

Accelerating Natural Contagion

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Trees have an interesting marketing prob-

lem. They need to spread their seeds widely to avoid competing with their own offspring for sun, water, and food. But the problem is that they are rooted to one place. If you've ever been grounded for a week, you know the feeling.

So trees have had to develop other ways to help spread seeds.

One of the techniques involves seduction and hitchhiking. The tree seeds start developing inside a green and not very attractive fruit, nut, or cone; as the seeds mature, the fruit around them becomes ripe, making it more attractive, sweet, colorful, and juicy. That's when the

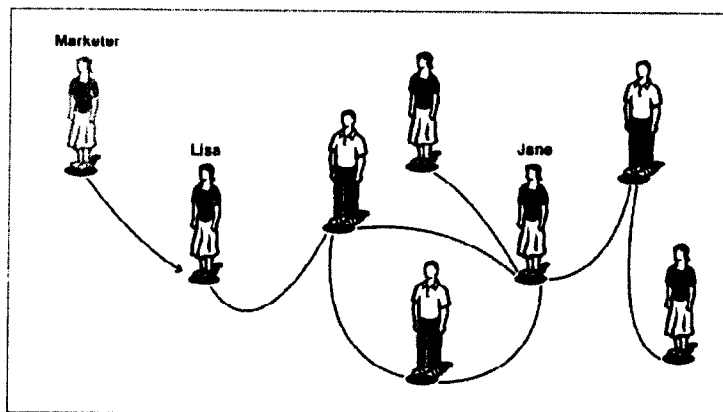
seduction happens. Animals see the colorful fruit, taste it, and take it with them to eat. In their travels they disperse the seeds, sometimes miles away from the source tree.

Nature has devised a clever strategy. But what works for trees doesn't work in business. There's an obvious reason: Companies operate in a more competitive environment, one where their survival often depends on their dominance. The strategy adopted by trees is too limited. Yet some companies adopt it by default. They develop beautiful "fruit" and wait for customers to come and find it and carry it around to wherever they happen to go. They believe that having a good product or providing a good service is all that's needed. These companies are not utilizing a significant advantage that we, as humans, have over trees: We can walk to the other end of the forest and plant the seed ourselves.

Two things are needed to create buzz successfully. The first one, as discussed in the last chapter, is to have a contagious product. But having such a product alone is not enough. Companies that get good buzz also *accelerate* natural contagion.

The game Trivial Pursuit sold 20 million copies in 1984. Contagion played an important role in buzz about this product. People who played the game were compelled to demonstrate their knowledge of trivia to others at work, school, or home. But word about the product didn't spread by contagion alone. Buzz was accelerated through many activities the company undertook. For example, the marketers of the game sent samples to celebrities who were mentioned in questions. This helped to start buzz (and trivia parties) in Hollywood. For months more than a hundred radio stations broadcast trivia questions and gave away sample games to listeners. This helped to create buzz in *numerous* clusters all around the country, as winners of these games invited friends to play.

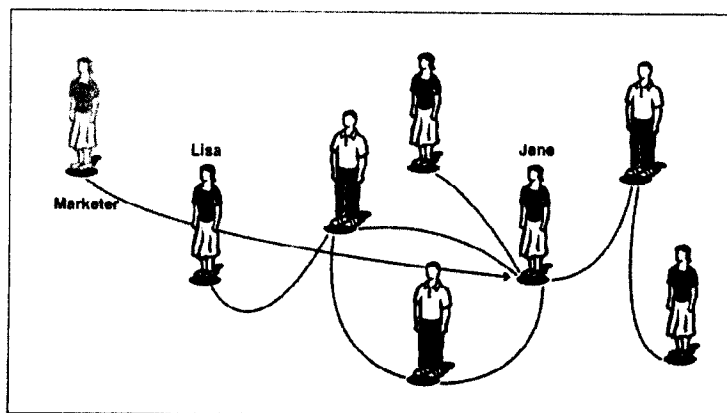
I call this type of acceleration leapfrogging. Instead of relying on Customer A to tell B, who will tell C, who will tell D (you start to sense how slow word of mouth can be), smart marketers know that



Lisa is reachable, but she's not best positioned to spread the word.

word of mouth almost always needs help. They do something to make word spread faster.

Let's look at a simple example of leapfrogging in action. In the following illustration a marketer wants to spread the word about a new product to seven customers. Assume that limited resources allow her to communicate with only one customer. A marketer who relies on the product to spread by itself would approach the closest



Jane is much better positioned to spread the message in this network.

person, someone with whom she already has a tie—in this case, Lisa—and expect her to pass on the message to others.

But notice that there are four steps from Lisa to the farthest individual in the network, and that only one person is one step away from her. The message is almost guaranteed to be blocked or distorted on its way to people in this group. Even if it doesn't get stuck, it will be very slow to spread.

A marketer who accelerates natural contagion, on the other hand, will try to locate and approach someone like Jane, who is more central in the group as a whole. Now *four* people are just one step away from Jane, and no one is more than two steps away from her. The message is more likely to reach its destination with minimum distortion and get there much faster.

The Why of Leapfrogging

While our simple Lisa-Jane example illustrates the core idea behind leapfrogging, it only begins to suggest its power in helping a product to take off. Every new product starts with no one knowing about it except for a few insiders. The buzz at this point is zero. There's an enormous gap between the few people who know about the product within the company and the rest of the world. To spread the word, the creators of the product or service start reaching out and planting the news in other areas of the networks. This is a critical time in the life of a product. It is critical for a company at this stage to have at least one person who is obsessed with spreading the word. It sounds almost too obvious, but many new products fail because there is no obsessed person in place at the right time. This is the person who doesn't let the company be a tree—he or she plants the seeds of buzz all over the forest.

Let's look at an example from the very early days of FedEx. On the night of March 12, 1973, employees of the young company

gathered near the new sorting facility in Memphis, Tennessee, waiting for the company's Falcon airplanes to arrive from eleven cities, loaded with packages that needed to be sorted. A night that began with a lot of anticipation ended in bitter disappointment. When the airplanes arrived and the doors were opened, the employees found only six packages—including one sent by Fred Smith, founder of the company. "People hadn't heard of us," one employee told Robert A. Sigafos, who described the scene in his book about FedEx, *Absolutely, Positively Overnight!* In the same way that only six packages traveled that night in the FedEx network, only a few comments about FedEx traveled around that time among potential customers. One lesson the company learned from this experience was that it needed to cover a wider network of cities to make its service more attractive. But another lesson was that it needed to get more aggressive in getting out the word about its service.

Ted Sartoian was one of those who made it happen. Previously a salesperson for UPS, he was hired by Federal Express in September 1973 as the head of their sales force. Business was still pretty bad when he joined—hardly the numbers needed to support a fleet of airplanes like the one FedEx was building. Sartoian remembered shipping about three hundred packages a night out of Chicago. Even today, more than twenty-five years later, he can't help but get indignant at this low number. "Three hundred packages out of Chicago—that's just sick!" he almost shouted over the phone.

Sartoian's approach was to lead a sales team of eight or nine people at a time into each city and stay there, conducting a sales blitz of a few weeks. "We'd get a bunch of people together and we'd take them to a city like Chicago," he remembers. "We'd sit down the night before or a day before and cut the city up into parts, and each person would have a territory, and you would go around and you would canvas. And you would canvas hard, get as many people as you could. And by canvassing I mean even door-to-door selling. It was very difficult." People of course didn't know what Federal Ex-

press was and had to be convinced of the concept. Sartoian and his people would sometimes take a sample package from a potential customer and ship it for free. They would come back the next day, with the name of the customer who signed for the package thousands of miles away. "That was a great selling tool," Sartoian says. This was the way that Federal Express leapfrogged into new cities, new industries, new networks. "We'd go in there and sales-blitz that city for four, five weeks with eight or nine guys, and all of a sudden now we're getting *thousands* of packages a day instead of three hundred." Sartoian wasn't the first to conduct a sales blitz. Originality is not the point here. The point is that you need to initiate these links somehow into a variety of networks to generate enough momentum for the word to spread. Without these links it is conceivable that, in time, almost every office in America would have received a FedEx letter and thus would have been exposed to the brand. But this is merely an academic hypothesis. In real life, with competitors and cash flow issues, companies need to get off the ground quickly. To get buzz going, a heroic push—*beyond natural contagion*—is usually called for.

It's a way to enter new clusters

New products often spread in some networks but not in others. In a classic study in 1954, William H. Whyte, Jr., used aerial photos to analyze how the use of air conditioners spread within several neighborhoods in Philadelphia. As the locations of houses with new air conditioners were plotted on a map, the clusters became clear. One block might have eighteen air conditioners, while the next block over might have only three. These clusterings were the result of small word-of-mouth networks operating among neighbors. Whyte surveyed 4,948 houses. In the following diagram you can see just forty row houses. Any house where an air conditioner was spotted is marked with an X. Clearly the product spread more successfully in



Row houses in the city of Philadelphia. The houses marked with an X are those with air conditioners. Notice the clusters. The photograph first appeared in an article by William H. Whyte, Jr., in *Fortune* magazine in 1954. Courtesy, Jenny Bell Whyte (Mrs. William H. Whyte, Jr.).

the upper row, where nine neighbors have adopted it, than in the lower row, where only one neighbor has an air conditioner.

If you were an air conditioner dealer in Philadelphia back then, you could wait for the word to spread by itself. The alternative would be to leapfrog by knocking on a couple of doors in the least active area in row two, convincing the residents to be the first on their block to own an air conditioner. It would have accelerated the adoption process—and would have ensured that *you*, and not your competitors, were the dealer selling in these clusters.

At a macro level, leapfrogging can help a product break into

		X	X	X	X	X	X			X				X	X		
							X										

new social circles. Look at hamburgers. We take them for granted as an integral part of American life, but in the 1920s hamburgers were consumed mainly by working-class men; they weren't part of the American family diet. In fact, they were considered by many a health hazard. Billy Ingram, the founder of White Castle, one of the first fast-food chains, decided to change that. White Castle was founded in 1921 in Wichita, Kansas. During the twenties the chain expanded to additional cities. As the income of the working class dwindled during the Depression of the thirties, Ingram understood that growth required breaking into new social networks. To convince middle-class women to include hamburgers in their families' diets, Ingram hired Ella Louise Agniel as the official "White Castle hostess." Under the pseudonym of Julia Joyce (which sounded both sophisticated and trustworthy), she made frequent appearances at women's clubs and charity organizations in cities where White Castle had restaurants. She would inform her audiences about the company's high standards and the nutritional value of their hamburgers. And whenever she gave a presentation, Joyce would bring along sacks of hamburgers for tasting. She would also invite her audiences for a tour of a nearby White Castle's kitchen, so they could see for themselves how the food was actually being prepared. "The key to Joyce's success was her relentless determination and energy. She often spoke to several clubs in one day, in addition to hosting sessions at various Castle restaurants," according to David Hogan, who studied the history of White Castle. By changing a few women's attitudes about hamburgers during each meeting, Joyce/Agniel planted the seeds of change in the group. In following meetings the converted women would tell friends about their families' reactions to hamburgers. And they would spread the word about hamburgers in other social networks, legitimizing the food in wider circles. By about 1940 White Castle had reached its goal. "The fast-food hamburger had shed most of its negative connotations and was finally accepted by consumers from all classes," Hogan writes.

The How of Leapfrogging

Companies that accelerate the process of natural contagion to speed up buzz go beyond formulas and beyond taking the obvious steps. They often bypass the obvious choice of formal networks. A traditional-thinking company might hear about “getting close to your customer” and think of their distribution channels—a familiar network. Certainly the channel is important, and as we saw in the case of *Cold Mountain*, it can help build buzz. But successful companies don’t rely on it *alone*, because many potential customers are not directly connected to the channel. Customers may occasionally visit a retail outlet, but they may or may not get information about products from the retailer. Successful companies leapfrog into informal networks as well.

Suppose you were introducing a new game for adults called Pictionary. You would want to have the product on the shelves so that people could find it. But to create buzz about a product such as Pictionary, you need to go beyond that. *You need to reach people where they hang out.* The makers of Pictionary, with the help of Linda Pezzano (who was also behind the launch of Trivial Pursuit), did just that. “We hired actors to dress up as artists and set them up with easels and flip charts in gathering places, and had them start engaging people in playing and giving out the sample packs at the same time.” Pezzano recalled. Demos were held at parks, shopping centers, and other gathering places. As a result, in its biggest year, about 15 million Pictionary games were sold.

Companies that speed up buzz go beyond the most expected communication channels as well. Cisco Systems, for example, serves network administrators who virtually live on-line, so you’d expect Cisco to use on-line methods to spread the word about its products. They do. But Cisco doesn’t limit itself to the on-line world. The company organizes more than one thousand seminars every year to meet potential customers face to face, they organize networking events for their current customers, and they attend dozens of trade shows. Re-

lationships with many customers start via face-to-face communication. The Net is used to maintain the relationships. Bill Raduchel, chief strategy officer of another high-tech firm, Sun Microsystems, put it this way: “The most complementary technology to the Web, is a 747.” In other words, don’t lock yourself to the latest electronic means of communications. Sometimes you need to get on a plane and meet people face to face.

Other Ways to Accelerate Natural Contagion

In addition to actively leapfrogging, companies that accelerate buzz also work to create the *conditions* that make shortcuts more likely to happen. One way is to create environments where customers can meet people who are not customers from remote networks. Suppose, for example, that your company sells e-commerce solutions. Putting together a series of seminars on the topic for noncustomers, and then inviting champion users to tell how they use your product out in the field, creates perfect conditions for buzz to leap from cluster to cluster. The Internet offers significant opportunities to stimulate interaction between customers and noncustomers. Many companies have created forums on the Net where users and nonusers can meet, share experiences, and discuss ways the product can be used.

Another tactic is to hang out in the “dense areas” of the networks. There is a lot of randomness in the networks. Shortcuts often happen by chance, and you increase the chances of these shortcuts’ happening to *you* by being out there, especially in the densest areas of the networks, like trade shows and other industry events. Everyone is already there—you just need to make sure that they talk about *your* product. Experienced PR people know how to create shortcuts across a cocktail party. A good public relations professional can gracefully grab Person A and escort him all the way to the other end of the hall to meet Person B at an industry event, personally creating a shortcut.

Misconceptions About Buzz

To create buzz and use it effectively, you should have a realistic view of the phenomenon, not glorify it. For example, some word-of-mouth enthusiasts argue that if you get good buzz, you don't need to do any marketing. This can be a major mistake. Distribution, advertising, promotions and other traditional marketing activities can translate the good will surrounding your product into sales. Good buzz is the best thing you could wish for, but it's just one component of your marketing mix. Here are three additional misconceptions that an overly enthusiastic view can lead to.

"Buzz Spreads Like Wildfire"

It is true only in rare cases. Big news can travel fast, but most news about products is not earth-shattering and therefore can spread at a painfully slow rate. Several factors slow down buzz. First, there's always someone who wants to keep the word about your product from spreading. Buzz is about new things, and new things always threaten someone. Second, like NBC or CNN, the invisible networks are also starting to be crowded with messages, so while customers are still receptive to messages from their friends, they don't remember all these messages and certainly don't act on all.

Something else that slows down buzz is the fact that people live in clusters. Buzz can spread in circles within one cluster but is slow to leap outside these networks. Moreover, people within each cluster are selective about what they pass on to their friends. They act not only as network hubs but also as filters. People don't automatically press the "Forward" key in their e-mail program (although it sometimes seems that way). Yes, if every customer told two other customers about your product, you could reach more than a billion people in just thirty steps, but this is hypothetical. *Not* every customer tells two other customers. Some do. Many don't.

"Buzz Is Truth"

To some people, buzz is the only real thing. The grassroots answer to corporate propaganda, free of any self-interest considerations. The reality is that some comments circling in the invisible networks are true and some are not. Just two examples: In 1999 rumors circled that the Miller Brewing Company was giving away free six-packs of beer to Internet users. In the early 1990s the makers of Tropical Fantasy had to deal with the rumor that their soft drink was secretly made by the Ku Klux Klan and was making African American men sterile. Both of these false rumors demonstrate that not all com-

ments transmitted through the networks are true.

At the other end of the spectrum you find people who believe that just because something has been *heard* and not *read*, it's false. According to this view, word of mouth is inferior by definition. This is, of course, the mirror image of the same misconception. The fact is that buzz is just talk. Some of the comments that travel in the invisible networks are true and some are not.

"All You Need Is a Good Product"

For buzz to spread, you need two things: a contagious product—one that has some inherent value that makes people talk—and someone behind the scenes who accelerates natural contagion. Yes, there are cases where having a great product or service alone is enough, but these typically occur when capacity is limited. A restaurant with thirty tables can rely on word of mouth alone if the talk is intense enough to keep these tables occupied. But this is not the case in markets where there's no such limit on capacity and where companies must act fast in order to turn their products into the *de facto* standard. Technology markets, for example, are almost like presidential election campaigns, where there's no prize for second place. Winner takes all. In these markets the natural spread of word of mouth *must* be accelerated. Having a good product is not enough.

Hiring practices can also be used to accelerate contagion in certain social networks. Companies that hire young employees have a better chance of linking into networks of youthful people. Companies that hire Hispanics help link into networks of Spanish-speaking individuals. It's part of the way Union Bank of California has grown. "Walk into a branch in a Latino area and you'll see lots of personnel who are Latino," vice chairman Rick Hartnack told *Fortune* magazine. Hiring people from diverse backgrounds—54 percent of Union Bank's employees are minorities—has given the bank an opportunity to spread its message into a *variety* of networks, a strategy that seems to have paid off in the stock market: The bank's stock "has appreciated at a 34% compound annual rate for the past five years," *Fortune* noted in 1999.

Leapfrogging is not easy, but to create buzz you almost always have to leapfrog to unfamiliar networks. Jim Callahan of The Dohring Company, a marketing research firm in the automotive industry, says, "There is a misconception that if a dealership gives good service it would automatically get good word of mouth. What we have found is that the dealerships that make a conscious effort to promote word of mouth are the ones that are most successful in getting word of mouth."

The third part of this book describes leapfrogging and some other strategies and tactics (such as viral marketing and publicity events) designed to accelerate the natural process. The techniques vary and will continue to change as new technologies evolve. But whatever the technique used, you can be sure that behind almost every good buzz there is someone who understands that success comes not only from having a contagious product but also from speeding the good word about that product to the far reaches of various networks, getting the attention of potential customers before competitors do.

Stimulating Buzz

Part
Three

Working with Network Hubs

9.

In the mid-1980s, Canadian physicians were abuzz about the use of cesarean sections. It was clear that the surgical procedure was often used when it wasn't needed, causing unnecessary risks and expenses. The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada issued guidelines that unambiguously recommended a lower rate of cesarean births. The guideline stated that the fact that a woman had had the procedure before was not a reason to reach for the scalpel again. Most practitioners—94 percent of them to be exact—said that they knew of these guidelines, and 56 percent reported that they had discussed them with a colleague. But when

researchers checked the monthly discharge data from hospitals to see whether there was a reduction in the number of cesarean sections as a result of the new guidelines, the answer was no.

It's not that the physicians disagreed with the guidelines—about 85 percent of practitioners said they agreed with them. In fact, many physicians claimed that they had changed their practices. “I think they truly were under the impression that they had changed their behavior,” says Jonathan Lomas, researcher who studied the case. “But in fact they hadn't.”

Lomas and his colleagues were intrigued and decided to search for the most effective way to influence these physicians. They tried several methods and eventually found that the best way to change people's behavior in this case was to work with local opinion leaders.

The first step was to identify the network hubs. To do this, the researchers sent out questionnaires to physicians in each hospital asking them to nominate colleagues in the area who matched the “opinion leader” profile. When the opinion leaders were identified, they were invited to participate in an workshop that explained the rationale behind the guidelines. In the weeks that followed the workshop, the researchers asked the physicians to do a little “marketing.” They asked each physician to mail a personal letter to his or her colleagues with some material from the workshop, to follow up with another letter, to host a meeting with an expert on the topic, and in general, to talk with colleagues about the issue. The results were impressive: 74 percent of the physicians in the hospitals with trained network hubs gave women the option of choosing regular labor, compared to 51 percent and 56 percent in groups where different strategies were tested. In one group the researchers simply mailed out the guidelines a second time. In the other group the reduction in cesarean sections was promoted in discussions at medical staff meetings and via an extensive audit procedure.

Whether you spread an idea, a product, or a service, you always have a choice. You can broadcast or you can connect. Broadcast-

ing involves massive mailings or buying media time and packaging your message so that it can be transmitted simultaneously to all nodes in the network. Connecting involves starting a dialogue with *certain individuals* in the network that you are trying to influence. This chapter describes the latter: how to identify network hubs, how to connect, and how to get them to help you create change.

Where to Find Network Hubs?

When the concept of opinion leaders was first introduced in the 1940s, marketers were excited. The idea that opinion leaders were out there, ready to transmit information to the rest of the public, was very appealing. “Now, if only we could identify these people,” marketers thought. But they quickly realized that there was no simple way to pinpoint these influential individuals. For years now, researchers have struggled to discover the magic formula for finding such people, but with only limited success. Nonetheless, smart companies identify network hubs every day and benefit greatly from doing so. The practical approach to the issue is first to recognize that you will not be able to identify *all* network hubs. Once you accept this, there are four methods you can use to identify as many such influential people as you can:

1. Letting network hubs identify themselves
2. Identifying *categories* of network hubs
3. Spotting Network Hubs in the field
4. Identifying network hubs through surveys

Regardless of the method or methods you intend to use, always look for individuals who display the ACTIVE characteristics of

network hubs: Ahead in adoption (at least slightly), Connected, Travelers, Information-hungry, Vocal, and Exposed to the media more than others.

Letting Network Hubs Identify Themselves

One group of network hubs is easy to find—they're the ones who come to you. Your job here is to recognize them, and you may be surprised how many companies don't. These opinion leaders will come to you for something they like more than anything else: information. They may call to ask questions that go beyond what a regular customer would ask. They may spend extra time at your booth during a trade show to look at the new gadget you're announcing. They may e-mail again and again to see what's going on with that new feature the market is expecting. Some of your people may feel bothered by this excessive interest, but they need to understand that network hubs feed on information. Teach everyone in your organization how to spot them.

Of course, not all of those who seek extra information or claim to be influential are valuable network hubs. But often the best policy is to *assume* that they are. Many software companies, for example, err on the side of sending out too many when it comes to giving away review copies of their software. How generous you can be depends, of course, on the associated cost and benefits, but often all you have to invest to develop a potential network hub is some time and attention.

Identifying Categories of Network Hubs

The previous method will help you find only *some* of the hubs—those that approach you. Yes, network hubs are information-hungry, but what if their hunger for information is fed by your competitors, or what if they're not *that* hungry? You need to use other methods, too. The most commonly used method to find network

hubs is to identify a category of promising people—a group that might potentially include such network hubs. For example, readers of a fashion magazine are likely sources for information about the latest fashions. People who attend a conference on computer security are likely to be hubs in this area. This is an important method, and the only reason I don't expand on it here is that it is well documented and widely known: The use of trade magazines, conferences, and trade shows is a sure way to reach opinion leaders.

It's also relatively easy to identify people who are connected to other potential customers because of their profession. For instance, nurses often talk with young mothers about nutrition. As a result, companies that sell baby food try to influence these health care professionals. Similarly, in a virtual community, chat hosts are usually passionate about the topic they are hosting and serve as a central resource for information about it. The way to look for a category is to think of people who, by virtue of their *position*, have a higher than average number of ties with people in the networks you're trying to reach. If you sell books, you should know what books local spiritual leaders are talking about. "I keep an eye on what the pastors at the local churches are recommending from the pulpit," says Karen Pennington of Kepler's, a bookstore in Menlo Park, California.

Spotting Network Hubs in the Field

Identifying network hubs by category usually allows us to find people with titles—teachers, nurses, physicians. Such people are important, but they aren't always the street-level network hubs we're looking for.

To find the grassroots network hub, you need to go out into the field. How do you see them through the crowd? "It's immediately obvious. You only need to be with someone like that five minutes, and that's true whether you meet them on-line or at a party," says Stacy

Horn, founder of Echo, an on-line community in New York City. When Horn started Echo, she used this method to locate network hubs who would liven up the on-line discussion. It's easy to find these hubs when you're part of a community. In fact, when you're part of a community, you don't really have to search. "We know who they are," says David Unowsky of Ruminator Books, a bookstore in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Many of the network hubs he's in touch with either have book clubs or are associated with The Loft, a large writing center in town.

And what if you're not part of the community? You should ask established members of the community to help. Rochelle Newman, who was involved in promoting Crisco Oil in the Hispanic market in the early eighties, remembers using this technique to identify women who were known and admired in local communities. "You'd really just go into the community and start talking to people," she says. Often the owners of the corner store—the bodega—were used to help identify them. When you heard a woman's name mentioned by multiple people, you knew that you had a network hub. Once these network hubs were identified, they were engaged in product sampling, parties à la Tupperware, and special promotions.

The fact that they're vocal also makes it easy to spot them. "There are always a bunch of advanced users who enjoy acting as experts, and pretty soon they're listened to as 'influencers' on company strategy and product direction as well," says Jeff Tarter, editor and publisher of *Soft*letter*. "These opinion leaders aren't journalists or people with impressive titles—they're just ordinary folks who acquire a reputation on their own merits." In the K-12 software market these people are often the teachers who are willing to spend extra time to integrate technology into the classroom. "There's a champion in every building," says Dean Kephart, a high-tech marketing executive who's helped several publishers of educational software to create buzz among teachers. And how do you spot them? They are "the same people who go to the state and regional conferences." They

speak; they write; they travel to conferences, trade shows, and Web sites; and they cause change.

Keep your eyes open for "connectors" as well—people who have the potential to transmit information across clusters. A physician who practices in two clinics may spread knowledge about a new medical device from one clinic to the other. A visiting professor at a lab can be invited to take demo versions of software back to his or her home university. Exchange students, part-time or temporary employees who work at more than one company, and service providers who interact with many different companies all can be possible connectors. Whenever you hear someone identify himself or herself as "wearing two hats," you may be dealing with a connector.

Another way to spot network hubs is to look for socially active individuals. As I discussed earlier, Roper Starch Worldwide selects their Influential Americans based on certain political and social activities. These people appear to talk more not only about local politics but also about commercial products. For example, 32 percent of these individuals report that they made recommendations about software (as opposed to 7 percent of the total public), and 24 percent of them report making recommendations about computer hardware (as opposed to 6 percent of the total public). Roper defines an Influential American as any person who within the last twelve months has done three things out of a long list of public, political, or social activities. Some examples of these activities are writing a letter to the editor, making a speech, and serving on a committee.

The practical implications of this are clear. If you come across people who are involved in social activities on a regular basis, that's a good indicator of their tendency to tell others about the products they use. Pay attention not only to the editor of your trade magazine but also to those who write letters to the editor. If you're entering a new geographical territory, look for those who serve on school boards, lead community groups, and voice their opinions in public forums.

Identifying Hubs Through Surveys

Some of the informal concepts discussed above can be utilized in formal surveys. These methods have not been widely adopted in industry. But they could be. They can teach companies a great deal about how information spreads among their customers.

1. Sociometric Methods. Imagine having a map of various networks in front of you. You ask all members of a given network to name the people from whom they seek information about a specific topic. The network hubs will be those people who have the highest number of links. This is a reliable method, but it has limited applications. First, you would need to ask all (or most) members of a system in order to get an accurate map, so this method can't be applied on a very large scale. Second, people are reluctant to give out the names of their peers. Still, this method can be extremely useful on a smaller scale. Imagine being able to promote the habit of wearing seat belts among high school students this way. You'd survey the whole school and then influence those identified as network hubs. This method can be used to build a model of how purchase decisions are being made in such networks as well.

The pharmaceutical industry often uses physicians with certain specialties as a local spokespersons in certain markets. In one particular city a drug company notices that although they had a top expert as their spokesperson, sales of the company's drugs in that market were lower than expected. Comsort, a Baltimore-based consulting firm involved in the case, distributed surveys among specialists in that market and created a sociogram of the network. According to John W. Hawks, president of Comsort, the spokesperson was number one on the "technical-advice-seeking-network," but he did not appear on the "trust-and-friendship network" at all. After mapping the networks of specialists in that city, Comsort gave the pharmaceutical company the names of four physicians seen as lead-

ers who were also key figures in the trust-and-friendship network. Having a map of the network allowed the company to target the right people.

2. Informants' ratings. In this method you ask people to tell you who the network hubs are. Sales reps use this method intuitively. When a rep for a software company who goes into a new school asks teachers for the name of the person to talk to, the teachers often refer the salesperson to the local software expert. Be attentive to clues that the people you talk to may give you. They may say, "Everybody here asks George" or "Jane is the person you ought to talk to if you want anything to happen."

A project that tried to promote safe sex among gay men used this method more formally. The researchers used the help of four bartenders in a gay bar to identify network hubs. For one week the bartenders were asked to observe who was being greeted positively most often at the bar. When the bartenders' recording sheets were cross-referenced, the names of 36 people emerged as opinion leaders. The researchers located about two-thirds of these people and asked them to name some additional influential people in the community. Based on that, the researchers put together a group of 43 individuals (39 men, 4 women), who then went through some basic training on safe sex. In the two weeks that followed the training, these individuals reported more than 350 conversations they had with other gay people in the community. Three months after this program began, the researchers again surveyed gay men in the city (and in two cities that served as control groups). In the city where the network hubs were identified and trained, there was a sixteen percent increase in use of condoms among gay men, a change that was not found in the control cities. In a similar marketing effort, researchers asked villagers in Finland to tell them who the two most influential people in their village were on health care issues. The researchers then trained those who were identified as opinion leaders on ways to reduce heart disease

risk factors. Once again the results were impressive, including a 28 percent reduction in smoking in these villages.

3. Self-designating method. There are a number of methods that measure the degree to which individuals perceive themselves as central and influential in a certain product category. Because such methods are based on self-perception, they are not as reliable as other methods. Nonetheless, such methods are practical and relatively widely used. For example, here are some of the questions included in a study by Rogers among Ohio farmers:

1. During the past six months have you told anyone about some new farming practice?
2. Compared with your circle of friends are you
 - (a) more likely to be asked for advice about new farming practices?
 - (b) less likely to be asked for advice about new farming practices?
3. Thinking back to your last discussion about some new farming practice,
 - (a) were you asked for your opinion of the practice?
 - (b) did you ask someone else?
4. When you and your friends discuss new ideas about farm practices, what part do you play?
 - (a) Mainly listen
 - (b) Try to convince them of your ideas
5. Do you have the feeling that you are generally regarded by your neighbors as a good source of advice about new farm practices?

Another method, the “Strength of Personality” test, was developed when managers at *Der Spiegel* magazine in Germany were trying to understand the active consumers who set standards in their community. A group of German researchers, led by Professor Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, developed a questionnaire that asked a series of yes/no questions. Sample questions included “I like to assume responsibility” or “I am good at getting what I want.” Follow-up research has shown that people with central positions in their social networks are those who score high on the “Strength of Personality” scale.

How to Work with Network Hubs?

The first step in working with network hubs is to keep track of them. Building a system to record information about hubs is mostly a matter of making everyone at your organization aware of them. The database you build should have telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, regular mailing addresses, as well as information about the scope and source of their influence and the nature of the networks they belong to.

Timing in reaching out to them is important. In each network there are a given number of network hubs and mega-hubs, and with a new product or service it is critical to capture their hearts and minds before your competitors do. Often you can try to accomplish this by seeding, a technique I describe in the next chapter. It may be worth seeding network hubs in a particular segment before you target that particular segment, to get the network hubs hooked in. (Of course, this is true only if you won’t turn them off with a half-baked solution). Once they do respond positively to a product, remember that adoption is just the beginning. There’s a lot more to do. Network hubs are not as loyal as you might hope, and if something better comes along, they can jump ship.

Target Hubs First

Network hubs at all levels love to be the first to know something new. The software industry has had a long tradition of giving advance copies to hubs and mega-hubs. Regis McKenna, in describing the introduction of Lotus 1-2-3, says, "Lots of people had early prototypes. I had one. Many magazine editors had them. We talked to each other about it, and the excitement grew. We could hardly wait for the final product to hit the market. By the time of introduction, 1-2-3 was the industry's worst-kept secret, but also its most surefire success."

The same type of excitement was created when the PalmPilot was first presented at Demo, an invitation-only event for the high-tech industry. "Every time they showed a feature, the audience would kind of gasp," Rafe Needleman, a journalist who attended the event, remembers. The young company combined the sneak preview with a seeding tactic, offering the device to attendees at 50 percent discount. Ed Colligan took between four-hundred and five-hundred orders. "Those people were the first to get them when we shipped," Colligan says. "It was pretty much the Who's Who of the industry."

While expert hubs are important, it's also important not to overlook the power of social hubs. Record companies routinely give sneak previews to DJs, record stores, radio stations, and other recognized expert hubs in order to promote new records. In a classic marketing experiment, however, researchers obtained the names of *social* leaders in high schools in several cities. Class presidents, sports captains, and cheerleaders were invited to join a select "expert panel" that would evaluate rock and roll records. (The researchers found later that most of these students owned very few records, which means that they would have not been classified as expert network hubs as far as the music industry was concerned.) The participants received free records in the mail and were asked to identify potential hits. They were then encouraged to discuss their choices with friends.

Joseph Mancuso, describing the experiment in the *Journal of Marketing*, says, "The total cost of the experiment was less than five thousand dollars. In turn, several records reached the top ten charts in the trial cities. These hit records did not make the top ten selections in any other cities. Thus, without contacting any radio stations or any record stores, a rock and roll record was pulled through the channels of distributors and made into a hit." The buzz created by letting these social network hubs discover these songs made them hits before they became hits anywhere else.

Give Them Something to Talk About

Buzz needs ammunition. How many times can you tell your friends that you now drive a Jeep? But if you come back from a two-day, action-packed Jeep Jamboree, you'll have *a lot* to talk about. What's a Jeep Jamboree? This is an off-road weekend trip designed for Jeep owners only. Although this activity is not designed exclusively for network hubs, it is very likely to attract them. The Jeep Jamboree tradition goes all the way back to 1953, when the first fifty-five Jeep vehicles took on the Rubicon Trail—driving from Georgetown, California to Lake Tahoe. The 155 passengers and drivers who participated had something to tell everyone back home—the nine-mile trail took about nine hours to complete! Since then, thousands of Jeep owners have crossed the Rubicon and many other trails established by Mark A. Smith, who acts as a consultant to the Jeep division of DaimlerChrysler. "A Jamboree makes for good cocktail talk. That just reinforces the Jeep name," Ed Brust, a Jeep/Eagle executive, told *Brandweek*.

Stimulate Them to Teach Others

Are network hubs buzzing about your product as you read this? Some of them may be, but how many? Network hubs, like everyone else, are extremely busy, and they have their own priorities.



Jeep Jamborees provide participants with experiences they are likely to share with others. *Courtesy, Jeep Jamboree USA.*

They may love your product, but talking about it may not be the first thing on their mind. Bringing them to forums where they can talk is a way to stimulate discussion.

Once you succeed in gaining the support of network hubs, you may be surprised at how much they are capable of doing. The hubs who assume the role of advice-givers in their cliques may gain even more respect for your product or idea as they start to spread the information to others. This happens as they process (and sometimes slightly modify) your message. Network hubs tailor the message to the language of their cliques. "Give them the information and they will translate it for you," says Ivan Juzang, president of MEE Productions, a Philadelphia-based communications company that specializes in spreading the word among inter-city kids. MEE produces antidrug videos, for example, but the company doesn't do it on their own. "You need to identify and recruit the peer-group leaders," says Juzang. Together with these young people, MEE creates tools that use the language employed by urban youth. For these kids the government's

standard message, "Just say No" to drugs, is meaningless. They are much more likely to be influenced by a message that comes from their network hubs.

Give Them the Facts

Don't be concerned about boring network hubs. Dell Computer Corporation came to realize that network hubs are willing to spend twenty minutes with an ad and go through the specs and the features. That's why Dell's ads look like catalogs. These hubs may be less influenced by brand names, and some marketers believe that they are therefore less brand-loyal. "Those people by their very nature are brand-agnostic," says Joe Gillespie of Ziff-Davis. "They are not to be fooled. They will not pay a 15 percent premium because there's a name on the product, and that's exactly how Dell made all its money." Brand-agnostic or not, network hubs put a lot of weight on facts. They are not to be fooled because they have acquired a great deal of knowledge. Give them more facts.

Never assume that network hubs already know about your latest product review. They may have missed it, or they may have noticed the one bad review you got in a different publication. Although many hubs consider themselves independent thinkers, they are influenced, like all of us, by others. Make sure that any endorsements or positive reviews that might add to their confidence in a product do not escape their attention. Although some of them may not be as impressed by popularity as other people, network hubs understand that ubiquity is important. Keep them up to date as the product passes certain benchmarks ("more than a million copies sold") or wins awards.

Don't Abuse the Relationships

Heidi Roizen, one of the best-connected people in Silicon Valley, asked Walt Mossberg, the influential columnist from *The Wall*

Street Journal, to meet with an entrepreneur she works with. Mossberg agreed to meet him the next day. When the two met, the businessman expressed his astonishment at Roizen's power. "I do everything she tells me to do," Mossberg told him. The reason? Because she doesn't ask him to do much. Roizen has a good relationship with Mossberg but is careful not to abuse it. "I'm on the board of six companies, and I've only called Walt once," she says. It's pointless to nag someone like Mossberg about a product that wouldn't interest him. "In order to use my network wisely, I don't call someone unless I'm absolutely certain that the product is ready and the idea is good." The same respectful attitude should be used with regular network hubs. Keep in touch with them, but don't overdo it. In fact, you should be even more sensitive about this issue in dealing with people who are regular hubs. Mega-hubs—the media, politicians, celebrities—are used to receiving press kits, phone calls, and e-mails and understand that it comes with the territory. Regular hubs are not always comfortable with this and may be turned off by *too* much attention.

Make Sure People See Hubs Using Your Product

Network hubs may be using your product, but this has only limited value if the world doesn't know about it. PowerBar implemented a special program to take care of that, enrolling thousands of leading athletes to be part of the company's "PowerBar Team Elite" program. Team members earn money when their picture appears in the media eating PowerBars or wearing the PowerBar gear. "Through that program you see PowerBar everywhere," says Alyssa Berman of the company's marketing team.

Luxottica Group uses this concept by placing its sunglasses with mega-hubs in the entertainment industry. In 1988, when Luxottica introduced its Armani line, most glasses in the market were housed in large plastic frames. The Armani glasses were compact and made out of metal. "People thought they were wierd-looking," says

Steve Hollander, vice president of marketing for the company. Luxottica used a Hollywood placement agency to have celebrities like John Travolta, Billy Crystal, and Robin Williams wear the glasses in numerous movies. "They wear them in their personal life as well, so you get the publicity of the movie, but they're also in *People* magazine and *Variety* and seen on the street," Hollander says.

The Bias Toward Mega-Hubs

Clearly, a successful marketing campaign should target both regular hubs and mega-hubs. Yet often only the mega-hubs are addressed. Why is this? First, because they are visible. It's easy to identify top analysts and press people in a certain market; simply read the trade publications and see who writes for them and who's being quoted. The second reason is that there are fewer mega-hubs. By covering several dozen individuals who follow an industry—sometimes even fewer than that—you're pretty much done. Look at the computer industry: "It really is a small group. When you really look at the industry and who people quote and which writers get the widest audience, it's a handful. It's fifteen to twenty people," says Heidi Roizen. The third reason is our bias toward hitting a home run. "Get on the cover of a major trade journal, and you've got it made," most people think.

Mega-hubs *can* be extremely influential, and their support can radically change the life of a product. Look at Oprah Winfrey and her book club. Oprah took a title like *The Book of Ruth* by Jane Hamilton, which sold fewer than 50,000 copies in its first seven years and turned it into a mega-best seller, with more than 1 million copies in print. It's no wonder that marketers are trying for a home run. They should. But they also need to work at the grassroots level first, because there's a limit to how many products mega-hubs can endorse—Oprah chooses only so many books a year. Second, regular hubs,

cumulatively, can be as important as mega-hubs. Look at a book like *Cold Mountain*, which became a bestseller with no help from Oprah or any other mega-hub. It's all because thousands of network hubs recommended it in reading groups, on the Web, and over the counter.

The problem is that grassroots campaigns are much more tedious. "It's hard to get most companies excited about talking to their own users," says Jeff Tarter, editor and publisher of *Soft*letter*. "And the PR community reinforces bad habits by insisting that 'the press' is tremendously influential for building a company's reputation. Maybe for a few giants like Microsoft and IBM, but if the end result of the PR campaign is six little news stories scattered throughout the trade press . . . Well, I think a much more productive effort would be to talk directly to users. Of course, that's not as good for the CEO's ego as getting quoted in an obscure trade magazine," says Tarter.

In the short term, targeting mega-hubs may seem to produce more results than focusing on regular hubs. It's much easier to quantify the effects of mega-hubs by tallying up "hits" in the media. And indeed, the backing of an Oprah Winfrey, a Rosie O'Donnell, or a Walt Mossberg could send sales of your product through the roof. But the untapped, neglected regular hubs ultimately may have as much or even more power. Since regular hubs engage in frequent *two-way* exchanges with their contacts, members of the networks are potentially more likely to hear and remember what these hubs say. This is the true source of strength that you can tap in to by using word-of-mouth marketing and the invisible networks.

Why Reach Hubs Early

Approaching network hubs at an early stage can help your product reach critical mass earlier than it would have otherwise. Why is that important? Because when a product reaches critical mass, adoption gains enough momentum to become self-sustaining.

Reaching that point is, of course, every marketer's dream. What do you do about it? You can just sit there and wait for hubs to hear about your product. The danger in that approach is that you might run out of energy or money before they decide to try your product. This is especially important for products associated with a high psychological or monetary risk, because network hubs are reluctant to be the first to adopt these products.

Remember that although network hubs are usually slightly ahead of the rest of their network in adopting new things, they are often not *the first* to adopt new ideas or products. "They will oftentimes wait to see whether or not the community is going to support their adoption behavior," explains Tom Valente of the University of Southern California. "They are not going to adopt it until they're sure it's the right thing for them to do."

Many innovations are first adopted at the *margins*, by people who aren't as central as network hubs. Either they have less of a reputation to maintain in their communities or they associate with groups of people who value risky choices. These people are usually imitated by only a few other people. When they are the only adopters, adoption spreads slowly.

That's why you want network hubs to adopt as early as possible. Bring the product to their attention. Address their concerns. Give them the facts. Assure them that it's safe. Show them hubs in other networks who have already adopted. Let them talk to these hubs. Do anything possible to make them adopt sooner rather than later. Once they do adopt, they'll give your product their seal of approval, making it okay for their followers not only to adopt, but also to recommend it to all of *their* friends. That, in turn, increases the chance of a person's hearing about the innovation from multiple acquaintances.

"Once the opinion leaders adopt, you're much more likely to reach critical mass, and then the process becomes self-sustaining," explains Valente.