

Book Review

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The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind

by: Jonah Berger

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Why is it so difficult to get people to take action when presented with solid facts, logical rationale, and an impressive delivery? Berger notes in the Introduction of *The Catalyst* as with inertia in the physical world, things that are stationary are hard to move. The same is true in the social world. People tend to do (or not do) what they have always done. In other words, changing someone's mind is not easy. Pushing harder to get someone to do or think the way you want might only encounter even stronger resistance or push back. To ease the transition, one can look to chemistry and catalysts. In a social context, a catalyst lowers the barriers and removes the roadblocks that prevent action. That is the premise of the book, describing principles on how to remove obstacles to change, thus allowing change to happen.

Instead of trying to convince someone with facts and reason, Berger suggests asking the question, why has not that person changed already? Essentially, what is the roadblock or barrier that prevents change? Berger addresses that question by discussing five roadblocks with one chapter dedicated to each. The roadblocks are *reactance*, *endowment*, *distance*, *uncertainty* and *corroborating evidence*. Taken together, the acronym REDUCE is what catalysts do – they *reduce* roadblocks, with application to thoughts and behaviours, individuals and institutions, as well as social and cultural settings.

The chapter on *reactance* explores why it is that when someone is told to not do something, it actually makes that activity more alluring. This was the case with teen smoking and with the Tide pod challenge, for example. It seems that warnings somehow become recommendations. People value their autonomy and having control over what happens to them. Even when the choice they make is not ideal, it seems that people prefer making the choice (to smoke or eat a Tide pod) over being told they do not have a choice. When there is no choice, reactance, or the bad feeling that is associated with the loss of control sets in. Berger asserts then that preserving agency with consumers by having them maintain control without undue influence can overcome reactance. Such was the case with the Truth campaign to reduce teen smoking rates in the late 1990s where high school students simply provided information about the tobacco industry and its marketing efforts rather than directly asserting to stop smoking. The chapter outlines strategies to

reduce reactance including offering choices, asking questions, highlighting gaps and start with understanding.

Chapter 2 addresses *endowment*, which is one's tendency to stay with the status quo. Even when presented with attractive alternatives, it is only when the perceived benefits significantly outweigh the potential losses that a change in behaviour occur. When the status quo is tolerable, like a sprained finger, people tend to do nothing about it. It takes what Berger refers to as, *surfacing the cost of inaction*, to help individuals appreciate that doing nothing actually has negative consequences over time. In some instances, when resistance to change is strong, the *burning ships* tactic can be employed. The idea is that although sticking with the status quo is an option, it can be a very unattractive one, as is the case when hardware and software companies no longer support older models, thus easing the endowment to switch to a newer version of technology.

Confirmation bias, or the tendency for people to interpret information in a way that supports what they already believe, is at the core of Chapter 3 on *distance*. When individuals are presented with ideas that are beyond their region of acceptance, they tend to reject the notions and stick even more strongly to their beliefs. Berger suggests that shrinking the distance can make a change in attitude a reality by finding the movable middle, asking for less, and switching the field to find an unsticking point. The premise is that some people will simply not change their position, thus it makes sense to target those who have demonstrated that they are willing to consider alternatives to their stated preference. Priming the individual for a bigger change by first asking for a smaller one also shrinks the distance. Finally, finding areas of agreement to build on lays the foundation for mutual understanding.

Chapter 4 addresses *uncertainty* and how it acts as a barrier to change as well as decision-making. Referred to as an uncertainty tax, individuals tend to lower the value of options as uncertainty in the outcomes increases. Berger suggests that uncertainty can be reduced by trialability, or the degree to which something can be experienced on a limited basis. Trial can be encouraged by harnessing freemium, reducing up-front costs, drive discovery, and make decisions reversible. Examples include digital storage, free shipping, free samples and lenient return policies. In the context of consumer behaviour, the appropriate strategy depends on where the consumer is in the decision-making process.

Berger asserts that even after reducing the roadblocks addressed in the first four chapters, there are times when a more substantial approach is needed. Chapter 5 focuses on providing *corroborating evidence* with a commensurate amount of information, context, or certainty for change to happen. Berger refers to subjectivity in individual evaluations as translation, addressing variation in experience, preference and perception. One way to address the variation is to rely on multiple sources, which add credibility and legitimacy. The effectiveness of such relies on who, when, and how the corroborating evidence is presented. Information from diverse sources in close succession and within the same circles seems to be effective. The degree to which each element is needed depends on the nature (e.g., expensive, time-consuming, controversial, risky) and strength (i.e., level of conviction) of the attitude or opinion.

The book also includes case studies and appendices providing detailed accounts of catalysing in action as well as tools in consumer behaviour for those who are interested. Reading cases about the transformation of a KKK leader to adopting Judaism, Brexit, switching political party affiliation, converting a sceptical boss, and a historical account involving wartime organ meat was interesting and impactful. Practical examples in the

appendices of strategies involving consumer behaviour include active listening, applying freemium, and force field analysis.

The book stems from curiosity and slowly transitions to applications in consumption. At the outset, the reader learns about changing the social or cultural perspectives of individuals. Eventually, the focus shifts to marketing strategies in influencing the purchasing behaviours of consumers. The relationship sections of the book are reminiscent of the work by Brené Brown and the courage of vulnerability. Individuals establish common ground when they overcome the fear of judgement by choosing to be transparent and authentic. The barriers to change can be reduced when people see they have more similarities than differences.

Easy to read, insightful, relevant and practical. Anyone interested in a practical and insightful book that also uses storytelling for entertainment will find that *The Catalyst* is worth their time to read from cover to cover.