

When Marketing Becomes Contagious

"Please don't tell." A few simple words that say what is coming next is to be kept private. But what if this was the name of an exclusive bar? And to make the bar even more exclusive, you can only gain entrance through a hidden door in the back of an old phone booth in the corner of a small, hole-in-the-wall hot dog restaurant? Seems unlikely that this exclusive bar would stay in business – but the opposite is true. People can't help but share this bit of information and spread the word of this unique establishment. So much so, it is hard to get a reservation to this hidden bar.

This is just one example that was part of Jonah Berger's keynote address, "Power of Word of Mouth. Why Things Catch On," at the recent Legal Marketing Association's Northeast Conference. Jonah is an assistant professor of Marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. His presentation was based on his book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. He walked us through some stories and examples based on solid research about what is behind the word-of-mouth (WOM) principle.

Is Word of Mouth Marketing Effective?

With so many options in our marketing arsenal at our disposal, which ones are the most effective? Social media has been a growing platform and there has been a big focus on this relatively new media outlet, but the most influential platform is – and always has been – word of mouth. The most effective word of mouth is face-to-face, with only 7%–10% actually happening online, and 91% of new business comes from existing clients. Research has shown that word of mouth generates more than twice the sales of advertising. This comes down to the simple fact that someone telling about a product or service is much more effective than seeing the same claim in any form of advertising or social platform. People trust the individuals in their personal social circles.

Those of us in marketing or advertising can usually see through the sales tactic, or at least question the value of a "special" sale. But how can you get a product or service to catch on, and get the consumer to be your product's or service's spokesperson? Throughout his presentation, Berger played some video clips showing how something as mundane as an ordinary blender could grow its market share in the industry with a low-budget campaign. How can you get a durable blender to gain attention and grow sales? Tom Dickson, the founder of Blendtec, spent several years perfecting a blender that could handle anything. He tested his blenders by putting all types of items in them to see if the blender could stand up to the challenge without breaking. This led his marketing partner's idea to produce a series of short videos called "*Will it blend?*"

Dickson blended all kinds of items: marbles, Bic lighters, CDs, golf balls, even an iPhone. Blendtec's blender pulverized everything and did not break under the challenge. The videos went viral, and Blendtec's sales increased by 700 percent in two years. This is an excellent example of how contagious content is made, not born.



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What makes something contagious?

Every day, people try to create “that video” that becomes viral. But the reality is that only a handful of the millions of videos uploaded will actually go viral. Key factors that can help make your product or service more contagious are:

Social currency: Make people feel as if they have insider knowledge about a product or service. With insider knowledge, people have a tendency to share and talk about what they know to others, spreading this information for you.

Triggers: In a specific situation, a person will recall information that is relevant at that time. When someone says “peanut butter,” you immediately think of jelly.

Emotion: This is a powerful trigger. [Emotion causes people to talk and share.](#)

Public: Make your product or service more visible so it can be seen or shared. This falls into the “monkey see, monkey do” category.

Practical value: Make your product or service useful. People like to help others and will share your product or service with others within their social circles.

Stories: People like to share stories; it is in our nature. Every company, product or service has a story behind it. [Crafting that message to tell your story](#) can set you apart or allow others to share your story and do the heavy lifting for you.

These key word-of-mouth marketing factors can be applied to any company, service, individual or organization. Understanding these key factors and deciding which ones fit your message (to market your professional service or individual practice) can make all the difference in getting your message to catch on. Word of mouth is a powerful tool; figuring out how you can harness any combination of these key factors can raise awareness of how you can help prospective clients with their needs.

Berger’s book goes into extensive detail, with research and statistics as well as examples of campaigns or stunts that did and did not catch on. And his keynote address intrigued me enough to read his book, so I guess it was contagious.

Done correctly, contagious marketing is highly effective and does not necessarily require a big-budget effort. Word of mouth can be a powerful tool. Let’s discuss how we can apply this in the legal and professional services industry. Reach out to me at asingles@jaffepr.com or leave a comment below.