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CONNECTEDNESS

In July 2009, a musician, Dave Carroll, released 'United Breaks Guitars', a music video he had produced with his band, Sons of Maxwell, in which he stars. He did this in response to an all-too-common experience for many air travellers: irresponsible baggage handling followed by an almost unbelievable arrogance by the company concerned. The video rapidly became one of YouTube's greatest hits and caused a media frenzy across the internet, which was picked up by major global networks including CNN, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Chicago Tribune*, *Rolling Stone Magazine* and even the BBC on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Here is Carroll's story, slightly edited for simplicity:¹

'On March 31, 2008 Sons of Maxwell began our week-long-tour of Nebraska by flying United Airlines from Halifax to Omaha, by way of Chicago. On that first leg of the flight we were seated at the rear of the aircraft and upon landing and waiting to deplane in order to make our connection a woman sitting behind me, not aware that we were musicians cried out: "My God they're throwing guitars out there." Our bass player Mike looked out the window in time to see his bass being heaved without regard by the United baggage handlers. My \$3500 710 Taylor [guitar] had been thrown before his. I immediately tried to communicate this to the flight attendant who

¹For the full story and to view the video, go to <http://www.davecarrollmusic.com/ubg/>

cut me off saying: "Don't talk to me. Talk to the lead agent outside." I found the person she pointed to and that lady was an 'acting' lead agent but refused to talk to me and disappeared into the crowd saying "I'm not the lead agent." I spoke to a third employee at the gate and when I told her the baggage handlers were throwing expensive instruments outside she dismissed me saying "but hun, that's why we make you sign the waiver." I explained that I didn't sign a waiver and that no waiver would excuse what was happening outside. She said to take it up with the ground crew in Omaha. When I got to Omaha it was around 12:30 am. The plane was late arriving and there were no employees visible... Air Canada gave me a phone number to start my claim with United. When I called the number United said I had to return to the Halifax airport with the guitar to show the damage to someone and open a claim. When I returned to the Halifax airport I met with an Air Canada employee, because United has no presence there, and that person acknowledged the damage, opened a claim number but "denied" the claim because Air Canada would not be responsible for damage caused by United employees in Chicago (which still makes sense to me). I took the claim number and called United back. They never seemed to be able find the claim number on several subsequent phone calls but at the last minute it would always surface. I spoke several times to what I believe were agents in India who, ironically were the most pleasant, and seemed genuinely sorry for what had happened. Three or four months later I got directed to the Chicago baggage offices of United and after several attempts to speak with someone was told to simply bring in the guitar for inspection... to Chicago... from Halifax, Canada. When I explained that Halifax is far from Chicago someone then said my claim needed to go through Central Baggage in New York and they gave me a toll free phone number. I phoned that number and spoke to someone. She couldn't understand why someone in Chicago thought she would be able to help me but she seemed to feel for me and asked me to fax her all the information. I did and a few weeks passed with no reply. I called back and the lady said she'd never received the fax. Then I asked

her to look for it and surprisingly, there it was. When she found it she asked me to give her a couple of days and to call back. I did, and by the time I phoned again two days later, the number had been discontinued. I had to start all over again with the same 1-800 # to India, where they were as sorry as ever for what happened, couldn't find my claim at first, and told me I needed to bring the guitar into Chicago's O'Hare for inspection. Six months had gone by and the guitar had now been repaired for \$1200 to a state that it plays well but has lost much of what made it special. I spoke to a customer service manager in India who promised to forward a note to have someone in Chicago contact me. I received a letter about month later from Chicago with no name or contact info, saying someone would be contacting me about this. Another month went by and I received an email from a Ms Irlweg in Chicago I believe. It basically said she was sorry this happened and denied my claim. Some of her reasons were: I didn't report it to the United employees who weren't present when we landed in Omaha; I didn't report to the Omaha airport within 24 hours while I was driving to places that weren't Omaha; It was an Air Canada issue; Air Canada already denied the claim (as I mentioned because Air Canada would not pay for United's damages), but I'm still unsure as to why I needed to report it in Omaha within 24 hours if it was clearly Halifax's responsibility; someone from United would need to see the damage to a guitar that was repaired. So after nine months it came down to a series of emails with Ms. Irlweg and, despite asking to speak to her supervisor, our conversations ended with her saying United would not be taking any responsibility for what had happened and that that would be the last email on the matter. My final offer of a settlement of \$1200 in flight vouchers, to cover my salvage costs repairing the Taylor, was rejected. At that moment it occurred to me that I had been fighting a losing battle all this time and that fighting over this at all was a waste of time. The system is designed to frustrate affected customers into giving up their claims and United is very good at it but I realized then that as a songwriter and traveling musician I wasn't without options. In my final reply to Ms. Irlweg

I told her that I would be writing three songs about United Airlines and my experience in the whole matter. I would then make videos for these songs and offer them for free download on YouTube and my own website, inviting viewers to vote on their favourite United song. My goal: to get one million hits in one year. To date I have written "United: Song 1" and "United: Song 2" and I'm proud to now release the first video in the trilogy. The response has been incredible so far. Everyone involved in the recording of the track and filming/editing of the video has volunteered their time and pre-production work is underway for the filming of "United: Song 2" (hopefully to be released later this summer). United has demonstrated they know how to keep their airline in the forefront of their customers' minds and I wanted this project to expand upon that satirically. I've done being angry for quite some time and, if anything, I should thank United. They've given me a creative outlet that has brought people together from around the world. We had a pile of laughs making the recording and the video while the images are spinning on how to make "United: Song 2" even better than the first. So, thanks United! If my guitar had to be smashed due to extreme negligence I'm glad it was you that did it. Now sit back and enjoy the show.²

Song 1 was posted on 6th July 2009. Within 24 hours it had drawn 461 comments on YouTube, most of them maligning the airline. However, it went viral after that with *The Consumerist* website reporting more than 24,000 views by the following night. When the YouTube count exceeded 150,000 hits, the international news media picked up the story and ran it around the world. Today, it has received over 9.2 million views on YouTube alone.³ Let no one be in any doubt that we live in an age where information technology is empowering consumers and massively lever-

²For the full story and to view the video, go to <http://www.davecarrollmusic.com/ubg/>

³For a spoof response by United, visit this YouTube link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xDoSFqqL4WI&feature=related>

aging inherent social networking capability. Bad news can spread easily. As with United Airlines, with the leverage of social networking, it can spread like wildfire, and so an organization that fails to satisfy its customers, whether it is big or small, courts disaster.

Migram and six degrees of separation

Even if we discount the power of the internet, society is amazingly connected. We do not live in discrete cells in which information is contained. Our personal real-life, life-built social networks are extraordinarily connected and have always been effective in the transmission of information.

'Word of mouth' has always been the most effective way of disseminating social information for the good of the whole of society, and it can make or break those whose behaviour is socially unacceptable. It was ever thus.

As long ago as the late 1950s, the American social psychologist Professor Stanley Milgram of Yale University carried out what became known as: 'The Small World Experiment'. Milgram⁴ sought to examine the average path length of social networks in the population at large. He had collaborated with other academics in the University of Paris in the 1950s who had been working on mathematical models of social contacts and influences, and whose ideas had probably been triggered by a

⁴Milgram was also influenced by the events of the Holocaust and sought to prove the relationship between obedience and authority. He is famous for his highly controversial experiments in the early 1970s in which he demonstrated that human beings were able to dissociate themselves from the consequences of their actions. He devised a method whereby he was able to get people to administer apparently lethal but pseudo electric shocks to actors posing as human guinea pigs; all under the orders of his researchers who wore white coats and carried clipboards, thereby appearing to be expert and authoritative.

Hungarian, Frigyes Karinthy (around 1910) who laid down a challenge for anyone to find another person through at most five other people.

Milgram's team of researchers ran an experiment in parallel, with two targets: one a stockbroker who lived in Boston, and the other the wife of a divinity graduate student who lived in Sharon, Massachusetts. The names of 160 people in Omaha, Nebraska were randomly obtained, and a similar number living in Wichita, Kansas. Both of these cities are more than 2300 kilometres away from Boston. Milgram wrote to each person enclosing a packet that contained the name and address of the chosen target in Boston, a photograph of that person, and a letter asking them to take part in a social contact study in American society.

The respondents were specifically asked to send the packet directly to the target only if they knew him or her on a personal basis. Otherwise, they were asked to send it to a personal acquaintance whom they thought more likely to know that person. In each case, they were asked to put their name on a card that was to accompany the packet throughout, and to send a pre-paid card to Harvard University as they handed the packet on. Sixty-four packets arrived at the target destinations and the tracking mechanism revealed that whilst some had take nine or ten referrals to complete the journey, many had done so in only two hops. The average path length (a measure of how easy it is to negotiate a network is) was 5.5.

Despite the size and complexity of society, in theory we are only separated from any other person by five or six others.

This famous experiment, with its astonishing results, led to the term 'Six Degrees of Separation' which has fired the imagination of writers and filmmakers as well as sociologists and marketers ever since.

Dunbar's number

How many Christmas cards do you send? If you're unenthusiastic about Christmas, the chances are it will be 15 or so. If you are more into it, maybe you have around 50 people on your list. If Christmas is a major event in

your year, the chances are it could be up to 150 although it is highly unlikely to be more than that. Robin Dunbar, Professor of Evolutionary Anthropology at Oxford University has concluded that in common with all primates, humans have a natural limit to the number of relationships they can reasonably handle. This, he argues, is based on the size of the neocortex,⁵ that highly developed part of the brain in higher mammals where social awareness is present. In the case of humans this is about 150 and it is called 'Dunbar's Number', more popularly known as 'The Magic Number'.

One hundred and fifty appears to be the optimum size for human social groups. Beyond that level, relationships are not easy to make and maintain, and in support of his theory, Dunbar points to communalistic fundamental Christian sects such as the Amish and Hutterites of America whose communities are about this size. He also cites the average village size as recorded in the Domesday Book, which is 150 there or thereabouts, and the size of the smallest standalone unit in modern armies, the Company. Interestingly, he points out that around 150 is also the level at which businesses start to need formal management structures, hierarchies and rules if they are not to fall apart as they grow.

There is an optimum size of social group beyond which people cannot easily relate, therefore. Peer pressure and personal loyalties, together with the ability to know a leader personally and a sense of belonging to a whole entity, disintegrate beyond this point but, crucially, Dunbar also demonstrates that a person's social network expands in layers, and that is governed by multiples of three.

We tend to have about five or six close friends, 15 or so not-so-close ones, then around 45 wider acquaintances until we reach the neocortex manageable limit, the magic number, of around 150.

Dunbar's work suggests that social networks in our modern societies ripple out from the individual in a series of layers, or circles, tripling in

⁵Dunbar, R. (1992) Neocortex size as a constraint on groups size in primates. *Journal of Human Evolution* **20**, 469–93.

size as each layer is added. He also suggests that these layered networks become fragmented with time and social movement:

‘The trends towards urbanization, economic migration and social transience that have come to dominate modern life have changed all that. We grow up in Huddersfield, go to university in Brighton, get our first job in London and move (or are moved by our employer) to Glasgow a few years later. At each step, we leave behind small groups of friends until time and distance eventually dim our relationships with them beyond the point of rescue. The effect of all this is that our networks of 150 people become increasingly fragmented, consisting of small clusters of friends who are forever associated with a particular time and place. These clusters rarely overlap; indeed, our social network only partially overlaps with even that of our partner, despite the fact that we live in the same house and share a life together. The core clusters of best friends and family may overlap, but we tend to have separate friends for work, hobbies and so on.’

It is this layering and fragmentation in people’s networks that opens up the opportunity for a broader societal connectedness whose extent and power is truly awesome.

Gladwell and Granovetter

In nature’s networks ‘Birds of a feather flock together’. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book *The Tipping Point*,⁶ points out that people not only associate with people they live close to (including family of course), but they also associate with people who have like interests and engage in similar activities: who work in the same company; who are in the same golf club; who move in the similar social circles, etc., and each of the people they

⁶Gladwell, M. (2000) *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Abacus. London.

associate with has his or her own extended networks too, just as Dunbar observes and network theory explains.

This was proved in 1973 by sociologist Mark Granovetter at Johns Hopkins University, in his seminal paper, 'The Strength of Weak Ties',⁷ which explored the way people got jobs. He showed that the diffusion of influence and information in social networks happened through relatively loosely connected, dyadic (based on two) ties between individuals each of whom moved in different social circles. Granovetter demonstrated that networks link through acquaintances (the 'weak' ties) as opposed to the strongly tied family and close friends. Milgram's packets had leapfrogged over 2000 kilometres in only five or six steps because people were linking their weakly tied networks of acquaintances, not their families and close friends.

Social networks do not comprise a fixed number of nodes with an average number of links; they are dynamic systems that change constantly, adding new nodes and links and losing others as circumstances change. Animals, chemicals, cells, as well as people, link in ways that are neither straightforward, random nor democratic.

Evolution, the survival of the fittest, means that all living organisms exist in a competitive environment. There are winners and losers in the social process. Politicians strive for opportunities to be heard, companies compete for customers, people vie with each other for social links because it gives them greater influence and security. Unlike the spider's web or the fisherman's net with their broadly similar numbers of nodal links, social networks are 'scale free',⁸ i.e. the number of their linkages follows the principle behind Pareto's 80:20 theory, also known as the Power Law, where the vast majority of nodes have only a very few links and a small number have a disproportionately large number.

Scale-free social networks tend to cluster, and these clusters become richer because they become more interesting and active, which makes

⁷Granovetter, M. (1973) The Strength of Weak Ties *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, Issue 6, May 1973, pp. 1360–1380.

⁸Barabási, Albert-László (2002) *Linked: How Everything is Connected to Everything Else and What it Means for Everyday Life*. Plume, Penguin Group (USA).

them more able to grab more links and grow very quickly. The ability to make links relative to every other node in the community is called 'fitness'. Fitness, measured by the number of links a node has, is a quantitative measure of the ability to stay ahead of the competition and it doesn't necessarily favour those who have been around the longest. (Google's domination of the internet search-engine market and its trumping of the early pioneers such as Yahoo! and Alta Vista demonstrates this vividly.)

Fitness accounts for why a company is more successful than its competitors to attract and keep customers, or why someone has a greater aptitude for being liked and being more memorable relative to others. In business, the earliest into the market isn't always the winner.

It is likely that some of the individuals involved in both Milgram's and Granovetter's research were what Gladwell calls 'Connectors'. Connectors are super-networkers. They are naturally social creatures who, as Gladwell puts it, have big Rolodexes. They are extremely well-connected individuals who have mastered the art of Granovetter's weak tie. Connectors are often charismatic individuals who energize other people. They are memorable and influential and they have a talent not only at building large numbers of friendly yet casual connections, but for keeping in touch with them. As individuals, they possess fitness and are able to attract many connections.

Milgram's packets leapfrogged over 2000 kilometres in only five or six steps not only because people were linking their weakly tied clusters of acquaintances rather than their families and close friends; they were almost certainly facilitated by connectors who have always been around in society, and massively effective even in the days before we had the internet and social media connecting billions of people worldwide. Most of us don't possess that ability, but the social media has given it to us. By being part of these super-hubs, any one of us can now spread a message amongst many people in a very short time. Today, we are all, potentially at least, socially powerful connectors who can use the new technology for good or ill; especially when it comes to product, brand and service reputation.

Web 2.0 and word of mouth

Immediately after the so-called 'dot-com' bubble burst in the late 2001, a new term came into our vocabulary. 'Web 2.0' was a reappraisal of the way the web worked, its culture and its ethos. People were using the web differently, adapting it in ways that no one had predicted hitherto. User-generated content became widespread and the internet came to be seen as a service to the community. Amongst a number of observable characteristics of this new paradigm, emergent behaviours rather than predetermined ones became apparent, and under Web 2.0, massive decentralization of power took place and freedom of communication was born.

In a sense Web 2.0 has given birth to 'Communications 2.0' where the act of communication has taken on a new dimension, and that oldest form of human connection, word of mouth, has become massively leveraged.

Thoughts, ideas and views can now be shared openly, and passing these on is aided by the ability to 'tweet' and 'like' what you see. Technology now allows people spontaneously to broadcast what they feel and think, linking those comments and the people who make them.

People's opinions, shared hitherto at most with only a narrow social circle, are now one-to-many, and this is permanent. The perishable verbal social tittle-tattle of pre-web days is a thing of the past. Now we have written-word communication, with all its permanence, its easy searchability, undiluted by 'Chinese whispers', and capable of being read asynchronously when it suits the reader, or across time zones. Comments on company performance, for example, can last.⁹ They are no longer 'nine days' wonders' – and they can flash around the world in seconds.

The days when organizations could control what information about them was disseminated to the public are gone. The brochure-ware websites of the early period of the web, where organizations of all kinds spoke

⁹The celebrated example of 'United Breaks Guitars' has an ever growing list of viewers on YouTube. Two years after it was published, the hit count stands at over 12.3 million and rising steadily.

to their markets in conventional ways, controlling and dictating what was said about them and their products, are a thing of the past. The control of brand reputation and image has largely been taken from their owners, and made or broken by people interacting with each other online. In this brave new world, customer service quality is becoming mediated in cyberspace, and organizations of all types need to beware. In a 2010 marketing trends survey carried out by the Chartered Institute of Marketing of the UK, more than half of respondent firms expressed themselves afraid of venturing into social media. Only the brave, the blind, or the squeaky clean are engaging with it.

Apostles and Terrorists

Intuit is one of the world leaders in accounting software, its product Quicken has millions of users across the world and it is famous for its attention to its customers. However, in marketing circles, its CEO Scott D. Cook is more famous for identifying what he calls 'Apostles and Terrorists' amongst customers. Apostles are customers who are so satisfied that they go out of their way to convert others to a product or service; they see themselves as converters of the uninitiated. On the other hand, there are customers who have had such a bad experience, who are so unhappy and disaffected, that they speak out against an organization at every opportunity - they become commercial terrorists who go out of their way to spread the bad news by word of mouth. Because they are so passionate, and because of the power of social networks, they can easily reach hundreds, and in many cases thousands and more, of people with their story of woe discouraging others even from trying a product or service.

As we shall see later, Service-Ability (or the lack of it in the case of United Airlines) is easily capable of producing these extremes of customer response.

Get your service delivery right and it can result in the creation of unpaid, voluntary marketers, apostles, who evangelize through-

out their networks; get it wrong and you might get commercially destructive terrorists who can wreak enormous damage far beyond imagining.

Feedback loops

Anyone who has used a microphone and amplifier will know about feedback. Get the position of the microphone wrong relative to the speaker, and sound will be picked up, fed into the amplifier, which feeds more sound into the speaker, only to be picked up by the microphone again, re-amplified and the whole cycle keeps repeating and growing until what is known as 'howl round' takes place: that painful screech of infinitely re-amplified sound that sets your teeth on edge.

Norbert Wiener, an American mathematician who died in 1964, formalized the notion of feedback, which describes how an output of information about an event will influence an occurrence of the same event in the future when it is part of a cause-and-effect chain: the event is said to feed back into itself. Today, social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter leverage this effect enormously. So-called 'friends' become engaged in a constant feedback loop, updating their status in real time in a loop of information between 'friends'; a chain of action and reaction where one posting triggers another, which in turn triggers a third, and so on. Feedback in sound systems can produce a deafening and uncontrollable noise, and so it is with the social media if a viral feedback loop is induced. That's what happened to United Airlines in the Dave Carroll incident.

In a completely different context, Barack Obama used this multiplying power of social networking using the internet for the first time in history for political purposes when, in 2009, he engaged with the social media in his campaign to become President of the USA. At the height of the campaign, Obama had more than three million friends on Facebook, and his social media campaigning staff, largely drawn from the generation to whom this medium is second nature, were using Facebook, Bebo, Myspace, YouTube, Twitter and a host of other such sites in such an innovative way that they managed to create what ultimately became a viral campaign.

Creative fans of Obama were even re-editing official campaign videos and redistributing them using YouTube to friends who, because of their novelty, passed them on. Obama's people were acting like connectors but using viral marketing through the powerful hubs of the social media to leverage that enormously, and they were so successful, their work is widely attributed as being a major cause of Obama's election.

Reflection on United

Let us reflect on that salutary tale about United airlines. 'United Breaks Guitars' is the consumer fighting back with tools that are now available in power and abundance. That airline's incomprehensible lack of even a modicum of customer service not only perfectly illustrates the desperate need for what is being argued for in this book, but shows how even hard-won good practice developed over years through basic common sense, let alone experience and cleverness, can be frittered away in the kaleidoscope, anything-goes, culture of our current times. United's experience doesn't just show how far organizations can fall away from even the basics of hard-won good practice, developed over decades, and often born of bitter experience, it shows that organizations today are being forced to have their customer relationships mediated in the eco-system of social media that has leveraged word of mouth by factors of thousands or even millions. According to *The Times* of London on 22 July 2009, under the title: 'Revenge is best served cold – on You Tube', United's share price plunged 10%, wiping \$180 million off its value as a result of this colossal service failure. This is equivalent to well over 50,000 replacement guitars for Dave Carroll.

Companies both large and small and in all sectors of our economy are trying to find ways to harness social media for marketing communications, but they should heed that old adage from the Indian sub-continent: 'He who rides the tiger is afraid to get off'. They

must wake up to the downside of what it means to ride roughshod through their customers' needs and rights.

Poor or nonexistent service can result in reputations that have taken years to build being destroyed in days through the power and reach of the connector-hubs of the internet social networks. It is often said that we live in a small world: today, it is a frighteningly small world.

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