



Polkas, Pyrotechnics and Point Ds:

Pieces and parts of Seth Godin's
new book, *small is the new big*

by Seth Godin

You're Smarter Than They Think

You're smarter than your boss or your friends or your organization believes. And you are way smarter than the marketers selling to you every day give you credit for, that's for sure.

I've been betting on the intelligence of my readers for almost a decade, and that bet keeps paying off.

They just don't get it. Not you, you get it. It's the other guys who don't. The people who deceive or cut corners or refuse to change in the face of overwhelming opportunity and evidence.

Sometimes it's hard for me to figure out exactly what I do for a living. Looking through some of my PowerPoint slides, I saw an image that clarified my thinking. It helped me understand what it is I do all day.

The picture is of a propane filling station in Canada, with a landmark twenty-foot-tall propane tank out front. This gas station also happens to sell fireworks.

That's what I do. I sell fireworks.

The people who buy my books or read my blog or hire me to speak to their organization already know what to do next. They're smart, even brilliant, when it comes to growing an organization, building a business, or spreading an idea. They already know how to design a great Web site or compose a successful blog posting. But they're stuck.

They're stuck because society, or their bosses, or their spouses, or their co-workers won't let them do what they already know they should do. It's like their briefcases are filled with compressed propane, but they can't get anything to happen.

So that's where I come in. I bring fireworks with me. Not particularly loud or powerful ones, but fireworks capable of attracting attention—and, more important, igniting the propane you've already got.

And what I've discovered is that different people respond differently to various messages.

Some of my e-mail tells me that people's lives have been changed and organizations supercharged as the direct result of a six-hour seminar I did—a seminar that left me exhausted for days. Others seem to get a spark from a two-line blog post, while still others need the comforting reassurance of a hardcover book to set their inner genius free.

After I posted my one-thousandth blog post, I realized that many of these fireworks I was busy igniting weren't reaching the audience that wanted (and maybe needed) to read them. My blog readers were having a blast (no pun intended) but others, those who wanted stimulation in a different format, were missing all the fun.

So here they are, in a handy, portable, nearly waterproof format, 100 percent recyclable, of course. The most explosive, viral, intuitive, obvious, spreadable, and quotable ideas from almost a decade of my writing books, then a column, and now a blog. I guarantee you'll find some that don't work for you. But I'm certain that you're smart enough to recognize the stuff you've always wanted to do buried deep inside one of these riffs. And I'm betting that once you're inspired you'll actually make something happen.

Cogs

Since you were five, schools and society have been teaching you to be a cog in the machine of our economy. To do what you're told, to sit in straight lines, and to get the work done.

We have been trained to be cogs in a vast system, workers in a finely tuned factory.

In the early factory era, there was great demand for trained cogs. The cogs even had unions, and cog work was steady, consistent, and respected. There were far worse things than coghood.

Here's how being a cog has changed in the last few years:

1. Cog labor is a lowest-common-denominator activity.
2. If cog labor gets expensive, companies now automate it.
3. If a company can't afford to automate, they move the work somewhere where it's cheaper.
4. If the competition moves, companies figure out how to measure and semi-automate their cog labor to make it cheaper still.

The end result is that it's essentially impossible to become successful or well-off doing a job that is described and measured by someone else.

Worth reading the italics twice, I think.

The only way our country (or your country, depending on where you live), your economy, and, most of all, your family has to get ahead is this: Make up new rules.

People who make up new rules continue to be in very short supply.

Grass (No, Not That Kind)

Do you have a lawn?

You know, the wasteful green expanse in front of your house? That kind of lawn.

It turns out that lawns were virtually unknown in the United States until after 1850, and were invented in the United Kingdom not too long before this.

The reason for a lawn? To demonstrate wastefulness. A lawn tells your neighbors that you can afford to waste land, waste water, and have a team of servants to keep it all pretty (visit http://www.american-lawns.com/history/history_lawn.html for all the gory details).

The marketing of lawns is true marketing. Not interruptive clever ads, but an idea that spreads and sticks. Just like Starbucks. Or e-mail. The challenge facing industries and organizations is to create ideas that have the marketing built in.

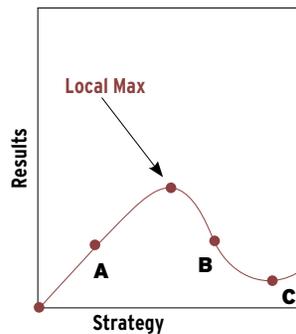
You don't have a front lawn so your kids can practice soccer. You have one so your spouse won't yell at you for embarrassing the family in front of the neighbors.

Happy mowing.

Local Max, And How to Avoid It

My guess is that you've been wrestling with your Local Max.

If your organization or your career is stuck, it may just be because of this chart.



Everyone starts at that dot at the bottom left corner. You're not succeeding at this point, simply because you haven't started yet.

Then you try something. If it works, you end up at point A.

A is where you see direct results from your strategy and hard work. A is the job you get after investing in an M.B.A. A is the sales you do after running an ad.

Of course, being a success-oriented capitalist, that's not enough. So you do more. You push and hone and optimize until you end up at the Local Max. The Local Max is where your efforts really pay off.

So you try even harder. And you end up at point B. Point B is a bummer. Point B is backward. Point B is where more effort doesn't return better results anymore. So you retreat. You go back to your Local Max.

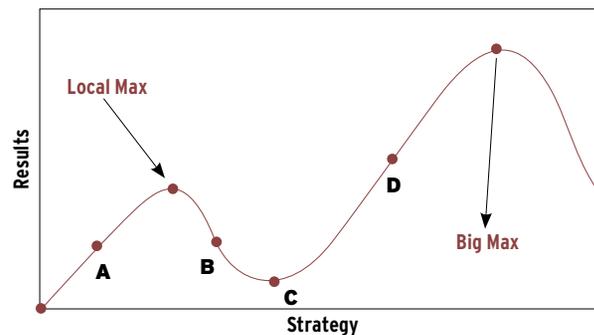
And that is where most people stay. Most people get stuck at the Local Max because changing strategy in any direction (this is really a 3D chart, but I've flattened it to the page) leads to poorer results.

You've got a very good job as an art director. To do better, you'd either have to move to another firm, move to another town, switch careers, or go back to school. All of these options have costs and very uncertain returns, so you stay where you are.

You have a hundred competitors in an industry that is a self-described commodity. You use the same tactics your competition does, because if you change your pricing or fundamentally alter your marketing outreach, you get punished in terms of sales or profits.

You've got a summer camp with eighty kids in it. If you want to grow, you've learned the hard way that hiring one or two more senior staff people won't work, because you can't afford them. So you stick with what you've got.

The lie of Local Max is this: The chart is incomplete. It really looks like this:



You'll discover that the Local Max isn't actually a suitable place to stop trying, especially when you realize that the Big Max is not particularly far away.

The problem is that to get to the Big Max, you need to get past point C, which is a horrible and scary place to be.

There were ten thousand single-location hamburger restaurants in the world when Ray Kroc decided to build the giant McDonald's franchise. Anyone could have done it. No one did. Because everyone who tried had to go through point C to get there. It took Colonel Sanders more than a decade of pain to get through point C.

Of course, it's not just about growing sales or revenues. The Big Max/Local Max paradox affects everything from education to nonprofits to politicians. If you have a "Max," whatever you're measuring, the odds are you're actually dealing with a Local Max, not the big one.

If your market is changing, this idea is even more important to understand, because changing markets are continually surfacing new Big Max points, and the only way to get to them is to go through the pain (yes, it's painful) of point C.

You can't reinvent yourself or your organization until you deal with the fear of point C, and that's hard to do without talking about it. I think the benefit of the Local Max curve is that it makes it easy for you and your team to have the conversation.



Polka

This sign is right next to the escalator at the convention center in Milwaukee:

Press to Play Polka

It doesn't cost much, but it transforms the mundane into the memorable. That, and you get to hear polka music for your entire ride.

Quality

In industries under siege from external change (and I count music, books, airlines, pharmaceuticals, IT, telecommunications, etc.), you'll find that the extra fees extracted by the legacy companies do not go toward quality. They go to prop up the status quo.

That's why CDs cost \$18 and why JetBlue is the best airline in America.

What Then?

You get to make a choice.

You can remake that choice every day, in fact. It's never too late to choose optimism, to choose action, to choose excellence. It only takes a moment—just one second—to decide.

Before you finish this paragraph, you have the power to change everything that's to come. And you can do that by asking yourself (and your colleagues) the one question that every organization and every individual needs to ask today: Why not be great?

Assume that:

Hard drive space is free

WiFi-like connections are everywhere

Connection speeds are ten to one hundred times faster

Everyone has a digital camera

Everyone carries a device that is sort of like a laptop, but cheap and tiny

The number of new products introduced every day is five times greater than it is now

Wal-Mart's sales are three times as big

Any manufactured product that's more than five years old in design sells at commodity pricing

The retirement age is five years higher than it is now

Your current profession is either obsolete or totally different

What then?

info

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Godin is a bestselling author, entrepreneur and agent of change. Author of seven books that have been bestsellers around the world: *Permission Marketing*, *Unleashing the IdeaVirus*, *The Big Red Fez*, *Survival is Not Enough*, *Purple Cow*, *Free Prize Inside!*, and *All Marketers are Liars*, he is also the editor of *The Big Moo* and one of the most popular business bloggers. Simply, Seth Godin changes the way people think about marketing, change and work.

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