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INSIDER: Contagious: Why Things Catch On
Stephen Chandler, MBA Candidate

Can you believe there is a steakhouse in Philadelphia that sells a cheesesteak for $100? What about a YouTube channel showcasing videos of a blender tearing through different Apple products? And that channel has close to 700,000 subscribers where two videos have been viewed a combined 28 million times.

Now, would you be shocked to learn these stories are related? On its face, a YouTube video that showcases the power of a blender, and a 100-buck Philly cheesesteak seem to have nothing in common - but both share attributes of all things that go viral.

According to Jonah Berger, a Wharton Marketing professor and the author of Contagious: Why Things Catch On, the premise is simple and fairly intuitive. Whether you are in marketing, real estate, or even politics, understanding how to push your products, services, and ideas to catch on is essential for success. To do so, users need to discover how to make content (stories, news, and information) contagious. Berger sets up a contagious framework with six steps: (1) Social currency; (2) Triggers; (3) Emotion; (4) Public; (5) Practical value; and (6) Stories (STEPPS). STEPPS make even the most boring content (like a blender) go viral.

Being contagious means likely to spread or diffuse from person-to-person via word-of-mouth or social influence. In business, including real estate, it means marketers and firms should design messages, products, and ideas with contagious ingredients in mind to make their brand more likely to go viral.

THINK POINT #1: Why Contagious?

People love to share stories, news, tidbits and information with those around them. Social transmission is important, as the things others tell, email, and text us have a significant impact on what we think, read, buy, and do. According to research outlined in Berger’s book, word-of-mouth is the primary factor behind 20-50% of all purchasing decisions. Why? Information shared via word-of-mouth is persuasive, especially compared to advertisements, which are perceived as biased and less credible. Word-of-mouth is also targeted. Naturally, consumers share information because they believe they have an interested audience.
What percent of word-of-mouth conversations do you think happen online? If you said about 50-60%, you would be like most people. Unfortunately, you would also be wrong. According to research by the Keller Fay Group, the number of word-of-mouth conversations that take place online is actually only seven percent. Consumers spend quite a bit of time online, but spend eight times as much time engaged in offline conversations.

This fact about social transmission makes an important point about online engagement: social media is a technology, not a strategy. Just posting something on Facebook or Twitter does not mean anyone will notice or even spread your message. Social media is not always the best vehicle. You may have a broad audience, and it is important to recognize that not all potential recipients will see every message you send.

Online conversations are all about social currency. Is sharing this information going to make me look smart or cool? Offline conversations are all about triggers. What is top-of-mind to fill conversational space? Marketing professionals and real estate professionals who engage in personal branding need to carefully consider how consumers share information to maximize marketing efforts and make content contagious.

**THINK POINT #2: Master the STEPPS to Becoming Contagious**

An idea, product, or service that becomes contagious is not random. Six ingredients (STEPPS) exist in all content that goes viral:

1. **Social Currency: How does it make people look to talk about a product or idea?**

   Real estate professionals need to find the “inner remarkability” of their ideas, products, and services to make their audience feel like insiders. The most powerful form of marketing is a personal recommendation. Research shows that more than 40% of what consumers talk about centers around personal experiences and relationships. Consumers use social currency to achieve desirable positive impressions among peers. Marketing products or services should give consumers a way to make themselves look good while promoting the product. Remember, anything can be remarkable.

   Social currency can be earned, even in the most simple of ways. Consider the social capital Snapple earns by placing an interesting fact found on the inside their bottle caps: *Real Fact #27: A ball of glass will bounce higher than a ball of rubber.* Snapple’s bottle cap facts are so interesting that people share them with each other. In other words, they are remarkable, and talking about them makes the consumer seem remarkable, too.

   *How can you earn social currency through your real estate business? What messages about your business or the real estate industry (e.g., “Real Estate Fact #27...) might subtly encourage your audience to spread your message for you?*
2. **Triggers: The foundation of word-of-mouth and contagiousness.**

Consumers talk more about Cheerios than they do about Disney World. Surprised? Berger mentions a study he conducted that looked at the relationship between a product’s interest score and how frequently it was talked about over a defined time period. The result: There is no correlation. Interesting products do not receive any more word-of-mouth than boring products.

The key for real estate professionals is to determine how to make products, services, and ideas more visible. In the example above, Cheerios are more visible than Disney World, so consumers talk about the cereal more often.

Practically, real estate professionals need to enhance existing triggers and create new triggers by linking products and ideas to prevalent cues in the marketing environment. The average American engages in more than 16 word-of-mouth episodes (separate conversations where consumers say something positive or negative about an organization, brand, product, or service) every day. Triggers are important because accessible thoughts lead to action and impact behavior. So consider the context of where and how the message will be received rather than just aiming for a catchy message. Think about whether the message will be triggered by the everyday environment of the target audience; a strong trigger can be much more effective than a catchy slogan.

*What are the triggers in your marketing messages? How can your target audience’s environment change the way your message is received and acted upon?*

3. **Emotion: When we care, we share. Don’t harp on function. Harp on feelings.**

Few consumers have time to seek out the best content in an ocean of information. Consumers often start by checking out what others have shared. Some emotions - like excitement, awe, and anger - increase sharing while other emotions decrease sharing. Berger notes that sadness, for example, decreases the likelihood of information being shared by 16%. There are two reasons people typically share content: the information is (1) interesting or (2) useful.

Here is an exercise you can do to seed positive emotions in your marketing messages: Ask yourself, “Why someone would want to buy a house?” Next, ask three more “why” questions (e.g., “Why do consumers prefer homes on a cul-de-sac?” etc.) to dig deeper and discover the emotional core of an idea (cul-de-sacs provide greater feelings of security). Rather than focusing on statistics and providing information, real estate professionals need to focus on consumers’ feelings, as activating emotion is key to transmission.
Why do consumers care about real estate services? What emotions can you engage in your messaging to help your audience connect with your business?

4. Public: Can people see when others are using our product or engaging in our desired behavior?

Making behaviors observable makes them easier to imitate, which makes them more likely to become popular. Berger argues that marketers should design products and initiatives that advertise themselves and create a “behavioral residue” that remains even after people have bought the product or espoused the idea. A great example of this concept is how Steve Jobs, the founder of Apple, Inc. agonized with his marketing team about the direction of the Apple logo. Should the logo be right-side up to the user when it is closed? Or should it be upside down when it’s closed so that when it is open, it is observable to others? If you have an Apple laptop, you can see Jobs went with the latter because he wanted his products to be observable primarily to the outside world to spur purchase and action.

This concept applies to social media as well. For example, the “like” feature found on Facebook allows consumers to show an affinity for and spread the word about a product, idea, or organization. Berger also reports that ABC News found that installing “like” buttons increased Facebook traffic by 250 percent.

How can you increase the public visibility of consumers who utilize your real estate services? How might social media tools be adapted for use in the home-buying process, making the consumer’s process (and therefore your services) more public to others?

5. Practical Value: People like to help others, so if we can show them how our products or ideas will save time, improve health, or save money, they will spread the word.

Sharing information and ideas brings consumers closer together because our friends/networks see that we know and care about them.

Take the story of Ken Craig as an example of practical value. Ken is eighty-six years old and grew up on a farm. Ken’s daughter-in-law created a YouTube video of Ken doing a little trick with corn to ensure you get all the silk off an ear of corn. Instead of shucking the corn, he tosses a few ears in the microwave for a few minutes, and after they’re cooked, Ken cut a half-inch off the bottom, gave it a shake, and the corn popped out. No silk. The video went viral and has collected more than 5 million hits since it was created.

The bottom line: Lots of products and services have practical value - the key is making them stand out so people want to share.
How can you communicate practical value to current and prospective clients so they share that value with their personal networks?

6. Stories: Build your own Trojan Horse! People do not share information; they share stories, or vessels that carry information with them.

Stories save time and hassle and give consumers the information they need in a way that is easy to remember. The real magic of stories is that important information travels under the guise of what seems like idle chatter. A great example we all know is Subway Jared’s story. Jared lost 245 pounds just by eating Subway. From this simple story we can conclude several facts about Subway: (1) the restaurant offers healthy options that encourage weight loss; and (2) the food must be pretty good if someone could eat Subway for three months straight and still come back for more. Subway is the key component of the Jared story, meaning advertisement campaigns need to maintain a product-focus. Do not forget that while getting consumers to talk is important, they should be talking specifically about your product or service. Berger defines this as “valuable virality” – make something viral but make it valuable to the sponsoring company or organization.

What stories do you have from doing business that would be of value to your prospective clients? How can you communicate your stories more effectively?

Conclusion

Any product, idea, or service can be contagious. However, a product or service does not need all six STEPPS to be contagious. Take the blender video - pulverizing expensive technology products is amazing (emotion) and remarkable (social currency). The video also showcases the blender’s benefits (practical value) into a broader narrative (stories) to get consumers talking about a common household appliance. Now look at the $100 cheesesteak - it is remarkable (social currency), surprising (emotion) and features an interesting narrative (story). The cheesesteak showcases the quality of the steakhouse it is served in (practical value), and perhaps the next cheesesteak you see will remind you of it (triggers).

Even in the real estate context, social epidemics are driven by products, services, and ideas. Certain characteristics make products, services, and ideas more likely to be talked about and shared, and Berger’s six STEPPS can help real estate professionals identify ways to make their real estate business contagious.
Recommended Reading


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Stephen is a graduate student from Shreveport, Louisiana. He earned his bachelor's degree in Political Science from Louisiana State University. Before enrolling at Baylor, Stephen worked as an advisor to several Members of Congress in Washington, DC, specializing in healthcare, transportation, finance, agriculture and foreign affairs policy. He also has operational and administrative experience working in a large non-profit healthcare system. Stephen is currently pursuing an MBA with a concentration in healthcare with plans to enhance his career in the health services industry.