Getting Inside the Heads of Consumers

Why does any consumer product break out of the pack and keep on selling?
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“Rock Around the Clock,” by Bill Haley and His Comets, appeared on the B-side of “Thirteen Women” in 1954, spent one week on the Billboard charts and disappeared. A year later, after the song opened the film Blackboard Jungle, it became the top-selling single in the United States.

Published as an e-book and paperback (by the Writer’s Coffee Shop, a small publishing house based in Australia) in 2011, Fifty Shades of Gray was then picked up by Knopf Doubleday and sold more than 150 million copies.

Why? Why does an initial failure – or, for that matter, any consumer product – break out of the pack, capture the attention of millions of people, and keep on selling?

In Hit Makers, Derek Thompson, a senior editor at The Atlantic magazine, provides some answers. Drawing on social science research and a boatload of fascinating stories (ranging from the instant popularity of Johannes Brahms’ lullaby, “Wiegenlied,” to the emergence of the iPhone, which Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer gave “no chance to get any market share,” as the
most profitable hardware invention in fifty years), Thompson examines the psychology of hits. He identifies some rules that help aspiring hit makers identify why people like what they like and the social networks through which markets can be reached. That said, Thompson does not quite make good on his promise to pinpoint the “way for people to engineer hits.”

The notion that original and high quality ideas and products will, inevitably, find large audiences, Thompson reminds us, is a myth. Instead, he maintains that two apparently contradictory psychological traits help explain “popularity in an age of distraction”: human beings prefer familiar consumer products, songs, landscapes, faces and voices – but also want to be challenged, shocked, forced to think “just a bit.” And so, in addition to repetition (“the exposure effect”) and the importance of social networks (a claim advanced by Malcolm Gladwell in The Tipping Point), Hit Makers adopts as its mantra a theory about exploiting the tension between neophilia (curiosity about discovering new things) and neophobia (fear of anything that is too new) that Raymond Loewy (the designer of Studebaker’s “Loewy Coupe” and JFK’s Air Force One) called MAYA: “Most Advanced Yet Acceptable.”

The practical utility of these theories, it seems to me, is limited. They don’t really account for the decision of several publishers to pass on the first Harry Potter – or J. P. Rowling’s stunning success. They do not explain why some movie sequels or adaptations flop while others flourish. They do not illuminate strategies for “niche markets.” They don’t define “optimal newness” or “surprising with familiarity.” And when Thompson maintains that the take-off of “We Are Young,” by the indie pop band Fun, after it aired in a “jaunty Chevy commercial” during Super Bowl XLVI, “was just about marketing – the power of the right song, in the right place, with the right product,” – we don’t know what makes “We Are Young” right and other songs wrong.

To be sure, Thompson’s analysis of the role of social media in pushing things to the surface, where audiences can see them,” is insightful and, at times, original. He does appear to retreat, however, from his promise to identify the “way for people to engineer hits” and let other people know “when popularity is being engineered.” Making products for people who don’t know what they want, he writes, is “unbelievably difficult,” and perhaps hopeless work. The business of creativity, he adds, with an apparent endorsement of chaos theory (microscopic change that yields wildly different outcomes), “is a game of chance,” begging for “a gospel of perseverance through inevitable failure.” And again: “there is no secret...if there were, everybody would know it and follow it, and the world would be awash in similarly successful cultural products.” Instead, “the only thing that people know is the last thing that succeeded.”

It’s a sobering – and compelling – thought. And, paradoxically, it makes Thompson’s stories of hits and misses that “bear the indelible imprint” of their maker and some enabler all the more alluring. Because, as Thompson reminds us, “it’s that tantalizing uncertainty” that keeps creative people – and more than a few of us less creative types – “up until four in the morning.”