

The Bandwagon, and Why Jumping On It Isn't Always a Good Idea

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It's safe to say that everyone has jumped on a bandwagon at some point in their life. I can even say that, and I'm usually very leery of them, often times turning my back to them as they roll on by. But whether the bandwagon is for a person, sports team, a product, political movement, social movement or anything else really - we have all jumped on a bandwagon at some point in our life. And how can we not? We are constantly bombarded by dramatic headlines trying to lure us onto one.

Do any of these look familiar?

"Jeremy Lin's Rise to the Top!"

"Everyone is Losing Weight on the South Beach Diet!"

"Celebrities Jumping on the Kony Bandwagon."

Neither good nor bad in their own right, these stories are just a few examples of major bandwagons which have swept through headlines gathering momentum and a devoted audience worldwide.

Sounds pretty good right? If you are the person or product that the bandwagon is all about, why wouldn't you want it? Well I can think of a few reasons, but first want to look at what exactly is behind the bandwagon effect in the first place.

For the most part, we are a species that likes to conform and feel more powerful in numbers. And we also feel more comfortable when making choices based on information we get from those we know and trust. When you are looking to buy something new – are you more willing to trust what a friend says about a product, or what the product pamphlet tells you? And that's really the basis for any bandwagon which starts to roll – and the probability of adoption increases with the rate of overall acceptance by those we know and trust. If we see someone we know and trust liking something, promoting something, defending something, then we will also feel compelled to do so – so much so that we will start to accept and promote things without even understanding what is underneath the surface initially presented. We attach to things without the supporting information – but what we're really attaching to is the emotional wave of groupthink that is carrying it.

But are bandwagons always successful? Is becoming a fad or trend something a product should aim for? Some might say yes, or that it can't really hurt - that they want the buzz, the quick revenue, the market's quick devotion.

But I'm not so sure I agree. To me, bandwagons aren't really built that well and usually fall apart soon after they start to roll. Remember that they aren't built on market need, but mostly on emotion and surface level information received from others – so while bandwagons may form quickly, they often crash just as quickly, usually tossing the person, product, or movement they were built for into a ditch on the side of the road.

Does anyone really follow Jeremy Lin anymore? And how often do people stay attached to the bandwagon team they cheered for through a playoffs series?

And there are those that say "who cares, they enjoyed their time in the spotlight" – and fair enough, they certainly did. But can that same attitude be applied when looking at the impact of the bandwagon effect to an actual product being sold in the market?

In a competitive market, companies are always chasing each other – looking for the differentiation that will give them a competitive advantage. And then once that is found, everyone else scrambles to imitate it, fearing the impact on their bottom-lines if they don't – in other words, they jump on the bandwagon. As an example, let's take a look at how the introduction of the iPad impacted the market and Apple's competitors. Once the iPad launched, many companies followed in imitation with their own version of a tablet. But what happens when quickly jumping on a bandwagon does not align with a company's brand or strategy?

Continuing with the iPad example, let's look at how this affected RIM. By jumping on the tablet bandwagon, Blackberry seemed to have only damaged their brand further – both by jumping too quickly with a product that wasn't comparable or competitive, but also with a product that did not necessarily align with the needs of their target market.

And looking internally within a company, what about the bandwagon effect within an actual product development lifecycle? Remembering that the foundation for the bandwagon effect is the desire to feel part of a group, does this sometimes stop us from halting the development of a product that shouldn't really go to market? Does the momentum of all working towards a common development goal, of supporting the group we work with, sometimes blind us to whether or not that goal is the one we should really be working towards? I certainly think it's possible.

In summary, jumping on a bandwagon can often be a short and bumpy ride that often ends with a crash – and in product management, it can potentially take a company's brand and market position with it.

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