

## NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

# CRAFTING CONTAGIOUS: GENERATING WORD OF MOUTH AND MAKING YOUR PRODUCT OR IDEA GO VIRAL

**Nano Tools for Leaders®** are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

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### THE GOAL:

Make your message go viral by following six key principles.

### NANOTOOL:

Word of Mouth is the primary factor behind 20–50 percent of all purchasing decisions, and it's ten times more effective than traditional advertising, according to a 2010 white paper published in the McKinsey Quarterly. The study predicts that word-of-mouth marketing will be a \$5.6 billion industry by 2015.

But to get people talking about your product or idea, you need to understand why they talk and why some things get talked about and shared more often than others. Based on analyzing thousands of contagious messages, products, and ideas, there are six key principles (STEPPS) that can help get your idea or product talked about, shared, and imitated.



- 1. Social Currency:** Status-by-association. Just as people use money to buy a product, they use social currency to create positive impressions of themselves. Talking about certain products or ideas makes people look good — and it increases awareness of the products or ideas. When organizations build social currency into their product or service, people will talk.
- 2. Triggers:** People talk about what's top of mind. To get word-of-mouth, you need to remind people — many times — about what you want them to share by linking it to a trigger that they naturally see or experience frequently.
- 3. Emotion:** Information alone doesn't get people to act. We share when we care, and it's "high-arousal" feelings that make us want to tell others and take action. Messages linked with awe, excitement, and amusement, or with anger or anxiety, get people talking.
- 4. Public:** Social influence has a big effect on behavior: People tend to conform to what they see others doing. Visibility therefore has a huge impact on whether products and ideas catch on. The more people see others using your product in public, the more they will talk about it.
- 5. Practical Value:** People like to help others by sharing information with practical value, such as how to save money, lose weight, or plan a vacation.
- 6. Stories:** Telling a story, rather than telling it straight, makes information catchier and easier to remember. Tell a great story, and people will share it — and your message will travel under the guise of idle chatter.

## HOW COMPANIES USE IT:

- When McDonald's introduced the McRib in 1981, sales were weak. After a few years of trying promotions and features, it dropped the sandwich from its menu. But in 2005 the company reintroduced the McRib, using the **social currency** principle by creating scarcity and exclusivity, offering it for a limited time, and only at certain locations. It now has a cult following, with online "McRib locators" to help fans find the sandwich.
- Hershey used a **trigger** to revive its Kit Kat brand in 2007. A new ad campaign paired the candy with coffee, describing Kit Kat as "a break's best friend." While "Kit Kat and cantaloupe" sounds about as good as "Kit Kat and coffee," coffee is a frequent stimulus in the environment. Every time someone drinks coffee, which is often multiple times each day, they might think of having a Kit Kat. According to Colleen Chorak, marketing director at Hershey, the trigger helped grow the brand from \$300 to \$500 million.
- It might be a stretch to think there's an **emotional** hook in something as banal as an online search engine. But Google's "Parisian Love" campaign, which follows a young man's online searches over time, from "study abroad Paris France" to "impress a French girl" to job hunting and "Paris churches" (as church bells ring in the background), was romantic, joyous, and inspiring. The emotions it aroused turned a normal ad into a viral hit.
- When Apple first introduced the iPod, it had a lot of competition in the digital music player space. And it had millions of potential customers who weren't sure whether to give up their portable CD players for the expensive new device, or which player to buy if they were ready to try one. Apple distinguished itself by including white (rather than the more common black) headphones, providing visible public proof that the iPod was being used and enjoyed by others.
- Vanguard's monthly newsletter, *MoneyWhys*, shares tips of **practical value** about investing, taxes, insurance, and other common financial concerns. Subscribers are prompted to forward articles (and to learn more about Vanguard products), through links on each page.
- Subway used the real-life **story** of Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds eating a Subway sandwich every day for lunch and dinner, in an ad campaign. The narrative is so entertaining that it gets repeated even when people aren't talking about weight loss, and even when they're not trying to promote the fast-food chain. But Subway benefits because its name and product are an integral part of the story.

## ACTION STEPS:

Here are some ideas for using the STEPPS principles to make anything go viral:

1. **Social Currency:** One way to build social currency is to use scarcity and exclusivity to make people feel like insiders. Both help products catch on by making them seem more desirable — if something is hard to obtain, people assume it must be worth the effort.
2. **Triggers:** Pick a positive trigger — a word, event or situation — that happens frequently where you want word of mouth. Then create strong links between the trigger and your product or service by repeating the connection frequently.
3. **Emotion:** Choose a "high arousal" emotion to link to your product or service, such as awe, excitement, amusement, anger, or anxiety. Show how your offering gets people more of the positive emotions or less of the negative ones.

- 4. Public:** Look for ways to make your service or product more visible, especially when people are using it. Be creative. Even seemingly invisible products like Intel can become visible to the public through tactics like “Intel Inside.”
- 5. Practical Value:** To get a product or idea to go viral, give people a chance to share a great discount with their friends. Use the Rule of 100: for items priced below \$100, discount using a percentage. For items priced above \$100, discount using a dollar amount.
- 6. Stories:** Create a catchy or compelling narrative in which your product or idea plays an integral part. People especially enjoy sharing these stories when they contain helpful information. As the story gets repeated, some of the details will inevitably get left out, so make sure your message is vital enough to withstand repeated tellings.

## SHARE YOUR BEST PRACTICES:

Do you have a best practice for making products, services, or ideas contagious? If so, please share it on our blog at Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. <http://whartonleadership.wordpress.com/>

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. Jonah Berger (Simon & Schuster, 2013). Describes the research-based STEPPS for generating word-of-mouth, making ideas and products contagious. *The Face-to-Face Book: Why Real Relationships Rule in a Digital Marketplace*. Ed Keller and Brad Fay (Free Press, 2012). Presents the results of a six-year study of consumer conversations, with insights, examples, and recommendations for businesses to use the information.
- “Networks, Influence, and Public Opinion Formation,” Duncan J. Watts and Peter S. Dodds. *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 34, No. 4: 441-445. Examines the “influentials hypothesis,” finding that large cascades of influence are driven not by influentials but by a critical mass of easily influenced individuals.
- Jonah Berger teaches in [Wharton Fellows: Master Classes and Networking for Senior Executives](#) as well as other Executive Education programs.

## ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, Director of Innovative Learning Solutions at Wharton Executive Education. It is jointly sponsored by Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management, Wharton Professor of Management Michael Useem, Director. Nano Tools Academic Director, Professor Adam Grant.