

# Tipping the Buzz for Consumer Marketing

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*Buzz* is a marketing component capable of propelling a brand to breakthrough levels of volume and revenue.

Malcolm Gladwell's The Tipping Point was on every business best seller list in 2000. From the editors "... Gladwell looks at why major changes in our society (ideas, behavior, messages, and products) so often happen suddenly and unexpectedly... and often spread like outbreaks of infectious disease".

These two concepts - tipping points and buzz - meld into a powerful tool for marketers to drive brand growth. Until now, there were few methods to manage this phenomenon. New work known as "Small Worlds" from the discipline of Complexity Science provides a rich foundation enabling marketers to devise strategy focused on using the natural communication among consumers to spread brand messages that increase sales.

## Marketing application

Let's examine in detail how to apply these principles to an active marketing situation. This approach is quite well suited to marketing feature films. Feature film marketing has realized the importance of buzz for as long as any consumer sector. And, in addition to its theatrical release, the marketing of a feature film includes movement into ancillary markets – home video, global theaters, cable and satellite TV among others.

Consumer market segments for films are varied. They include frequency of moviegoing, demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, fans of a particular film genre, and consumers attracted to an individual actor, actress, or director's work. Each new film has additional segments that emerge from the specifics of that particular offering. For example, product tie-ins whether from clothing, fast food meals, BMWs or Ray Bans are capable of generating consumers who will associate their product usage with the film. What is of use to us is the presence of a number of market segments.

Armed with the insights from *small worlds theory*, we construct computer models that represent all the market segments for a film. The model contains data on the composition of each segment, the propensity of individual segment members to

influence others with their opinions, and a measure of a group's population to accept the opinion of various sources. Activating the model provides a simulation of how the buzz for a film travels within each market segment and how moviegoers in separate segments communicate with each other.

The simulations show us the amount of effort necessary for buzz to reach a tipping point in a given small world. We can test specific opportunities such as: increasing pre-release awareness, emphasizing one of the cross promotions, special screenings for selected audiences, or any combination of these and additional options. Results from using model simulations include a direct measure of the path for an ROI of marketing resources. The model identifies where and when buzz will reach a tipping point and spread throughout the market creating demand and box office revenue.

Any consumer product or service category can benefit by harnessing the value of *tipping the buzz*. This example, based on motion picture marketing, is with equal measure direct and pedagogical.

## Concepts

From Gladwell we learn that messages of all types spread throughout society. In some cases, a message (which may even begin in an isolated or unique quarter of the public) generates ample attention that it “tips” from a relative level of obscurity and rises to ubiquity. For this discussion in the realm of consumer marketing, ‘message’ may imply product news, buying behavior, adoption of an idea, etc.

A few general conditions are present when a tipping point is reached. Knowledgeable people who are described as social connectors are required to be among the first to receive, understand, or discover the message. The message itself has a content that is compelling, and in Gladwell's terms the message has *stickiness*. These last two characteristics have serious implications for marketers. That is – for a product to ever reach a tipping point it must have the quality and appeal to establish a relationship in the market that meets the criteria of compelling content and stickiness.

When these forces converge at a sufficient intensity, the tipping point is reached, and the message takes on epidemic proportion and spreads throughout the marketplace.

Buzz has recently been studied in a very detailed and pragmatic manner. A systematic review of buzz by Renee Dye (in the Harvard Business Review) guides us to identify the potential paths for buzz. Once these paths are known, Dye suggests using simulations that show the flow of information from one group to another. Of equal importance in finding buzz is interviewing customer groups to determine their propensity to adopt and recommend a product. The models depicted in our example do precisely as Dye directs.

## Science

These models are possible because of Complexity Science. No science proves more important and appropriate for marketing than complexity. Marketing a consumer brand requires full understanding of buyer behavior. A consumer makes a purchase decision based on the combinations of many product facets: price, advertising, loyalty, image, ... Small changes in a product's buzz, the purchase by an acquaintance, or the unexpected arrival of a competitive alternative all have impact on if/when/how much a consumer purchases. And all these elements are at work simultaneously; they interact with each other and become a gestalt of brand knowledge.

The system of buyer behavior is identical to systems studied in complexity theory: biology, economics, particle physics, weather, etc. The common traits for all systems are: they are not linear, elements of the system interact (the whole is greater than the sum of the parts), and small changes in initial conditions can create profoundly different outcomes. Without question consumer marketing meets the structure of a complex system.

Small worlds theory arises from complexity science. Small worlds can mathematically explain the intriguing "six degrees of separation". They provide a computational framework to represent concepts such as social networks and their hubs. And of critical interest, small worlds will discriminate between random events and true formations of individual connection ---- for us, the presence of a viable market segment.

## Going forward

With the use of small world theory marketers will see market segments with new clarity. We will move past the commonplace of identifying segments and into the arena of fully understanding the behavior of segments. New models will generate alternative strategy options for brand positioning and resource allocation. Incorporating the conceptual elements of buzz and tipping points enables marketers to build strategy from models that are realistic and scientifically sound.