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Hey, before we jump right into the transcript, first let me set the stage...

This is a direct audio transcript of the call I had with Jonah Berger, which you can find at <http://socialtriggers.com>

While I suggest you listen to the audio—you can listen on your computer, your iPod, or any mp3 ready device—I know some people prefer to read.

And that's cool. That's why I'm including this transcript.

Hope you enjoy it!

And remember, if you absolutely love it, as part of our deal, share it with 3 friends who you think will also love it :-).

Let's dive in.

Is Any Publicity Good Publicity?

The short answer is no.

Some bad publicity can torpedo your business, but there are three specific cases where bad publicity can help, and in this transcript, you'll learn all about it.

...start the transcript.

Derek: Hi and welcome. This is Derek Halpern, the founder of SocialTriggers.com, and during this show you'll learn about the three specific cases where bad publicity leads to more sales.

You might have heard that any publicity is good publicity, but that's simply not true. Some bad publicity can tank your business.

So not only will you learn about the three specific cases where bad publicity helps, you'll also learn about the types of bad publicity that hurts.

And today, with me, to hold you by the hand, I've got Jonah Berger, an assistant professor at the world-renown Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania.

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I've written about Jonah before, but let me tell you why this guy is the man when it comes to publicity, word of mouth marketing, and viral marketing. Professor Berger studies social epidemics or how products, ideas, and behaviors thrive in the world today, as well as how they die and fade away into the ether. His research has been published by top-tier academic journals and has been cited in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, NPR, Harvard Business Review, Sloan Management Review and pretty much almost every major publication. Jonah is amazing. So, Jonah, thank you for joining us, are you ready to do this?

Jonah: No problem thanks so much for having me.

Derek: I know everyone's excited to be listening to you today and I know that everything we're going to be talking about today was based off of research study that you conducted. Am I right?

Jonah: Yes, it was a study we did a couple of years ago using book sale data as well as a number of experiments looking at how both negative and positive publicity affects book choices and sales.

Derek: Awesome. All right, so this is going to be good stuff. Now before we talk about the three instances where negative publicity helps sales, let's talk about the instances where negative publicity actually hurts sales. When should companies or people panic about negative publicity?

Jonah: You know, I think there's a whole bunch of examples and we all have our favorites about when negative publicity hurts, but you know, we can think of lots of examples in the past few years, so you know, Toyota had a big problem a couple of years ago with a safety scandal. Mission Impossible, when the third movie came out, we all remember Tom Cruise jumping up and down on the couch and seeming like he was crazy and people have argued that cost the movie more than a hundred million dollars in ticket sales. So I think there's all sorts of examples we can think of. There was a famous old example of people being worried that McDonald's had worm meat in their hamburgers, or people being worried that a particular person might have a negative characteristic. There's a host of examples where negative publicity or negative rumors in the press hurts politicians, hurts brands, hurts movies across a host of different domains.

Derek: All right, so the whole idea that any publicity is good publicity is simply not true any more. Right?

Jonah: Yeah, it's simply not the case. And I think you know we all have our favorite phrases and proverbs that we like, and there are a host of examples that we can see, where just negative publicity doesn't help.

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So research for example, has looked at how movie reviews affect movie sales. And often, negative movie reviews lead to movies having worse sales. So, a thumbs-down from Siskel and Ebert can really hurt the likelihood that a movie really does well. People have really shown there are many cases in which negative publicity can hurt.

Derek: All right, cool. So I guess that makes sense, but what I really found interesting, and I kind of talked about this, while there are some pieces of negative publicity that hurts, there are three cases where negative publicity helps sales. Let's talk about that. But before you jump into the specifics, can you retell that whole Eliot Spitzer and Ashley Dupre story that you shared with me on our preliminary call? How did negative publicity work there?

Jonah: Yeah, I think that that example is perfect example of what we show in the paper. Your listeners may remember a couple of years ago, Eliot Spitzer got in big trouble for getting a bunch of prostitutes, one of which was Ashley Dupre, one of the most famous call girls he was associated with.

And if you think about what happened as a result of that scandal, it was negative for both of them, right? It didn't paint her in a good light, no one wants to be seen that way, and it didn't paint him in a good light either. He lost his job, he sort of fell out of politics for a number of years. He's tried to sort of make a comeback at it, but it really hurt his political ambitions. People thought he would be a major figure in New York if not in politics in the country, and it sort of hasn't panned out.

But if you think about the consequences that it had, it really hurt him. Right? He was a famous political figure, he was doing very well, it totally cut him down to size and now he really doesn't have much of a political career.

For her, no one knew about her ahead of time, but after this scandal, she actually- you may not have known this- but she was sort of an amateur music artist. She had a couple of songs that were out there. One of her songs on iTunes sold around a million dollars in sales after the scandal happened.

And so for her, while the publicity wasn't good, it didn't paint her in good light, it was definitely negative publicity, but it actually really helped her career, at least in the short term. So even the same example can have negative and positive effects depending on the type of person that we're looking at.

Derek: That's really interesting. I know you shared this with me, and it actually blew my mind. Here we go, we've got Eliot Spitzer- this powerful politician, gets caught sleeping with a call girl, Ashley Dupre. Eliot Spitzer's career tanks, Ashley Dupre, her career takes off, at least in the short term, she does a million dollars in sales of one song on iTunes.

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Jonah: Yeah, and again, it's not particularly that her song was fantastic, but she really made a bunch of money off of that song- a bunch of people downloaded that song because they found out about her through the scandal.

Derek: Wow. That's really interesting news. I think that applies, especially to the people here at SocialTriggers because I think a lot of people even though they're not necessarily call girls or they're not doing illegal things, but a lot of people are in situations were they aren't necessarily as well-known as someone like Eliot Spitzer, they're more like the underdog, which is what Ashley Dupre is kind of painted as – this underdog who's unknown and achieves success because bad publicity helped her.

Now I'm not saying that people should go out there and become prostitutes, but I'm saying that it's easy to identify with this unknown person experiencing some success from the negative publicity. At least, that's how I look at it anyway.

Jonah: You can think, how many people are there that are music artists? How many start-ups and new websites that are trying to cut through the clutter, and I think if you think about it, this is one case where negative publicity actually helped someone who was relatively unknown beforehand, cut through the clutter and get a lot of attention.

Derek: Interesting. Now this actually reminds me of what happened with Perez Hilton, that famous celebrity gossip blogger. Back a few years ago, he was getting sued by all these photo agencies for allegedly stealing photos. He got painted as this thief in the media, who was stealing photos from all these big agencies.

And what happened was Perez Hilton just got all this exposure as a celebrity gossip blogger.

And even though they were trying to sue him and they were trying to put him out of business, that negative publicity of allegedly stealing photos, actually helped Perez Hilton grow his audience.

So I figure that's a very similar situation that we're talking about here, where he was sued for photo stealing, but got a lot of benefits out of it- And with him especially- long-term benefits from the negative publicity.

Jonah: Yeah. Definitely.

Derek: All right. Now, let's talk take-aways. Everyone at SocialTriggers loves to get some tips that can help them. So in this specific case of Eliot Spitzer, Eliot Spitzer got nailed, and Ashley Dupre flourished. Eliot ruined his career; Ashley sold a million dollars worth of music on iTunes. Why did this happen and how did it go down?

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Jonah: Yes, I think, and maybe we'll get there in a couple of minutes, but as you mentioned, there's sort of three key ways that negative publicity can help. And I think in this particular example that we're talking about, it's a case of increased awareness for a previously unknown product.

If we think about it, there are two ways that publicity can affect sales. One is through evaluation. So positive publicity makes you think something is better, negative publicity may make you think that thing is worse, but it also changes your awareness of a product or how much you know about it. Do you even know it exists?

For example, there are dozens of Hollywood movies out in any given week. There are hundreds of new books released. There are thousands of new websites that start. You don't have the time or the resources to find out all these things. One way that publicity can help, positive publicity for example, can help us to increase awareness.

What's interesting though, is that negative publicity can have the same affect. Take the Ashley Dupre case; no one knew about her previously, but the increased awareness that the negative publicity gave her led to her album selling many more cases.

In the case of the three cases, one is the increased awareness of an unknown product, the other we can talk about in a second, is increased accessibility of a known product. So that's a case where you may know the product exists, but it's not top-of-mind, right? Imagine there are dozens of new movies when you go to the video store, you get to the video store and you can't remember what to rent. You may know that Mission Impossible II or II or whatever it is, is out on DVD, but if you don't remember when you're in the store, you're not going to rent it.

Similarly, you may come across a book, if you don't remember that book exists when you are in the bookstore or when you're buying online, you're not actually going to purchase it. So accessibility is all about whether something is top-of-mind or not. So negative publicity changes whether you're aware of something or not, so negative publicity can help by making people aware of products they didn't know of previously-unknown products.

For example, in our paper we find that negative publicity actually increases the sales by something I think around 40% of books that are negatively reviewed, as long as those books are reviewed by more unknown authors. So if it's an author that people don't really know much about previously, actually a negative review can increase sales because it makes people more aware of that book.

Derek: Really? Let me just break this down for a second. If I heard this correctly, when you're dealing with a product, people need to know your product exists,

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they need to remember your product exists, and then they actually have to want to buy your product.

Now, when we're dealing with bad publicity, bad publicity can actually help people know and remember and potentially influence their purchase decision if they don't currently know your product exists, because, as you had mentioned, bad publicity can actually increase awareness, it can also bring to top-of-mind and it can really help foster people to remember that your product is even out there in that over-crowded marketplace. Am I getting that right?

Jonah: I think that's a really nice way to talk about it. Yes. And by the way, to be clear, it's not that positive publicity doesn't do the same things- it does. Positive publicity also makes people know your product exists and reminds them that it's out there, so it has those two effects.

But negative publicity, even though it might we could imagine it hurting evaluations or being a bad thing, it can be a good thing because it has those same memory boosting effects that positive publicity has. It makes people aware of your product, and it reminds them that it exists, so when they're trying to decide on a new book to get or a new movie to buy potentially, they'll be more likely to think about it than they will have otherwise.

Derek: What you're saying is if someone is going to tell you that your product is amazing, take that, but if they're not going to say that it's amazing, you could settle for the bad stuff, too.

Jonah: Yeah, and I think we can talk more about this, but what I'm not suggesting to do is do terrible things and get lots of negative publicity. What I am saying though is that while we may often think of negative publicity as a terrible thing, a lot of times actually music artists, products, and other sorts of thing actually become popular at the beginning because of negative things that happen to them.

And so it may not be as bad in some cases as people think. With that said though, we also do find that negative publicity can hurt in some cases, just like prior research has shown.

For example in our New York Times analysis, we looked at about 200-300 different books that were reviewed in the New York Times book review section. And we split reviews into positive reviews and negative reviews. But we also split them into the types of books they were. Whether they were well-known authors, , people like maybe Stephen King, or John Grisham, sort of famous authors that people already know a lot about already, or unknown authors- authors that people have never heard about before the reviews were written books, people really didn't know who they were.

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And what we find is that yes, in some cases, negative publicity hurts. SO for example, a book by established authors, if they get a negative review, that leads to about a 15% decrease in sales. And that hurts. Negative publicity can hurt. Negative publicity hurt Mission Impossible sales, it may have hurt McDonald's a few years ago, it hurt Toyota- all cases where the brand was pretty well known previously.

At the same time though, negative reviews- that same negative information- if it's about something that people don't know about previously, it can actually increase sales.

And so negative publicity for a book by an unknown author, someone people had no idea of previously- sort of an unknown product, actually increases sales by about 45%. And so it's not just whether the publicity is negative or positive, it's whether it's about a product that people know about previously or don't.

Derek: That makes a lot of sense to me. Since we're dealing with a lot of web people and we're dealing with a lot of small local businesses, what you're really suggesting right now is that this is almost like a publicity rule set, where if you're a relatively unknown person in your marketplace, you obviously prefer positive publicity. But there's certain types of negative publicity, that while it may not necessarily make you happy or make you feel good, it's not necessarily going to hurt you.

Jonah: You mentioned Perez Hilton being very helpful and everyone may not remember about Katy Perry now, but if you remember one of the first songs she got popular for, it was for that song, I Kissed a Girl, which got a lot of attention and disdain with people saying, "Is this good for our culture, is this bad for culture?" It got a lot of attention. 50 Cent, who everybody knows now and got very popular, one of his very first songs that actually got attention was a song called, How to Rob, where it was on a mix tape and he talked about robbing different artists in the industry, sort of as a joke, but it got a lot of attention because it was negative.

Sometimes it's hard to cut through the clutter with positive things. Negative things may actually get a lot of attention. I bet when those things actually happened, those artists didn't love that they were being talked about that way, but it actually may have helped their career in a way that they didn't realize.

Derek: Let's riff on that a little bit. So what you're suggesting is that negative publicity can help, and I know in your paper you had mentioned that you managed to score some sales data from Michael Jackson albums, who was seemingly, in my opinion after reading your research, was seemingly the King of reaping the rewards of negative publicity. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

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Jonah: Sure. As we talked about, there're three main principals of how negative publicity can help sales. Increasing the awareness of an unknown product, increasing the accessibility or top-of-mindness of a known product, so that's the case where people know your product exists, but it's not top-of-mind.

The Michael Jackson case is a little bit of that. He didn't really put out more music albums recently, and he's obviously not around any more, but in the past few years, he hadn't been putting out a lot of music. He had been in the press for a lot of negative things, so his music wasn't top-of-mind.

What's also interesting with Michael Jackson is the publicity is what we could call indirect. It wasn't about Michael Jackson's music as bad or good, like a bad movie review or a book reviews about the book being bad or good, it was about Michael Jackson the person.

But that negative attention could have a positive effect on the sales of his albums because it reminds people that those albums exist. Again, think about how accessible or top-of-mind the product is.

For Michael Jackson, we actually found collected data on the sales of his albums over time, and what we found is that when he's in the news media for negative things, not positive things, but negative things- you may have remembered he dangled his baby blanket over the hotel balcony and he got a lot of negative press for that or he was in the news for potential cases of child molestation.

And that's definitely not positive publicity, but at the same time those events were happening in the news, he sold more of his albums. And so the idea is even thought the negative attention is directed to him, it reminds people, "Oh yeah! Michael Jackson, There's so many artists out there. I remember I actually like his music. I wouldn't have thought about buying it because he wasn't top-of-mind."

And we call these things triggers. Just like you talk about social triggers, it's a trigger to make people think about his album, even though it's negative publicity. And they think about buying it.

Derek: Interesting. Now, I actually really like that example because you just called into light the difference between the publicities. There's indirect publicity where people assault someone or some person or that character but doesn't necessary assault what's being sold. And I guess that makes sense with Perez Hilton, because people attacked Perez Hilton as a thief; they didn't attack him as a guy who was bad at celebrity gossip.

Jonah: Right. And so you can imagine you're a company, and again just to be very clear I'm not suggesting that people should try to encourage negative publicity, but imagine your small company CEO gets indicted, and they're going to leave, but that's going to get a lot of attention for the company itself, even

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though the negative attention is directed to the ex-CEO. They're going to mention in the press, "The CEO of blah blah blah company has this problem." And it may not affect whether people actually like your product, but it may make them aware of your product-which could actually be a very good thing for you.

Derek: We made the case for indirect negative publicity. Let's talk about direct negative publicity. Is there ever a time when direct negative publicity can help product sales? I know we mentioned there were three cases if people don't know you exist, if people know but you're not top-of-mind, and indirect negative publicity. But how about when there's negative publicity that slams you or your product, can that ever increase sales?

Jonah: It definitely can. There's a couple of fun example that we talked about in the paper. For example, a couple of years ago, there's a wine that got written up by a really prominent wine website in a really negative way. The wine was described as redolent of stinky socks.

Most people don't want to drink a wine that smells like stinky socks. But we actually found that sales increases by 5% after it got this review on a prominent wine website. Or you can think of the movie Borat where he makes relentless fun of the country of Kazakhstan. "Oh, I'm from Kazakhstan, blah blah blah blah", Doesn't seem like a good thing for the country, but actually hotels.com reported a 300% increase in requests for information about the country after the film was released.

Again, it's a case where it's directly negative- it's talking about the country of Kazakhstan in a bad way- but it's helping actually increase the attention that country because of the increasing request for information.

Similarly, we talk about one of the books in our data set, is this book called Fierce People. It's written by a new author and it received unambiguously a negative review- definitely not positive. In the review, it said things like the characters do not have personalities, the author gets by on attitude, not such a great strategist, the reader can't figure out what that attitude is- all things that you'd think you wouldn't want people to say about your book. Basically saying this book wasn't so good. Yet sales more than quadrupled after the review. They went up a huge amount after the review.

Again, what I'm not saying is negative publicity helps every product- it doesn't. But for unknown products- a wine that people haven't heard of, a country that people didn't realize existed, or a book that was relatively unknown by a new author- direct negative publicity; people saying their product is not so good, can actually help if it increases awareness for that product.

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Derek: Interesting. Now I think that's a really good point, and while as we've said a few times, you shouldn't ever go out and seek bad publicity- that's not the goal here. But there are certain types of bad publicity that you should lose sleep over and then there's other types of bad publicity that maybe you shouldn't lose sleep over.

And in the case when you're dealing with a product and no one knows that you exist- even direct bad publicity about your product can help you sell more stuff. Many of the people who listen to SocialTriggers and read SocialTriggers.com are either running a website or are small business owners with websites, so mainly we're dealing with people who have web presences. Now, you've showed us how negative publicity works, now I'd like to bounce some ideas off you to see what you think about how maybe this negative publicity applies online. As we said, there's bad press you should worry about and there's bad press that can actually help you. Based on that notion, do you think that bad press that can help should be ignored, or dare I say, even promoted?

Jonah: I think you want to be careful. What I'm not suggesting is that all your listeners should go out and get their CEOs indicted and dangle babies over balconies and get in trouble and try to get negative press.

But I think what you want to remember is sort of the underlying psychology here. What's the science behind why this is working? And the idea is, as you mentioned, I do a lot of work on word of mouth, if you talk about what people talk about and share, they don't talk about and share expected things. They don't talk about and share normal things. They talk about and share things that are novel, surprising or exciting- particularly online.

So we've done some research on online and offline word of mouth. We actually found that offline, people tell all sorts of boring things. But online really, we mainly share things that are more extreme- that are really sort of interesting and surprising in some way. The idea here is that some things are getting publicity because they are negative instead of positive. If I told you a book was decent. That wouldn't be so surprising.

But if I told you a book was terrible, it would be more surprising and you might be more likely to pass that along. Michael Jackson donating money to a charity is not very surprising. It doesn't get much media attention. People are unlikely to talk about it. Michael Jackson dangling his baby over a balcony is pretty extreme, and so it gets a lot of attention.

But you can also think about how we can get attention for extreme positive things. Will It Blend, for example, a campaign for blenders, is a great example of a case that is really positive. It can blend many things. It can turn an iPhone into dust and shreds of glass. It can grind up marbles into little bitty pieces. It can

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really blend anything. It's showing how powerful their blender is. Because it's extreme- no one's ever seen someone drop an iPhone in a blender- it got a lot of attention and it gets passed a long. It got a lot of positive attention.

And so the idea here is I think you need to figure out what about your particular product people are going to talk about or share. What is word-of-mouth-worthy? What's remarkable? Whether that thing is positive, and ideally you're going out there and trying to create positive things, or if it's negative, I'm not saying you should promote them, but in some cases that negative can actually help you out.

Derek: Now do you remember that little campaign- I think it was either Office Max or Staples- where they filmed some videos of people paying for things with a bag of pennies? That sort of a little example of a viral campaign isn't necessarily positive or negative though the video portrays a negative instance of someone getting thrown out of a restaurant, per se, but that's an example of how to generate positive publicity. Am I right?

Jonah: We did an analysis of six months of data on all the articles released by the New York Times- over six thousand articles. And we looked at which of those articles went viral- which were highly shared.

And what we found was that, sure enough, positive things were shared more than negative things. People like sharing positive stuff more than negative stuff. But negative stuff, even, was shared more than entirely neutral stuff. Stuff that has no emotional value, stuff that's not extreme at all, sort of moderately positive or moderately negative, really isn't going to be talked about. Things that are extremely positive-people doing amazing things like lance Armstrong coming back from cancer to win sixth and seventh at the Tour de France- that's really surprising in a positive way. But negative things that are surprising can also get attention. Things that diverge from our expectations are going to be talked about more and they're also more likely to be memorable and help brands.

Derek: We kind of shifted from bad to positive just now, but I want to ask you a question. Is there ever a right time to try and score bad press? Do you think that could be a viable strategy or do you think people should continue focusing on the good press?

Jonah: I'm going to have to say that if you have a choice, and you're going to get a lot of press for something, if the choice is to have that thing be positive or negative, I'd say it's better to have it be positive. What our research doesn't show that positive publicity doesn't help- positive publicity also helps unknown products. Sometimes it's harder for unknown products to get positive publicity. So sometimes negative publicity is easier to get.

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But if you have a choice, I'd go with positive. I think the only take home here is that negative might not be something that you need kill right away. For example, Abercrombie and Fitch recently talked about how they wanted to get The Situation, the actor from Jersey Shore, he wears their clothes on television and Abercrombie and Fitch supposedly said, "Hey, we're going to pay you not to wear our clothes because we don't want people to associate you with our clothes. We're afraid people aren't going to like our clothes because they may not like you. We're going to pay you not to wear our clothes." That seems like a negative thing. That paints Abercrombie in sort of a negative or weird light. A couple of years ago, they also got in trouble for making racist comments on t-shirts. They had a t-shirt for an Asian Dry Cleaner that said, "Two Wongs will make it white" There was a big backlash against the company. I don't know that they're doing those things on purpose, and I wouldn't suggest doing those things on purpose. But you can see how even if they end up being taken in a negative light, even if people say, "that's terrible that they're paying The Situation not to wear their clothes," the mere fact that it gets attention can help that brand.

Derek: What about that whole problem, earlier this year I think it was, maybe last year, with the GoDaddy CEO hunting elephants? Do you remember something like that?

Jonah: I don't remember that, but I can imagine it.

Derek: They had a video of the GoDaddy CEO, I think it was the GoDaddy CEO, hunting an elephant and killing it on a video camera, and all these animal rights activists banded together to go against them and say that was very extremely inappropriate. And while I tend to agree, with someone like GoDaddy- someone who deals with domain registration- even though that was negative publicity for the GoDaddy CEO, it could have let millions of people know that GoDaddy is the place to go to register domains.

Jonah: Right. I'm not in favor of shooting elephants, but I think that example is sort of one way to think about this. Imagine you're doing a campaign and you think most people will like it but you think a small minority of people will really not like it. And you think, "Maybe I shouldn't run the campaign, because even though they're a small minority, if they don't like it, that's really going to hurt me." If you're an unknown product, I'd say run the campaign. Because as long as you think most people are going to like it, that's a positive thing for you. And even the people who don't like it, if they really talk about it a lot, and controversy often begets conversation, the mere fact that they're talking about it will increase awareness for your product.

So I'm not saying run a campaign that you think 95% of people will hate. But I am saying that if you think 95% of people will like it but 5% of people will hate it, it

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might be okay to run it anyway because the 5% of people that will hate it will get more attention for your product.

Derek: That's actually a funny little insight that you've shared with us. I want to tell you about this. A few months ago, I wrote an article that said the whole 'content is king' notion in the blog world was a myth and I was going to debunk that myth.

Now in the blog space, that's sacrilegious for me to say that content isn't king. Everybody agrees that content is king. I simply said that content wasn't king and had data to back it up. And I knew that the people who would absolutely love this were designers. So I told all these designers about it and got them to share this whole "content isn't king" ideology. Then, I reached out to the writers knowing that they'd hate it, so that they would share and talk about it also. And this created this whole viral sensation for a blog post. Because I knew there was an audience that would like my article, I knew there was also an audience that would dislike my article. So based on what you just shared, if you think one of your press campaigns will be 95% positive, it might be a good idea to figure how to find the 5% who will dislike your campaign and make sure they see it because they're going to talk about it a little bit more.

Jonah: I think that insight of yours is very clever. I think the one thing I would say, is if you're a well-known brand, maybe be a little more careful. So if you're the most known blogger in the world, if you're the New York Times, if you're Bill Gates, if everyone knows you already, if you're Nike- you don't necessarily need more attention. So the negative attention isn't going to help you. But if you're a new person trying to build your mailing list, if you're a new website no one's ever heard of, or you're a new product or a new restaurant, doing something a little bit risqué may actually go against what some people like can be okay because that negative attention will increase the attention that people give you, even though it's negative, but will make it more likely that they know you exist and consider you.

Derek: Now I've got one final question. And I've got to say I think this has been great so far. I think there are a lot of key action points for everyone who is listening in, but here's my last question: Let's say one company, a competitor maybe, experiences some bad press. Is there any way that you know of where people can capitalize on that press? So let's say my main competitor is getting bad press, is there any way for me to score publicity by taking advantage of their bad publicity?

Jonah: Interesting. I think this idea of triggers that we talked about already is really important here. Some researchers at Arizona State have this nice idea called The Poison Parasite, and if you think about it, some ads sort of play off of other ads in interesting ways. There's some anti-smoking ads, for example, that

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play on the Marlboro Man that shows a cigarette turning downwards saying, “smoking causes impotence,” or “Bob, I have emphysema,” that show a Marlboro Man saying that particular thing.

Recently, Microsoft has gone after Apple. You know Apple had those great ‘I’m a Mac, I’m a PC’ ads. Microsoft began linking themselves to Apple ads by saying, “I’m a PC, I’m a PC, everybody’s a PC. PC isn’t such a negative thing.”

So I think if you can make a way that your competitor is a trigger for you, that every time people hear about your competitor they also think about you, that can actually be a really useful thing. Making your competitor a trigger for your business, or in the case of negative press. In a particular case saying we don’t have that problem.

So particularly negative press about something that your competitor has like a functional part of their product or an issue with something, if you can say, “We don’t have that problem”. Sometimes people want to say, “well this company has that problem, but there’s a solution.” We don’t really like knowing their problems, we like knowing what the solution is. So making sure you can fill that void is another nice way to get attention for your product or your brand.

Derek: So let’s break this down to a specific strategy. Let’s say a competitor gets some bad press for a functional issue in their product that your product does not have. You could actually try and reach out to the reporter that brought that to light in an article, and say, “Look, I know you just talked about this competitor having this issue. Well this product doesn’t have that issue.” So it will allow you to piggyback on one reporter’s take and give them some potential follow-up material.

Jonah: Think about Toyota a couple of years ago. Toyota had a big problem with safety. If you’re Hyundai at that time, that’s a time when you want your ads to talk about how safe you are. Because safety is obviously a discussion that has been made big by the negative attention Toyota’s gotten. That’s sort of prevalent in the public discourse, and things that relate to that discussion are going to be more likely to be talked about. They’re common ground at that time. They’re triggered by the social environment. You want to have yourself inserted into that discussion.

For example, a couple of years ago we released a paper showing that losing can actually lead to winning. So you might think that basketball teams that are ahead are more likely to win because they are better teams, and because they’re ahead and so it’s hard to come from behind. We saw NBA teams that are down by a point at halftime are more likely to win than teams that are ahead by a point. We had this really neat result, we’re writing it up, and we decided though to get attention for it, to try to get attention for that research, right around the time of

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March Madness. Why? Because people are talking about basketball. It's the same idea here. People are talking about some negative thing about your competitor. Maybe it's the safety of their car, maybe it's whether their food is actually healthy for you, that's a great time for you to insert yourself into that discussion by talking about how your product is good on that dimension. People will talk about it as a solution.

Derek: The key take-away is don't necessarily try to create the conversation, try to enter a conversation that's already happening. And see how you can put yourself into that conversation so it's natural.

Jonah: I think that's a great way to think about it.

Derek: Jonah, I'm really glad you took the time out of your day to do this. I know you're always publishing new research papers, so thank you for joining us today. Do you have anything else that you'd like to share as any closing remarks, anything you want to tell anyone else about here?

Jonah: No, Derek. I think that's it.

Derek: Now let's tell everyone where they can find you. I believe you have a website?

Jonah: Sure, or you can Google Jonah Berger and I'm the first hit that comes up. All the papers we've talked about, all the papers on negative publicity as well as the other things we've discussed are all freely available on my website and people are welcome to download them.

Derek: Is there any other paper you think people should check out? I know we talked about this in the preliminary call, what do you think, if they read the paper about negative publicity, what's another good paper that people should read?

Jonah: That's a great question. Not negative publicity per se, but we've done other work about how cues in the environment can bring things to mind, so stimuli can trigger people to think about things. We have a paper called, *Dogs on the Street, Pumas on Your Feet*, about how cues in the environment can affect consumer behavior, and can certainly affect how people evaluate products and choose them. That's a great paper to read. We also have a paper related on how where people vote, so whether you vote at a church or a school, can actually affect how you vote.

Again, cues in the environment bring things to mind and changes behavior. That's a paper on contextual priming. I think both of those are two great things to think about. If you're in the product space thinking about consumer behavior, the *Dogs on the Street, Pumas on Your Feet* paper, and then if you're interested in these things more generally, or if you like politics, thinking about how where

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people vote –the particular place they cast their ballot, the polling location- is a great paper as well.

Derek: Thank you Jonah. This is going to conclude the first show today. Everyone else, make sure you check out Jonah's website, check out those papers. He's got some great insights in them. And do me a favor, right below this audio, you'll have an opportunity to leave some comments and let me know what you thought. How great was Jonah? Derek Halpern out, see you on the next show.