*. A combination of some or all of these attributes cause what Gladwell has termed “the tipping point”, the point at which events reach a critical mass and the dramatic moment comes.

The Law of the Few--Gladwell describes people who are connectors, mavens and salesmen (gender specification is Gladwell’s, not mine). Connectors are people who are just naturally interested in a wide, diverse group of people and who introduce their group of interesting acquaintances to other interesting acquaintances. Mavens are those who work at obtaining knowledge of lots of things—products, technology, etc. and who use that knowledge to help others make decisions. Salesmen are those subtle and not-so-subtle persuaders of the rest of us.

The Stickiness Factor--Gladwell goes into detail with Sesame Street as an example of concepts that have that certain something (exactly what, is sort of left to the reader) to tip the balance to public awareness.

The Power of Context--Gladwell studies the conditions that led to the subway shootings committed by average citizen Bernhard Goetz and goes into detail about New York City crime. He also cites numerous examples of the rule of 150—the maximum number of relationships our brains can handle and still maintain familiarity with individuals in the group. If we want to reach the tipping point of making our product known or having a movement happen, larger organizations must be broken down into groups of not more than 150 to be effective.

I think this book is very interesting and thought-provoking. I found the examples to be a little heavy in the crime wave department and it's difficult at times to tell if his message is about change or about advocating new marketing concepts. It has captured the attention of the marketing world and consulting firms and big corporations have adapted the concepts he promotes. Certainly the author's concepts explain the new success of "viral" marketing.

I would offer something that Gladwell doesn't seem to observe in the book. In my experience, change happens "all at once" because the energy that fuels that change is moving, but not visible on the surface. We can't see it, so we don't believe that our efforts at change are having an effect. It's human nature to give up and get discouraged because we don't feel we've made progress. It's like sticking to our diet religiously, and for days the scale doesn't reflect one pound lost, until one sweet day it shows we've lost four pounds, not just one! Here's wishing you lots of "sweet days" in 2005!