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# News

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## Applying Gladwell's 'Tipping Point's' Insights

### Book Suggests Small Events Can Lead to Major Changes

By Mark Dominiak, Special to *TelevisionWeek*

I recently read Malcolm Gladwell's study of human behavior patterns, "The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference," which was published in 2000.

I wish I had picked it up sooner; it offers quite a bit of insight that can be applied to media planning.

"The Tipping Point" uses the notion of epidemics as a metaphor to consider a variety of societal situations and behaviors. In exploring the patterns of epidemics, Mr. Gladwell posits that people need to rethink their expectations of cause and effect: "We need to prepare ourselves for the possibility that sometimes big changes follow from small events, and that sometimes these changes can happen very quickly," he writes.

Media planners attack planning goals using big strategies such as "event programming," "mass reach," "high frequency" and "media mixes" to achieve marketplace impact for brands. But we also should consider smaller, counterintuitive actions that might have the possibility of creating the significant levels of impact that clients demand.

"The Tipping Point" offers an alternative paradigm under which to think about conventional notions of planning strategy. Mr. Gladwell's paradigm flows from what he calls three "change agents" that might prompt little tweaks that set big changes in motion. The three change agents are "Law of the Few," "Stickiness Factor" and "Power of Context."

#### Law of the Few

The nature of the Law of the Few is that small numbers of dynamic individuals can act as potent conveyors of information or ideas. Mr. Gladwell sorts these individuals into buckets he calls connectors, mavens and salesmen. What the Law of the Few suggests is that a message, like an epidemic, can become very contagious when it is carried by one of these dynamic individuals.

Basically, he posits that a message becomes more compelling when the message carrier is more compelling. A great example from "The Tipping Point" is the resurgence of Hush Puppies brand shoes.

After dwindling into obscurity, Hush Puppies went from anemic sales of 30,000 in the early '90s to more than 400,000 in 1995. The Few turned out to be a small group of kids in New York City's East Village and Soho who started wearing the shoes specifically because no one else was wearing them. The company fed off of the trend started by these few kids and started answering the requests of noted Manhattan and Los Angeles designers who had been infected with the fashion statement. From those small, localized beginnings, the epidemic spread.

There are two implications in this for media planning. First, when attacking a tipping point, planners need to be focused. The target inherent in the Law of the Few is just that: a few. A shotgun approach will not work as well as a rifle approach. In fact, the shotgun approach squanders resources. By focusing resources on the dynamic, important few, a brand can influence them with its message, ultimately "infecting" the larger masses via the initial few.

Second, deep resources would in theory not be required to create significant marketplace impact.

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Frequency against a limited, key group is the objective. A strategy of that sort may translate into tactics like ownership of a particular show, or of a particular day or daypart, or perhaps a particular cable network or Web-delivered video.

Further, a deep media mix may not be needed. Inundating the core few prospects with messages may in fact be counterproductive. Hitting them from too many directions may come off as too "mass," killing the effort before it has a chance to cement the message. Finding a single trusted medium for the message can do the trick.

Planners should think outside the box when it comes to identifying that medium. In the Hush Puppies example, the ultimate medium could be considered either word of mouth or the first few fashion-forward kids themselves. What is the incendiary medium for your brand's Law of the Few? Unconventional media answers shouldn't scare a planner away.

### **Stickiness Factor**

Mr. Gladwell conveniently uses television and advertising examples to describe what he means by the Stickiness Factor. The television examples are "Sesame Street" and "Blue's Clues." "The Tipping Point" explains how the creators of both shows invested significant time testing the creative content of the shows with children, using subsequent learning to better engineer the shows to be sticky.

In both examples, the creators' efforts were successful in producing shows that had resounding impact with kids. It was just small tweaks in the elements of presentation that enabled the shows to grab and hold the attention of children. Also in both cases, the tweaks that both sets of creators used were counterintuitive.

For "Sesame Street," crossing the assumed line between fantasy and reality by placing Muppets and people on the screen together made the content more compelling to kids. In the case of "Blue's Clues," the tweak was a scheduling change that went against the grain. By airing the same show five days in a row as opposed to running a new show every day, "Blue's Clues" built confidence among kids over time and became more compelling as the week advanced.

From the advertising world, Mr. Gladwell cites an agency-versus-agency battle in which Wunderman and McCann duked it out for the Columbia Record Club business. It's a classic contrast in approaches, with McCann airing sophisticated creative in big prime-time spots and Wunderman running very typical direct-response units in overnight time slots. The tweak for Wunderman was a gold-box incentive that was worth a free record.

Wunderman's sticky little gold box treasure hunt crushed McCann's effort.

There are two implications here for media planners.

The first is fairly straightforward: Media plans can't necessarily make a message stickier, but they can leverage sticky environments that might increase chances of a message being noticed.

How does a planner identify those sticky environments? Conventional wisdom might point down the path of engagement and quantitative metrics denoting attention to a program or environment. But the wisdom of the kids' cases draws insight directly from consumers. With both shows, insight came from watching kids as they watched the programs. Direct, qualitative evidence from the kids showed they were attentive. Planners might take a cue and do what they can to obtain direct qualitative evidence on environments that have the potential to be sticky.

The second implication is the reminder that powerful solutions might be found in unlikely places. Puppets and humans, repetitive episodes and little gold boxes instinctively felt taboo, but testing demonstrated they were in fact powerful. Planners may want to take a few steps back in creating plans or dismissing tactics and consider their potential benefits from a fresh perspective. There could be gems to be found.

### **Power of Context**

To demonstrate the Power of Context, Mr. Gladwell recounts New York's crime situation in the early '90s. In that case, the Cliffs Notes version is that "The Tipping Point" centered on small things like cleaning up graffiti and curtailing subway gate jumpers. That little shift to more cleanliness and order had a dramatic impact across the board. When the chaotic environment was erased, fewer crimes were committed.

For planners, a significant part of the job hinges on context. Where will the brand's message run? Are there facets of the message environment that work at cross-purposes to communicating the message? Competitive pressure and clutter are two aspects of environment that can influence the context in which

messages are encountered.

Often, media plans are designed to place brand messages precisely in places where competitors are also speaking in an effort to differentiate from them. Maybe a better context is available where the brand doesn't have to shout against others with similar messages. Given current levels of commercial loads, competitive messages may be a small worry. How is a brand to stand out from all of the other shouting voices in the environment?

Perhaps tipping points for messages can be facilitated by objectively assessing the context of where the message runs. How often do we as planners really step back and try to understand the message environment? We do a significant amount of work to identify where messages should be placed, but not a lot to understand what it looks like when we get there.

That assessment should be factored in as well. Can we find target-relevant environments in which the brand can stand out from competitors and on its own? Are there environments with less clutter? Is it possible to influence environments, eliminating things detrimental to the brand?

It is compelling to think that tipping points can be triggered as the result of only small actions. As the media world grows ever more complicated, it is incumbent upon planners to take a thoughtful look at plans and try to identify the places where a little tweak can create bigger marketplace impact for their brand.

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