



# Contagious

## Why Things Catch On

### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

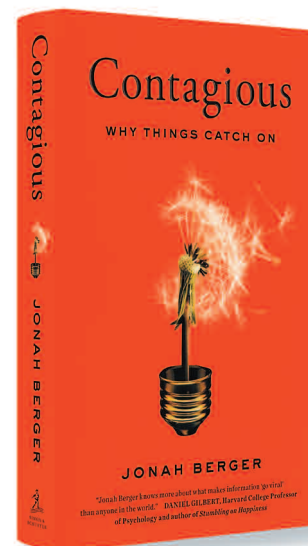
What makes things popular? If you said advertising, think again. People don't listen to advertisements; they listen to their peers. But why do people talk about certain products and ideas more than others? Why are some stories and rumors more infectious? And what makes online content go viral?

Wharton marketing professor Jonah Berger has spent the last decade answering these questions. He's studied why *New York Times* articles make the paper's own Most Emailed List, why products get word of mouth, and how social influence shapes everything from the cars we buy to the clothes we wear to the names we give our children. In this book, Berger reveals the secret science behind word-of-mouth and social transmission. Discover how six basic principles drive all sorts of things to become contagious, from consumer products and policy initiatives to workplace rumors and YouTube videos.

*Contagious* combines groundbreaking research with powerful stories. If you've wondered why certain stories get shared, emails get forwarded, or videos go viral, *Contagious* explains why and shows how to leverage these concepts to craft contagious content. Whether you're a manager at a big company, a small business owner trying to boost awareness, a politician running for office, or a health official trying to get the word out, *Contagious* will show you how to make your product or idea catch on.

### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- A primer on the six principles of contagiousness and how you can apply them to your products, services and ideas.
- How word of mouth is generated.
- The importance of triggers.
- How to highlight incredible value in order to cut through the clutter.



by Jonah Berger

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# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: CONTAGIOUS

by Jonah Berger

**The author:** Jonah Berger is the James G. Campbell Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. He has published dozens of articles in top-tier academic journals.

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## Introduction: Why Things Catch On

By the time Howard Wein moved to Philadelphia in March 2004, he had lots of experience in the hospitality industry. But he was done with “big.” So he moved to Philly to help design and launch a new luxury boutique steakhouse called Barclay Prime.

Wein knew he needed to generate buzz. Philadelphia already boasted dozens of expensive steakhouses, and Barclay Prime needed to stand out. Wein needed something to cut through the clutter. But what?

How about a hundred-dollar cheesesteak? He started with a fresh, house-made brioche roll brushed with homemade mustard. He added thinly sliced Kobe beef, marbled to perfection. Then he included caramelized onions, shaved heirloom tomatoes and triple-cream Taleggio cheese. All this was topped off with shaved, hand-harvested black truffles and butter-poached Maine lobster tail. And just to make it even more outrageous, he served it with a chilled split of Veuve Clicquot champagne.

The response was incredible. People didn't just try the sandwich; they rushed to tell others. One person suggested that groups get it “as a starter ... that way you all get the absurd storytelling rights.” Wein didn't just create another cheesesteak; he created a conversation piece, and it worked. The story of the hundred-dollar cheesesteak was contagious.

The buzz helped. Barclay Prime opened nearly a decade ago, and against the odds, the restaurant has not only survived but flourished. It has won various food awards and is listed among the best steakhouses in

Philadelphia year after year. But more importantly, it built a following. Barclay Prime caught on.

## Why Do Products, Ideas and Behaviors Catch On?

One reason some products and ideas become popular is that they are just plain better. Remember how bulky televisions or computer monitors used to be? Now they're flat screens, which offer larger screens and weigh less.

Attractive pricing and advertising also contribute to making products and ideas successful, but they don't explain the whole story. What about videos on YouTube? There's no difference in price (all are free to watch), and few videos receive any advertising or marketing push. And although some videos have higher production values, most that go viral are blurred and out of focus, shot by an amateur on an inexpensive camera or cell phone.

So why do certain videos catch on? Social transmission: social influence and word of mouth. People love to share stories, news and information with those around them. Additionally, word of mouth isn't just frequent; it's important. The things others tell, email and text us have a significant impact on what we think, read, buy and do. Word of mouth is the primary factor behind 20 percent to 50 percent of all purchasing decisions and is more effective than traditional advertising for two key reasons:

1. **It's more persuasive.** Advertisements tell us how great a product is, but friends are objective and candid, which make consumers more likely to trust and listen to their friends.

2. **It's more targeted.** Companies try to advertise in ways that allow them to reach the largest number of



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service@summary.com

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 500 Old Forge Lane, Suite 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2013 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®.

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Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor In Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; Melissa Ward, Contributing Editor

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interested customers, whereas word of mouth is naturally directed toward an interested audience. No wonder customers referred by their friends spend more, shop faster, and are more profitable overall.

### Generating Word of Mouth

Want to know what's the best thing about word of mouth? It's available to everyone. It doesn't require millions of dollars spent on advertising; it just requires getting people to talk. That's the challenge.

What percent of word of mouth happens online? Research by Keller Fay Group finds that only 7 percent of word of mouth happens online. And while that may seem low, remember that people spend an estimated two hours a day online, but they spend more than eight times as many hours offline.

Harnessing the power of word of mouth, online or offline, requires understanding why people talk and why some things get talked about and shared more than others. The psychology of sharing; the science of social transmission.

### Six Principles of Contagiousness

After analyzing hundreds of contagious messages, products and ideas, it was noticed that the same six principles were often at work. Making the acronym STEPPS, they are social currency, triggers, emotion, public, practical value and stories. Think of the principles as the six STEPPS to crafting contagious content. These ingredients lead ideas to get talked about and succeed. People talked about the hundred-dollar cheesesteak at Barclay Prime because it gave them social currency, was triggered, emotional, practically valuable and wrapped in a story. ●

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## Principle 1: Social Currency

Here's a secret about secrets: They tend to not stay secret very long. As it turns out, if something is supposed to be a secret, people might well be more likely to talk about it. The reason? Social currency. People share things that make them look good to others.

"Self-sharing" follows us throughout our lives. This desire to share our thoughts, opinions and experience is one reason social media and online social networks have become so popular. People blog about their preferences, post Facebook status updates about what they ate for lunch, etc. Research finds that more than 40 percent of what people talk about is their personal experiences or relationships.

What people talk about also affects what others think of them. So, not surprisingly, people prefer sharing things that make them seem entertaining rather than boring, clever rather than dumb. Word of mouth, then, is a prime tool for making a good impression — as potent as that new car or Prada handbag. Think of it as a kind of currency, social currency. Just as people use money to buy products or services, they use social currency to achieve desired positive impressions among their families, friends and colleagues.

To get people talking, companies and organizations need to mint social currency. Give people a way to make themselves look good while promoting their products and ideas along the way. There are three ways to do that: 1) find inner remarkability, 2) leverage game mechanics, and 3) make people feel like insiders.

### Inner Remarkability

Remarkable things are defined as unusual, extraordinary, or worthy of notice or attention. Remarkable things provide social currency because they make the people who talk about them seem more remarkable. The desire for social approval is a fundamental human motivation. Not surprisingly, remarkable things get brought up more often.

The key to finding inner remarkability is to think about what makes something interesting, surprising or novel. Can the product do something no one would have thought possible? One way to generate surprise is by breaking a pattern people have come to expect. Take low-cost airlines. What do you expect when you fly a low-cost carrier? Small seats, no movies, limited snacks and a generally no-frills experience. But people who fly JetBlue for the first time often tell others because the experience is remarkably different. You get a large, comfortable seat, a variety of snack choices and free DIRECTV programming from your own seat-back television.

The best thing about remarkability is it can be applied to anything; it's possible to find the inner remarkability in any product or idea by thinking about what makes that thing stand out. Emphasize what's remarkable about a product or idea, and people will talk.

### Leverage Game Mechanics

Ever wonder why people enjoy games so much? Game mechanics are the elements of a game, application or program — including rules and the feedback loop — that make them fun and compelling. Good game mechanics keep people engaged, motivated and always wanting more.

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But game mechanics can also motivate us on an *inter-personal* level by encouraging social comparison.

Game mechanics help generate social currency because doing well makes us look good. People love boasting about the things they've accomplished: their golf handicaps, how many people follow them on Twitter, etc. Game mechanics boost word of mouth — people are talking because they want to show off their achievements, but along the way, they talk about brands (Twitter) or domains (golf) where they achieved.

Leveraging game mechanics requires quantifying performance. Some domains, like golf handicaps, have built-in metrics. People can easily see how they're doing and compare themselves with others without needing any help. But if a product or idea doesn't automatically do that, it needs to be "gamified." Metrics need to be created or recorded that let people see where they stand — for example, different colored tickets for season ticket holders.

Great game mechanics can create achievement out of nothing. Airlines turned loyalty into a status symbol. And by encouraging players to post their achievements on Facebook, online game makers have managed to convince people to proclaim loudly that they spend hours playing games every day.

### Make People Feel Like Insiders

Scarcity is about how much of something is offered, and while exclusivity is also about availability, exclusive things are accessible only to people who meet particular criteria. Scarcity and exclusivity help products catch on by making them seem more desirable, and they boost word of mouth by making people feel like insiders. If people get something not everyone else has, it makes them feel special, unique, high status. And because of that, they'll not only like a product or service more but tell others about it. The mere fact that something isn't readily available can make people value it more and tell others to capitalize on the social currency of knowing about it or having it. ●

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## Principle 2: Triggers

What most people don't realize is they naturally talk about products, brands and organizations all the time. Every day, the average American engages in more than 16 word-of-mouth episodes, separate conversations where they say something positive or negative about an organization, brand, product or service.

### The Difference Between Immediate and Ongoing Word of Mouth

Some word of mouth is immediate, while some is ongoing. Imagine you've just received an email about a new recycling initiative. Do you talk about it with coworkers later that day? If so, you're engaging in immediate word of mouth. This occurs when you pass on the details of an experience or share new information you've acquired soon after it occurs. Ongoing word of mouth covers the conversations you have in the weeks and months that follow: the movies you saw last month or a vacation you took last year.

Both types of word of mouth are valuable, but certain types are more important for certain products or ideas. Movies depend on immediate word of mouth, as well as grocery stores with limited shelf space. But for most products or ideas, ongoing word of mouth is also important. New policy initiatives certainly benefit from huge discussion when they are proposed, but to sway voter opinion, people need to keep mentioning them all the way up until Election Day.

### How Triggers Affect Behavior

At any given moment, some thoughts are more top of mind, or accessible, than others. For example, you might be thinking about the sandwich you just had for lunch. Some things are chronically accessible. Sports fanatics or foodies will often have those subjects top of mind. But stimuli in the surrounding environment can also determine which thoughts and ideas are top of mind. If you see a puppy while jogging in the park, you might remember how you've always wanted a dog.

Using a product is a strong trigger. Most people drink milk more often than grape juice, so milk is top of mind more often. But triggers can be indirect. Seeing peanut butter not only triggers us to think about it, but about partner jelly. Triggers are like little environmental reminders for related concepts and ideas. But why does it matter if things are top of mind? Because accessible thoughts lead to action.

### Triggered to Talk

What do we talk about when making small talk? Whatever is top of mind is a good place to start. More frequently triggered products get talked about more. Even mundane products like Ziploc bags and moisturizer received lots of buzz because people were triggered to think about them so frequently. People who use moisturizer often apply it at least once a day, and people often use Ziploc bags after meals to wrap up leftovers. These everyday activities make those products more top

of mind and, as a result, lead them to be talked about more. So rather than just going for a catchy message, consider the context. Think about whether the message will be triggered by the everyday environments of the target audience.

Triggers are the foundation of word of mouth and contagiousness. To use an analogy, think of most rock bands. Social currency is the front man or woman. It's exciting, fun and gets lots of attention. Triggers could be the drummer or bassist. People may not pay much attention to it, but it lays the groundwork that drives success. The more something is triggered, the more it will be top of mind, and the more successful it will become. ●

### Principle 3: Emotion

The Internet has become increasingly engineered to support the natural inclination of sharing. If people come across a blog post about a new bike-sharing program, they can easily hit the Share button or copy and paste the link into an email. And because few people have time to seek out the best content in this ocean of information that is the Internet, they check out what others have shared.

#### Does Emotion Boost Sharing?

According to psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt, awe is the sense of wonder and amazement that occurs when someone is inspired by great knowledge, beauty, sublimity or might. It's the experience of confronting something greater than yourself.

The most obvious difference between different emotions is their pleasantness and positivity. Awe is relatively pleasant, while sadness is unpleasant. Might positive emotions increase sharing but negative emotions decrease it? Conventional wisdom suggests that negative content should be more viral. That's why nightly news always starts with something like, "The hidden health hazard that's lurking in your basement ..." That said, you could also make a case for the opposite: people prefer sharing good news. After all, don't most of us want to make others feel happy or positive rather than anxious or sad? However, there's more to it than just negative and positive.

#### Kindling the Fire: The Science of Physiological Arousal

The idea that emotions can be categorized as positive and negative has been around for hundreds of years. More recently, however, psychologists have argued that emotions can also be classified based on a second dimension: that of activation, or physiological arousal.

### The Three Whys

In *Made to Stick*, authors Chip and Dan Heath talk about using the "Three Whys" to find the emotional core of an idea. Write down why you think people are doing something. Then ask, "Why is this important?" three times. Each time you do this, note your answer, and you'll notice that you drill down further and further toward uncovering not only the core of an idea but the emotion behind it.

For example, take online search:

1. Why is search important? Because people want to find information quickly.
2. Why do they want to do that? So they can get answers to what they're looking for.
3. Why do they want those answers? So they can connect with people, achieve their goals, and fulfill their dreams.

Now that's starting to get more emotional. Some emotions kindle the fire more than others; activating emotion is the key to transmission.

Physiological arousal is a state of activation and readiness for action. Some emotions, like anger and anxiety, are high-arousal. When we're angry, we yell at customer service representatives. When we're anxious, we check and recheck things. Positive emotions also generate arousal. Take excitement and awe. Other emotions, such as sadness, have the opposite effect. They stifle action.

Understanding arousal helps explain why anger and anxiety lead people to share because, like awe, they are high-arousal emotions. They activate people and drive them to take action. Low-arousal emotions, like sadness, decrease sharing. Contentment has the same effect, though contentment isn't a bad thing. People are just less likely to talk about things that simply make them content.

#### Focus on Feelings

Marketing messages tend to focus on information. Public health officials note how much healthier teens will be if they don't smoke or if they eat more vegetables. People think that laying out the facts in a clear and concise way will tip the scales; their audience will pay attention, weigh the information, and act accordingly.

But many times, information is not enough. And that is when emotion comes in. Rather than harping on features or facts, we need to focus on feelings: the underlying emotions that motivate people to action.

Some emotions kindle the fire more than others. Activating emotion is the key to transmission.

Physiological arousal or activation drives people to talk and share. We need to get people excited or make them laugh. We need to make them angry rather than sad. Even situations where people are active can make them more likely to pass things on to others. ●

### Principle 4: Public

Think about the last time you sat through a bewildering PowerPoint presentation. At the end of the talk, the speaker probably asked the audience if anyone had any questions. The response? Silence. But not because everyone else understood the presentation. The others were probably just as bewildered as you were. But while they would have liked to raise their hands, they didn't because each one is worried that he or she is the only one who didn't understand. Why? Because no one else was asking questions. No one saw any public signal that others were confused, so everyone kept doubts to him- or herself. Because behavior is public, and thoughts are private.

#### The Power of Observability

The famous phrase, "Monkey see, monkey do" captures more than just the human penchant for imitation. People can imitate only when they *see* what others are doing. Observability has a huge impact on whether products and ideas catch on. Say a clothing company introduces a new shirt style. If you see someone wearing it and decide you like it, you can go buy the same shirt or something similar. But this is much less likely to happen with socks. Why? Because socks are harder to see.

Observable things are also more likely to be discussed. Public visibility boosts word of mouth. The easier something is to see, the more people talk about it. Observability also spurs purchase and action. As discussed with triggers, cues in the environment not only boost word of mouth but also remind people about the things they already wanted to buy or do. The more public a product or service is, the more it triggers people to take action.

#### Behavioral Residue

A product, idea or behavior advertises itself when people consume it. When people wear certain clothes, attend a rally, or use a website, they make it more likely that their friends, coworkers and neighbors will see what they are doing and imitate it. If a company is lucky, people consume its product or service often.

But what about the rest of the time? Is there something that generates social proof that sticks around even when

### Behavioral Residue and Shopping Bags

Behavioral residue exists in all types of products and ideas. Tiffany, Victoria's Secret and a host of other retailers give their customers disposable shopping bags to carry purchases home. But because of the social currency associated with some of these retailers, many consumers reuse the bags rather than tossing them. They use the Victoria's Secret bags to carry their gym clothes or toss their lunch in a Tiffany's bag.

Clothing retailer Lululemon takes this idea one step further. Rather than make paper bags that are relatively durable, it makes shopping bags that are hard to throw away. Made of sturdy plastic like reusable grocery bags, these bags are clearly meant to be reused. So people use them to carry groceries or to do other errands. But along the way, this behavioral residue helps provide social proof for the brand.

the product is not being used or the idea is not top of mind? Yes, it's called behavioral residue, the physical traces or remnants that most actions or behaviors leave in their wake. Mystery lovers have shelves full of mystery novels. Runners have medals from participating in 5Ks. When these items are publicly visible, it provides people with the chance to talk about related products or ideas.

It's been said that when people are free to do as they please, they usually imitate one another. We look to others for information about what is right or good to do in a given situation, and this social proof shapes everything from the products we buy to the candidates we vote for.

We need to be like Hotmail and Apple and design products that advertise themselves. We need to be like Lululemon and create behavioral residue, discernible evidence that sticks around even after people have used our product or engaged with our ideas. We need to make the private public. If something is built to show, it's built to grow. ●

### Principle 5: Practical Value

People like to pass along practical, useful information, news others can use. In the context of triggers, practical value may not seem like the sexiest concept. Some might even say it's obvious or intuitive. But that doesn't mean it's not consequential. When writer and editor William F. Buckley Jr. was asked which single book he

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would take with him to a desert island, his reply was straightforward: “A book on shipbuilding.” Useful things are important.

Offering practical value helps make things contagious. People share practically valuable information to help others. In this way, sharing practically valuable content is like a modern-day barn raising. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, people would get together, volunteer their time, and help their neighbor. Next time around, the barn would be built for someone else. You can think of it as an early version of the current prosocial ideal of “pay it forward.”

Sharing something useful with others is a quick and easy way to help them out. Even if we’re not in the same place. Passing along useful things strengthens social bonds. If our friends are into cooking, sending them a recipe we found brings us closer together. Our friends see that we know and care about them; we feel good for being helpful, and the sharing cements our friendship.

If social currency is about information senders and how sharing makes them look, practical value is mostly about the information receiver. It’s about saving people time or money or helping them have good experiences.

Think about sharing practical value as akin to advice. People talk about which retirement plan is cheapest and which politician will balance the budget. Think about the last time you made a decision that required you to gather and sift through large amounts of information. You probably asked one or more people what you should do, and they probably either shared their opinion or sent you a link to a website that helped you out.

### Saving a Couple of Bucks

When most people think about practical value, saving money is one of the first things that comes to mind. One of the biggest drivers of whether people share promotional offers is whether the offer seems like a good deal. If we see an amazing deal, we can’t help but talk about it or pass it on to someone we think would find it useful. If the offer is just okay, though, we keep it to ourselves.

### Highlighting Incredible Value

Deals seem more appealing when they highlight incredible value. Remember with social currency, the more remarkable something is, the more likely it’ll be discussed. We’re bombarded with deals all the time, so a deal needs to cut through the clutter to get shared.

- **Expectation.** Promotional offers that seem surprising or surpass expectations are more likely to be shared.

This can be because the actual deal itself exceeds expectations or because the way the deal is framed makes it better this way.

- **Availability.** Somewhat counterintuitively, making promotions more restrictive can actually make them more effective — restricting availability through scarcity and exclusivity makes things seem more valuable.

- **Timing/Frequency.** Putting something on sale can make it seem like a good deal. But if the product is always on sale, people start to adjust their expectations. People come to realize that sales are the norm and no longer see them as deals. But offers that are only available for a limited time seem more appealing because of the restriction. Just like making a product scarce, the fact that a deal won’t be around forever makes people feel that it must be a really good one.

- **Quantity Limits.** This works similarly to frequency restrictions. Retailers sometimes create limits around the number of a given discounted item a given customer can buy, such as “one per household.” You might think that by making it harder for people to get as many as they want, these restrictions would hurt demand, but it’s just the opposite. It makes the promotion seem like an even better deal.

- **Access.** Even restricting access can make a promotional offer seem better, such as a hotel rewarding loyal members with “exclusive” hotel rates. These offers seem special. This boosts sharing not only by increasing social currency but also by making the deal itself seem better. Like restrictions on quantity or timing, the mere fact that not everyone can get access to this promotion makes it seem more valuable. This increases practical value, which in turn boosts sharing.

### More Than Money

Useful information is another form of practical value. Helping people do things they want to do or encouraging them to do things they should do faster, better and easier. Look at the content you’ve been emailed over the past few months, and you’ll see similar patterns. Articles about sunscreen brands that Consumer Reports rated the best, tips to recover quickly from exercise — these things are useful. Practical advice is shareable advice.

In thinking about why some useful content gets shared more, a couple of points are worth noting. The first is how information is packaged. Vanguard doesn’t send out a rambling four-page email about financial management with 25 advice links about 15 different topics. It sends

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out a short, one-page note with a key header article and three or four main links below. It's easy to see what the main points are, and if you want to find out more, you simply click on the links.

The second key is audience. Some stories or information have a broader audience than others. You might think that content that has a broader audience is more likely to be shared, such as a piece about football should be shared more than one about water polo. The problem with this assumption is that just because people can share with more people doesn't mean they will. In fact, narrower content may actually be more likely to be shared because it reminds people of a specific friend or family member and makes them feel compelled to pass it along. So while you may have a lot of friends who like American football, no one person comes to mind when you come across the related content. However, you may have only one friend who cares about water polo, so when you read an article about it, you think of your friend right away, and you share it.

So while broadly relevant content could be shared more, content that is relevant to a narrow audience may actually be more viral. ●

### Principle 6: Stories

The story of the Trojan Horse has been passed on for thousands of years. It's estimated that the battle took place around 1170 BC, but the story was not written down until many years later. For centuries, the tale was transmitted orally. But the story of the Trojan Horse also carries an underlying message: "Never trust your enemies, even when they seem friendly." By encasing the lesson in a story, early writers ensured it would be passed along. People think in terms of narratives, but while the focus is on the story itself, information comes along for the ride.

#### Build a Trojan Horse

Stories give people an easy way to talk about products and ideas. Subway might have low-fat subs, and Lands' End might have great customer service, but outside of triggers in conversation, people need a reason to bring that information up. And good stories provide that reason. They provide a sort of psychological cover that allows people to talk about a product or idea without seeming like an advertisement.

When trying to generate word of mouth, many people forget one important detail. They focus so much on getting people to talk that they ignore the part that real-

ly matters: what people are talking about. That's the problem with creating content that is unrelated to the product or idea it is meant to promote. There's a big difference between people talking about content and talking about the company, organization or person that created the content.

#### Making Virality Valuable

Evian's "Roller Babies" video has the same problem. The clip shows diaper-wearing babies doing tricks on roller skates. The babies' bodies are animated, but their faces look real, making the video remarkable to watch and garnering more than 50 million views, and *Guinness World Records* declaring it the most viewed online ad in history. But all this attention didn't benefit the brand; the same year, Evian lost market share and sales dropped almost 25 percent. The problem? Roller-skating babies are cute, but they have nothing to do with Evian.

The key is to not only make something viral but also to make it valuable to the sponsoring company or organization. Not just virality, but valuable virality. Think of Barclay Prime's \$100 cheesesteak: an expensive, high-end cheesesteak and an expensive, high-end steak restaurant are clearly more related than Evian and roller-skating babies. And the item wasn't just a stunt; it was an actual item on Barclay's menu. Further, it spoke directly to the inferences the restaurant wanted consumers to make about its food: high quality but not stuffy, lavish but creative. Virality is most valuable when the brand or product benefit is integral to the story, when it's woven so deeply into the narrative that people can't tell the story without mentioning it.

If you want to craft contagious content, try to build your own Trojan Horse. But make sure you think about valuable virality. Make sure the information you want people to remember and transmit is critical to the narrative. So build a social currency-laden, triggered, emotional, public, practically valuable Trojan Horse, but don't forget to hide your message inside. Make sure your desired information is so embedded into the plot that people can't tell the story without it. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Contagious*, you'll also like:

1. ***The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg.** Duhigg takes us to the thrilling edge of scientific discoveries that explain why habits exist and how they can be changed.
2. ***Buyology* by Martin Lindstrom.** Lindstrom presents astonishing findings from a groundbreaking neuromarketing study that peered inside the brains of 2000 volunteers as they encountered ads, commercials and brands.
3. ***How We Decide* by Jonah Lehrer.** In this bestseller, Lehrer takes a fresh yet informed perspective on the fascinating subject of how we make up our minds.