



# From Complacent to Contagious: Where is Your Brand on the Spectrum?

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## THE RUNDOWN

Why do some ideas spread like wildfire while others don't? The Wharton School's Jonah Berger has examined hundreds of baby names, thousands of New York Times articles and data from millions of YouTube videos to break down the elements that make things go viral. Here, the best-selling author joins the Engagement Project conversation by giving us a glimpse at his findings on how brands can shift their thinking to create engaging, contagious content.

Engagement is a spectrum. On one end of the continuum you have passive consumers and interruption marketing. This is any kind of ad that is unsolicited, not based on who you are, and gives you no opportunity to signal your interest (or lack thereof). You may be engaged, if the stars align and the right message finds you, but it's a relatively passive type of engagement — one which puts the onus on you to go elsewhere (online, in-store, an event) to signal your interest.

On the other end of the continuum are the marketing efforts that invite you to take part. In these cases, when done well, people actively share or talk about products, ideas, brands, companies, or reputations. They don't just like those things, but they like them so much, they're actively telling others about them. This is active engagement.

The web gives consumers and brands the opportunity to engage with each other. As a result, smart advertisers are looking to the web not as a home for their offline content, but as a place to really take advantage of the nature of engagement. My colleagues and I have spent the past two years looking into the phenomena that lead to hyper-engagement on the web – the things that get shared so often they “go viral”.

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In the age of the web, a lot of companies focus on how many friends they have or how many likes they get. But the question is not just likes or friends — which are static. It's engagement: Are people actually coming back to your site? Are they sharing and commenting on things that you're posting? Are they spending time with your content?

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**SO HOW DO YOU GROW THIS TYPE OF LOVE? HOW DO YOU GET YOUR BRAND'S IDEAS TO SPREAD?**

There's a tendency, especially after *The Tipping Point* — which is a book a lot of people read — to focus on the messenger. *The Tipping Point* argues that you need to find the special people, you need to find the mavens — the super-influentials. But what my book, *Contagious*, argues is that it's not about the messenger. What really matters is the message.

## BRANDS NEED TO ASK: “HOW CAN WE DESIGN A MESSAGE THAT PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKELY TO TALK ABOUT AND SHARE?”

You don't have to find the perfect people to spread your idea. If you focus on the message, and make it easy to share, it doesn't matter whether the people who share it have ten friends or 10,000 friends, whether they're really persuasive, the most popular person on a social network or they're not really popular at all.

In fact, for marketers to effectively spread their message using social channels like Twitter, it may be much more cost effective to create interesting, relevant content and get normal people — people who are not necessarily “influencers” in their area of expertise — to share it.

And though this may seem intuitive to many of us, the magnitude can be surprising. A study last year found 80 percent of US online adults credit communication with people they know personally for helping them discover new brands, products or services. Ninety-four percent of those respondents actually purchased or tried a new brand or product after hearing about it through the grapevine. So how do you go about creating content that maximizes the grapevine?

## THE SIX PRINCIPLES OF CONTAGIOUS

After analyzing hundreds of contagious messages, products and ideas, my collaborators and I noticed six “ingredients” or principles that are often at work in the things that are talked about, shared, and imitated. They are:

### **1. SOCIAL CURRENCY**

People want to be smart, cool and savvy. That motivates us to share and engage with things.

#### **PEPSI MAX & JEFF GORDON PRESENT: “TEST DRIVE”**

[goo.gl/CLXDo](http://goo.gl/CLXDo)

This video went viral on the web and was viewed 28 million times in the first week. There was significant chatter across the web around whether it was real or not, with users sharing the content on social channels across the web.

### **2. TRIGGERS**

Stimuli prompt people to think of related things, for example, peanut butter reminds us of jelly.

#### **OFFICIAL RAM TRUCKS SUPER BOWL COMMERCIAL “FARMER”**

[goo.gl/qpgkD](http://goo.gl/qpgkD)

Even though most pickups will never see a farm, by evoking farm imagery, and Paul Harvey, the brand puts itself in the mental space of Americana. This becomes more than just an ad.

It's a salute to all that is good about America. This ad "won" many of the Super Bowl contests, and more recently was selected as a winner in TED's Ads Worth Spreading.

### **3. EMOTION**

Emotions get people engaged and activated. When we care, we share.

#### **DOVE REAL BEAUTY SKETCHES**

[goo.gl/1918E](http://goo.gl/1918E)

Dove recently swept the Cannes Lions Awards with their Real Beauty Sketches. The campaign is so much more than just advertising. It's a compelling story of how important feeling beautiful is to how we see ourselves.

### **4. PUBLIC**

When something is observable — it could be a ribbon signalling solidarity with a cause or a glowing piece of fruit on a laptop — it becomes much easier for others to imitate.

#### **YOUTUBE PROUD TO LOVE**

[goo.gl/LrZU5](http://goo.gl/LrZU5)

YouTube timed it's Proud to Love campaign with the Supreme Courts' judgement that struck down the Defense of Marriage Act and Pride celebrations nationwide. They both featured user generated content and encouraged users to upload their own videos or experiences using #ProudToLove. In just over a week a search for #ProudToLove on YouTube yielded more than 91,600 results.

### **5. PRACTICAL VALUE**

People like to help others. If your content can save time, or money, or improve health, they'll spread the word.

#### **HOME DEPOT'S HOW TO CONTENT**

[goo.gl/qUVZX](http://goo.gl/qUVZX)

Since 2009 the Home Depot has been publishing "How To" content that's informative and useful for their audience. Complex, but popular "How To" topics like tiling a bathroom floor, wall or shower; installing a toilet; or building a deck.

### **6. STORIES**

People don't just share information, they share stories.

#### **USHER'S "LOOKING 4 MYSELF" PRESENTED BY SAMSUNG**

[goo.gl/SaEJj](http://goo.gl/SaEJj)

This recent ad from Samsung reached #1 on the June 2013 YouTube Ads Leaderboard. It showcases the amazing new motion features on Samsung's new Smart TV through a compelling breakup story.

## TROJAN HORSES WIN

In the end, while there can be a tendency to get technology-drunk, fundamentally the same thing that's been true for 50 years still holds — the underlying factor in all of the most viral content is the story. When done right, technology enhances the story, it doesn't replace it.

Because stories underpin contagious content, brands should think about what larger narratives they can wrap their ideas in. Build trojan horses. Embed your products and ideas in stories that

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people want to tell. It's not easy, but shut off that first instinct to “sell, sell, sell” and think about how you can make consumers' lives better. They will appreciate it and help you out along the way.

*Jonah Berger's Contagious: Why Things Catch On is published by Simon & Schuster.*



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