

Making Citizen Advocacy Contagious

Brian Martin

Chair of the board, Illawarra Citizen Advocacy

Work in citizen advocacy programmes requires commitment, good sense and hard work. But are there ways to suddenly do a whole lot better? Some clues can be gleaned from a stimulating book titled *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* by Malcolm Gladwell (published by Little, Brown in 2000). The book is an engaging popularisation of ideas about persuasion and the dynamics of social systems that have been developed in recent decades.

In New York City in the 1990s, the crime rate suddenly started to decline dramatically, for no obvious reason. Also in the 1990s, Hush Puppies, a shoe with an outmoded image and low sales, suddenly became highly fashionable. Sales boomed. Why?

Gladwell argues that just as there can be epidemic diseases, so there can be social epidemics. Furthermore, the difference between a low level of activity and a furious epidemic can be very tiny, just a slight change in conditions. Where this happens he calls the tipping point.

When you look into social epidemics, it turns out that a few key individuals make all the difference. "Connectors" know lots and lots of people, many of them acquaintances who provide ties into different worlds. "Mavens" collect knowledge and are eager to let others know about it. Finally there are the salespeople who are incredibly good at persuasion. A few people even combine these attributes.

Choosing staff who are connectors or salespeople can make an enormous difference to a programme's

ability to recruit protégés and advocates. But short of that, having connectors, mavens or salespeople as board members, or just as contacts, makes a lot of sense.

What makes people into trendsetters and effective persuaders? Often the processes are incredibly subtle, such as facial expressions and body motions in face-to-face interactions that aren't even noticed consciously.

Gladwell says a second important factor in creating social epidemics is the "stickiness" of the message, namely how compelling it is. The makers of the children's TV programmes *Sesame Street* and *Blue's Clues* spent enormous efforts finding out how children learn. For example, kids watch educational TV when they understand, not when they're stimulated. So the key is to notice when they're watching. That's when they're learning.

Gladwell doesn't offer a magic answer for making CA messages compelling, but he does offer hope that there is a magic answer! He concludes "There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it." That means it's worthwhile experimenting with different approaches, seeing what really grabs people.

Gladwell's third key element in creating social epidemics is context. Changing the environment can make a big difference, whether in crime, prison or doing a good turn. The "Good Samaritan" experiment

showed that many theology students, on their way to give a talk, would walk right past a man needing assistance. What made the biggest difference in whether they stopped to help? Not whether they expressed high principles or even whether their talk was about the Good Samaritan. Instead, the key factor was whether they were late or had time to spare. The implication is startling: the immediate context can be more important than convictions and thoughts.

Many citizen advocacy programmes pay a great deal of attention to context, especially by promoting images of positive roles and avoiding negative imagery. But beyond this, there may be other things to learn. For example, deciding just where to meet a potential advocate or how a leaflet is designed may make a great difference.

Rebecca Wells' book *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* spread like wildfire through small groups of women. Gladwell concludes that "small, close-knit groups have the power to magnify the epidemic potential of a message or idea." Can a CA programme build on small groups of committed individuals? Perhaps when several advocates know and support each other, this can provide the basis for drawing in more advocates and strengthening relationships.

CA is never going to take off like sales of a trendy shoe, but by learning from knowledge about how social epidemics occur, programmes may be able to do better. If building on the power of the few key networkers, making messages as compelling as possible and experimenting with changes in context has the potential to tip the balance to better help just a few vulnerable individuals, it is worth the effort to learn the lessons of *The Tipping Point*.