Daniel Hall Presents

REAL FAST RESULTS PODCAST

Episode 84

How to Make Your Content Marketing Contagious

with Dr. Jonah Berger Harris

Welcome to this episode of the Real Fast Results podcast! This is an extra special episode because today's special guest is world famous researcher, New York Times bestselling author, and university professor Dr. Jonah Berger. **You're about to learn how to put campaigns together, which have the propensity to be contagious and even go viral.**

Dr. Berger is a marketing professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of the bestselling book, *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*. Berger has spent over 15 years studying how social influence works, and how it drives products and ideas. In addition to writing his book, he has published dozens of articles in top-tier academic journals and has consulted a variety of Fortune 500 companies. He has also been published in popular outlets like the New York Times and Harvard Business Review.

"Contagious"

We've all seen products and ideas catch on, services and the like, whether it's a product in the grocery store (Greek yogurt became popular a few years ago), whether it's an app like Uber or Snapchat, or whether it is a service, like B2B marketing, for example. **We've all seen examples of things which came out of nowhere and became extremely popular, and the question is "Why?" What was it about these things that made them popular?**

It turns out that it's not just about advertising or having a big advertising budget, or even, necessarily, having the best product or service out there. **It's really about the power of word-of-mouth.** It turns out that word-of-mouth is ten times as effective as traditional advertising. If we can understand how to get that word-of-mouth, we can help our products and our services become more successful.

How to get more people to talk about it and make it more likely that if one person is using it, their friends and colleagues start using it as well.

How Contagious Marketing Works

Sometimes we see things become successful, and we think that it must be random, or luck, or chance. Right? You have to, sort of, bottle lightning to become successful. But, it isn't. There's really a structure or a science behind it. **We found six key factors in _[Contagious](#)_, which are what I call the "STEPPS," which cause all sorts of products, ideas, and services to become popular.** "Steps" is an acronym which stands for "Social Currency, Triggers, Emotion, Public, Practical Value, Stories." Each of those is a psychological principle that causes people to talk about and share information, which causes all sorts of things to catch on and become popular.

How Can I Go About Applying These Principles to What I'm Promoting?

You know, I thought a lot about this exact question. It's tough being a content creator. There's so much more content out there today than there has ever been. You think, "God. How can I compete? How can I cut through the clutter? How can I really get people's attention?" **But, at the end of the day, you get people to share, and that really increases your reach.** Rather than you having to promote it, necessarily, or pay to have it placed in certain places, other people do that promotion and that work for you. So, how can you get them to share? That's really where the STEPPS come in.

Let's take one of them, for example. Social Currency. Social currency is the idea that the better something makes you look, the more likely you are to share it. I tell an example, for instance, in the book about a bar that's hidden inside of a hot dog restaurant. So, you walk inside this hot dog restaurant, and in addition to great hot dogs, there's a phone booth in the corner. You walk into the phone booth, you pick up the phone, and you dial a certain number, and you get let into this secret bar. What's so neat about it is they became extremely successful not by telling everybody about it, but by making the people who knew about it feel smart and "in the know". They felt special, like they were insiders, and like they are not like everybody else.

One question, when it comes to writing a book or creating content in some way, shape, or form, is how can you make your audience feel like an

insider? How can you make them feel special or different from everyone else when hearing from you? How can you make them feel like they have information, for example, that puts them ahead of the curve so that they want to come to you first and they want to share with others? How do you make them feel like they are in on a secret, like they have insider information?

Too often, we think about whether or not our customers like us. "Do they like my book?" We get high reviews, for example, and they like our content, but at the end of the day, it's not just about whether or not they like us. **It's about how they look when they talk about us.** Do we make them look good? Because, the better we make them look, the more likely they will be to talk and share, and the more likely we'll get to come along for the ride.

Using These Principles As An Author Or Publisher

Think for a moment about the cover of your book. Is your book something that people would be proud to carry around with them? Do they want other people to know that they are reading it? Or, are they not? **You think about visible badges of status.** When people like something on social media, it often shows up in their feed, connecting other people and making other people realize that they like it. Is someone going to do that with your content? How would it make them look to post your thing, or share your thing, versus something else? You know, does it make them look like they are ahead of the curve, or does it make them look like they are behind the times?

We often realize that this is true with the car we drive or the clothes that we wear. We wear certain clothes because we recognize that they make us look good instead of bad, we buy certain cars for the same reasons. It's the same with content. How does it make us look to share a piece of content? The better it makes us look, the more likely we are to share.

We thought a lot about this when we were developing *Contagious*, and the cover around it. **I spent a long time reading through research on the psychology of color, understanding which colors do certain things and which are more noticeable.** We wanted a bright color so that if someone were reading the book on the subway, or at the airport, other people can see them reading it, but they also wanted an active color, rather than a passive color. *Contagious* is all about spreading something, not just sitting passively by. Really, thinking about building in some of these principles into everything that you do will help you be more successful.

Active Colors

So, orange, for example, is a very active color. Red and yellow are also active, but they do have some association with caution and other sorts of things, so I tend to stay away

from that. Also, an electric green, or an electric blue, can be good. They are very visible. They are a little more calming, or at least the blue color is; so you may or may not want to pick that, based on the content that you're writing.

I think about, not just the cover, but the content itself. If someone was at a cocktail party, and they mentioned your book, is that going to make them look smart and special, or is that going to make them look like something else? The more you can make them look that way, the more likely they will be to share.

When I give talks, one thing that I always mention is to ask people, "How much word-of-mouth is online?" Most people will guess 50%, 60%, 70%, or something along those lines. The numbers actually a lot closer to 7% or 8%, which is much smaller than people might think. Not only is that interesting, but people love to share that number with others because it is counter-intuitive, and it makes them look smart and "in the know" about social media. **That's the kind of thing we're thinking about. What are those sound bites or tidbits that really make people look like they are ahead?** They'll share that with others.

STEPPS

Another one that I think is really useful is this idea of triggers. I think of the six, "triggers"... Once you hear it, you completely understand it, but ahead of time, you wouldn't normally think about it. If something is at the top of the mind, it's much more likely to be tip of tongue. One example is Geico's recent ad for "Hump Day". As many people know, Wednesday, in the United States, is called "Hump Day". Why? Because it's the hump that you have to get over to get to Friday, which is the end of the week.

Geico built a piece of content based on this. There's a very annoying camel walking through an office, asking "What day is it? What day is it?" Everyone ignores him because he's being annoying, but he finally comes across this poor woman, and she goes, "It's Hump Day." He says, "Ooh!," and the commercial goes on to say how happy people are to have switched to Geico, which is happier than a camel on Hump Day. It's sort of funny when you see it on TV. People will give it a chuckle or two. It's not *that* funny though, and yet, that was the second most shared ad a couple of years ago. It's not a car ad, and it's not a beer ad, but an insurance ad. Not the most exciting product category out there.

So, one question is, "Why so many people shared this when it's not that funny or that sexy of a category?" Well, if you look at the data, you actually notice something interesting. I'm a data guy, and I dug a little deeper. I looked at the "share" data of this video, and what you see is kind of surprising. There's a spike in the shares, and then it goes down, and then there's another spike, and then it goes down. Well, if you look a little closer though, the spikes aren't random. They are about seven days apart. If you look even closer, you'll see that they happen every Wednesday, which is currently on Hump Day.

The count isn't good or bad, and it equals out every other day of the week, but when Hump Day rolls around and provides a reminder, or what psychologists call a "trigger," to make people think about it, talk about it, and share. If something is on top of mind, it's much more likely to be tip of tongue. Again, too often we think about whether or not people like us. If they like us, they will talk about us. If they like our content, they'll share our content. But, it's not just whether they enjoy it. It's whether or not they are thinking about it.

Imagine someone sitting on the subway, and they read your content, and they read two or three other articles. Then, they get off and go to work, and two or three hours later, they have lunch with their boss or a colleague. Is your piece of content, your message, and your idea going to be brought up? It's not just whether they liked it or not, it's whether they are thinking about it or not. That's what a trigger is. It's a little reminder in our environment, a little cue to remind us to think about something that's not necessarily there. So, if I said, for example, "peanut butter and…" you might say "jelly". If I said, "rum and…" you might think of "Coke".

If you think about it, peanut butter is almost like a little advertisement for jelly. It's almost like jelly should pay peanut butter a kickback or a referral fee every time peanut butter is around because when peanut butter is around, then jelly doesn't have to remind you that it exists. Like, peanut butter does all that work for jelly. I mean, that's the same idea here.

The question is, "What's your peanut butter?" What's the thing in the environment that will remind people of your message, your idea, even when you aren't around? Because you may have written a really great piece of content, and people may have loved it when they read it, but if they don't think about it after they read it, they're not going to continue to share it. That's really the question, right? How can you link into something in the environment, and every time they see that something, they think about your message?

There's an example in the book about "Kit Kat and coffee," and since as a society we drink and think about coffee, it is a daily trigger for Kit Kat. In this case, people liked Kit Kat, but they weren't buying it, so what did Kit Kat do? They linked themselves to coffee. "When you are having a coffee break, have a Kit Kat," or "Thinking about coffee? Think about Kit Kat." Coffee/Kit Kat, Kit Kat/Coffee, best friends forever. This hugely boosted Kit Kat's sales because now, when people thought about coffee, they thought about Kit Kat as well.

So, as a writer and as an author, what is that thing that's going to remind people of you? If you have a great story in your book, it might be really engaging for people to read it, but what's going to remind them of that story when they are in their surrounding environment? You need to think about everything from what you are going to write about, to how people are going to find your book, or find your piece of content, as well as what will remind people about it so that they are more likely to talk about it.

Finding The Right Triggers For A Product

I often say that there are four key things to think about when you are thinking about triggers. The first is "Who". Who do you want to be triggered? Who, as individuals, do we want to think about our message? Who is our target segment? And second, "When do we want them to think about us," and "When is the right time for individuals to think about us?" Is it when they are at a cocktail party or when they are in the office? When do we want our message to come to mind and invoke our piece of content, and what is in the environment around that time, and how can we link to that thing?

So, there are four questions: The who, the when, the what, and the how. These will really help us think about how to use triggers effectively. You might be wondering, "When is the right time for people to think about my message? When do I need them to take action on my content coming to mind, at that point?"

Practical Value

I'm happy to talk about this one as well. I think, of the six, it's one of the less fun ones, but it's quite useful. **It's all about the idea of having useful information.** People don't just share things to make themselves look good. They share things to help the others around them. So, the question is, "How can you make your content amazingly useful?"

What's useful about your message? How can you create other things that are useful which can carry your message along? When I talk about stories, for example, I talk about a notion, which is what I call a "Trojan Horse Story". This is where a story carries a message or idea with it. You know, good stories aren't just stories, they are vessels or carriers of information. So, how can you build a vessel or carrier of information that brings you along for the ride? Useful content is one way to do that.

You know, people these days talk a lot about content marketing, and what they really mean by that is rather that talking about yourself, you give something away for free that's of use or value. But, at the end of the day, it harkens back to you. It makes people think you're an expert, and it carries your message. So, the question really is, "What's your kernel?" What is this key attribution or key idea that you want to get across? But then, how do you build a vessel to carry that? What is the story, or the piece of useful content that shows what you want, or tells what you want to communicate.

Anyone can say that they are innovative, but how can you show that you are innovative? Anyone can say that they have great customer service, but how can you show that you have great customer service? Nordstrom does an extremely great job

with their customer service, and Nordstrom says that they have great customer service, but there's a story that really shows people and not just tells them.

A guy goes into Nordstorm, and he's got this pair of snow tires that worked defectively. He's only had them for a year, and they are already going bald. He says that he wants his money back, and the person at the store said, "Well, we don't actually sell snow tires here, but if you think that you bought them here, we will be happy to give you your money back."

What's great about that example is that it shows rather than tells. It's really easy to say that you offer a great service, but how can you show it? So, whatever that kernel is for you, how can you show it rather than tell it? So, whether your message is, "I tell really entertaining stories," or your message is, "I'm really knowledgeable about space," or whatever that key kernel is, how can you show it rather than tell it? If you can show it, that will really carry your message along for the ride.

Final Thoughts

Rather than thinking about you and your message, necessarily, how can you really think about your audience and their needs? How can you tailor your content to fit those needs? Think about your audience. That's really the key to being an effective communicator. You might have great ideas, and you might have a great message, but if your audience can't understand it, it's not going to matter. So, the more you think about and understand your audience, the more effective you'll be.

As we think about sharing, it's not about social media. It's not about the technology. It's about the psychology. It's about understanding why people share and using that to build more effective messages. Understand that the majority of word-of-mouth is not done, in fact, through social media. It's done face-to-face, or on the phone, or in a meeting, for example. So, understanding why people share and how they share can really help your message to get passed along.

Connecting with Dr. Berger

[My book is available](#) anywhere books are sold. Amazon, Barnes & Noble, or wherever you like. You can find more information about me at [JonahBerger.com](#). There are a bunch of free resources on our website, like a workbook to help you follow the STEPPS, and those sorts of things. You can also find me on J1Berger on Twitter.

Resources

[*Contagious: Why Things Catch On*](#)

[**JonahBerger.com**](#)

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