

Tip This

BY CHIP MARTELLA

U.S. CONCEPTS

Crank up the drawbridge, fellow marketers: Camelot is under attack. I'm not talking about King Arthur and Lancelot, or Obama and JFK for that matter.

No, I'm talking about the Holy Grail of Marketing, *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell—the brand bible of buzz for a legion of faithful readers.

In case you've been too busy caucusing, there's been a lot of chatter lately in magazines, blogs, group emails and Donny-esque TV shows about a provocative argument being circulated that *The Tipping Point*, and in fact the whole notion of *Influentials* detailed therein, is misguided, dangerous, or worse—dead wrong.

In Clive Thompson's article, "Is the Tipping Point Toast?" in the February issue of *Fast Company*, Duncan Watts, a clearly intelligent network-theory scientist (could you be otherwise, being that?) currently on assignment with Yahoo!, suggests that Influencers, as defined, categorized and sub-categorized by Gladwell, have no real role in the creation of trends.

Watts' principal argument is that "ordinary" people can actually be more effective in the propagation of a viral message or ad than Influencers—to the tune of being four- to five-times more effective. He even goes so far as to suggest that marketers who spend their time and money thinking about—and attempting to influence—Influencers are wasting both.

So, as I jump into the fray, let me try to frame the discussion in terms of what we, as marketers, can learn from the discourse.



First of all, as Gladwell would tell you, *The Tipping Point* was never intended as a handbook for marketers any more than his article in *The New Yorker* about the image problem of Pit Bulls was intended as a buying guide for dog lovers.

Marketers just treated the book as such, seeing how it reinforced long-held industry beliefs and provided a nicely packaged, credible proof point that could be handed to clients with a wink and a smirk. (Full disclosure, at my last agency, Fusion 5, we seized on the book in its first printing as just that and sent it out to everyone we knew. Guilty as charged, but hey, it worked).

But beyond that, there are a couple of specific examples cited in Thompson's article that demonstrate how Watts seemingly skipped over or missed some key points.

CONTEXT: THE MADONNA TEST

In an example that tipped many overzealous bloggers into a gleeful frenzy at the chance to take potshots at the Material Girl, Watts conducted a test that attempted to recreate the music scene in 1983—and what would have happened had Madonna



Was Madonna a fluke and Hush Puppies an accident?

released the same material a year earlier. Would it have been such a sensation?

There's only one problem here: Watts fails to take into account that Madonna, as an artist, wouldn't have written or chosen the same songs a year earlier. And they probably would have been produced differently. And maybe she wouldn't have worn those clothes. There are just too many variables. So, yeah, she may not have had that success if the same material had been released in '82.

But would anyone in his or her right mind bet against her, even in hindsight? She proved to be on top of emerging trends, musical and otherwise, five or six times over the next decade and a half. Why? Because she's an artist, she's savvy, she surrounded herself with talent—and she was driven.

Those are non-laboratory variables—context—that can't be accounted for in Watts' tests, but that are crucial in credibly assessing the tests' validity. Of course the problem is, they are impossible to replicate.

So, as marketers, what can we learn from this? Well, for one thing, don't engage in the devilishly tempting practice that hundreds of brands fall victim to all too often all across the globe: Don't attempt to recreate a viral phenomenon. It simply can't be done.

I wish I had a dollar (or preferably a euro) for every time a brand manager, in a voiceover to a brief, boldly stated that the key to success was to follow Red Bull's buzz-building path to dominance. Or to replicate Jagermeister's now legendary bartender-seeded brand mythology.

First of all, it helps if your brand has a story to tell. And, secondly—context, context, context. You can't recreate the past simply by borrowing some tactics.

Just as there will never be another Bob Dylan—no matter how many up and coming singer/songwriters are unfairly marketed that way—there will never be another brand that succeeds on the exact same terms as Red Bull or Jagermeister. (Not to mention that, in the case of those two brands, they were allowed to grow organically—without the specter of a CMO waving quarterly profit forecasts in front of them).

Successful brands need to find their own inherent equities that can be leveraged or packaged to tell their own stories in their own ways, and then, of course, articulate their stories in a relevant, insightful and compelling manner to the consumer who is most likely to be receptive to it and spread it. This is sometimes called “activating brand fanatics.”

Which brings me to the second crucial component of what makes or breaks a word-of-mouth success, and another chink in Watts' armor.

PRODUCT: HUSH PUPPIES DON'T SUCK

Watts is quoted as saying: “If society is ready to embrace a trend, almost anyone can start one—and if it isn't then almost no one can.” In this case, it's not that Watts is wrong, it's that he's missing some crucial pieces to the puzzle.

In one of Gladwell's most talked about examples, Hush Puppy shoes (the brand) was rescued by a bunch of East Village hipsters who “discovered” them in a thrift shop and, after they started wearing them, slowly helped bring them back due to their place in society as Influencers.

There is a key point hidden here that rarely gets talked about (and a tenet for all those brand stewards standing at easels with colored markers ideating about new ways to connect virally with their consumers): If your product sucks, forget it. Really.

When was the last time you wore or even tried on a pair of Hush Puppies? Well, trust me, they're damn comfortable shoes—crazy comfortable, almost, albeit kind of ugly. Which, incidentally, is why they were lost in the fashion vortex for so long, and why they were picked up by kids who didn't care as much about how they looked as how they felt. Plus, at the time, in those thrift shops, they were cheap.

But if the shoes weren't comfortable, those unsuspecting hipsters would have had nothing to talk about. And even the most sophisticated, focus-group endorsed marketing campaign wouldn't have rescued them.

The lesson here is that some brands and products are much more suited to word-of-mouth marketing

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than others. If your product isn't the first in, doesn't have a demonstrable difference versus its primary competition or doesn't have a compelling story that effectively leverages a core consumer insight, you're better off utilizing a different marketing discipline to communicate the message.

I can't think of a single brand that benefited from buzz marketing that didn't have one or more of the above qualities. It takes a spark to light a fire.

Which leads us to another factor that has been lost in the dust kicked up by Thompson's article and closes specifically on the matter of Influentials.

THE ACCIDENTAL INFLUENTIALS

In a continuation of the Hush Puppy story, Thompson, paraphrasing Watts, asks about those same East Villagers: "Why didn't their other clothing choices reach a tipping point too?"

Well, one answer is because they were probably wearing nothing else of particular note than those out-of-date, oddly shaped shoes (that perhaps triggered so many "retro" good vibes among those who saw them). But, more important for us as marketers, it points up this fact: There is no such thing as an All-Knowing, All-Influencing Influencer (aside from, of course, a handful of über hot celebrities, but this is not about exceptions to the rule). Being an Influencer does not mean you are some other-worldly being with metaphysical powers capable of swaying those around you to act and follow as you please. There are different Influencers for different brands, categories, hobbies, etc.

In other words, everyone has their own "Influencer set," whether they realize it or not. The person you seek out when buying a flat-screen TV is (most times) very different from the person you would ask when buying a new set of China. Those Hush Puppy kids were, in fact, "Accidental Influentials."

They weren't trying to influence anybody. But they did, because they were highly visible in certain circles of people who at the outset were wearing the same shirts and jeans, but not the same shoes. And when asked, they most likely responded that the shoes were comfortable (and cheap), dude, check 'em out. They were accidental, but the right people in the right place at the right time with the right product.

For us, as marketers, the implication is that we must decide who is the right person for the brand we are trying to push out there—and to realize that it may be a different person at a different time, even within the same brand family.

This is not to say, as Watts suggests, that most—or all—ordinary people can be Influencers. Not true. Even if you define the influencer for your brand to be an Alpha Mom, you still need to screen her social habits, media consumption trends, role and access to other members of the community, etc. rigorously before you "activate" her. And then, at some point, you have to let the brand take over—if it's unique, differentiated, relevant—in short, *worthy*.

THE QUESTION OF MEASURABILITY

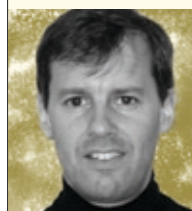
Watts also claims that another issue with the Influencer philosophy is that proponents can't ever prove it works—the implication being that if you can't measure it, don't do it. Here's where we separate the knights from the page boys.

I have always, and will always, maintain that the measurability of Influencers and their role in word-of-mouth marketing is a fool's errand. Having operated in this field for more than 20 years, I have sat in the room with senior-level marketers all over the world who get it—and many more who don't. There is a gut instinct and an inherent strategic understanding of the role and benefit of properly executed programs with built-in WOM potential and triggers.

I'd be happy to provide a laundry list of programs by smart brands that do this every day without twisting themselves in knots over how to measure (start with NikeID and Glaceau Vitamin Water).

The people who demanded measurability ten years ago are the ones still standing on the sidelines watching other brands get built in innovative ways... if they're still employed. Can it be measured? Sure. Should the methodology be the barometer of go/no go? Nope.

At some point you either drink the Kool-Aid and ride the buzz—or you doom yourself to drinking the soft stuff at the water cooler and talking about the other guy who did it right. ■



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