Designing for Social Networks
By Jonathan Bruck

Recently, several books have discussed social network theory and how it can be applied to the field of business and marketing. However, these ideas should not be lost to or ignored by designers as adapting these rules for design can help us build better and more meaningful products.

Social network theory seeks to understand how we are connected to other people and how 'weak ties' (invisible links between groups) can seamlessly connect overnight to create massive trends. In a famous experiment conducted in the 1960s, psychologist Stanley Milgram mailed to 160 people in Nebraska a package to be delivered to a stockbroker in Massachusetts. On average, each package passed through six pairs of hands before the stockbroker received it. This led to the concept of six degrees of separation which is the theory that any two people in the world are connected in some way by no more than six people.

Milgram's experiment showed how only a few people can have a powerful impact. In his book *The Tipping* Point, Gladwell (2003) explains that "six degrees of separation doesn't mean that everyone is linked to everyone else in just six steps. It means that a very small number of people are linked to everyone else in a few steps, and the rest of us are linked to the world through those special few."

The basic message of social network theory is that in every social network there are a few people who connect everyone else together. Gladwell identifies these people as Connectors, Mavens and Salesmen. Connectors are social glue, who spread the ideas, Mavens are databanks who provide the message and Salesmen have the skills to persuade us when we are unconvinced of what we are hearing. Seth Godin (2000) in his book *Unleashing the Ideavirus* refers to these people as Sneezers -- people who 'sneeze' and spread an idea to a large network of people, quickly and with credibility.

Both Gladwell and Godin use the metaphor of an epidemic to depict how things become fashionable or popular. Just as a small number of people do the majority of the work involved in spreading contagious epidemics, a small number of people also do most of

the work involved in spreading social epidemics. According to Gladwell, epidemics have three defining characteristics: they are contagious, they are caused by small things, and they happen fast.

While Milgram clearly identified this phenomenon in the 60s, it is only now that it seems to be making its way into the business psyche. This can primarily be understood as a result of digital technology that makes the tracking, visualization and communication through these social networks easier then ever. In the past, if you wanted to tell a friend about something, it required one-to-one or one-to-few communication. Now, with tools like email, not only can we tell all our friends at once, but we can reach their friends and their friends'-friends, etc… at the click of a button.

To design for the future we must recognize that these social networks are the prominent way in which ideas spread. Yet, we must also acknowledge their asymmetry, which makes traditional data gathering techniques such as focus groups ineffective. Here are a few steps to consider next time you are designing a new product (taken from Godin).

You can multiply the impact of your idea by boosting these five factors:
1. The reputation benefit to the powerful sneezer.
2. The selfish benefit to the promiscuous sneezer.
3. The smoothness of sharing the virus with a friend.
4. The power of the amplifier used to spread positive word of mouth.
5. The frequency of interaction by the members of a "hive" or group of connected people.

How effective is this? The Apple iPod can be viewed as a perfect example.

From a classical sense, the iPod is stylish and intuitive to use. This certainly doesn't hurt – but consumers have always privileged price over style and usability in technology products. Take the Mac for example, while it was undeniably more intuitive and user friendly it was still radically outsold by the less expensive Windows PCs in the late 80s and early 90s. So what then explains the success of the iPod? On the surface it possesses many of the qualities of the Mac with superior design and usability over competing products. Nevertheless, it is also expensive, which, by Macintosh standards, should mean that it could easily be overcome by a cheaper competitor.

However, the iPod succeeds because the design leverages the principles of social networking. By nature the iPod is a portable device that enhances visibility and spreading through its' everyday use. In addition, while the navigation wheel on the iPod can be seen as a well designed feature – it serves an even greater role in advertising the product. Owners can demo this neat iPod feature. My own experience suggests that the curiosity of playing with it cannot be resisted even for those who have no intention of owning an mp3 player. The iPod fulfills points one and three from the list above: it's easy to share with friends and this sharing process is fun and satisfying to the owner. This serves to increase the likelihood that an iPod owner will continue to promote the product on Apple's behalf. Even the all white color which extends through the ear buds is now a status symbol, when you see someone on the street with white ear buds you know they have an iPod.

Seeking inspiration from Godin's rules, Apple could further enhance the virality of their product. For example, it could increase frequency of interaction between owners through an iPod to iPod music file sharing program. This could help users find other users, to connect with them and exchange songs, thus adding a whole new social dimension to the iPod. Such features all serve to solidify Apple's market position and competitive edge.

So the next time you have to design a product try to understand how it will be used, spread, shared and talked about in a social way and what you as a designer can do to facilitate these processes This is just a short introduction to how designers can use social networking theory, and you may find the following books useful for a more in depth investigation.

- *Unleashing the Ideavirus* by Seth Godin
  get a free online version of the book here: www.ideavirus.com
- *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Glasser
- *The Anatomy of Buzz* by Emanuel Rosen
- *Urban Tribes* by Ethan Watters
- *Smart Mobs* by Howard Rheingold