



Made to stick - Why some ideas take hold and others come unstuck

by Chip & Dan Heath

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THE BOOK IN A NUTSHELL

Why is it easier to recall some things but not others? Teachers spend hours filling students with mitosis, only for it to be forgotten. Likewise, a Manager unveils the new strategy only to find the next day the employees continuing with the old strategy. In many cases we are only as effective as our power of communication. This book focuses on the key strategies that helps shape an idea into one that can stick. It uses a mnemonic, SUCCEsS = Simple; Unexpected; Concrete; Credible; Emotional and Stories.



THE BOOK

'Sticky' is an idea that cuts through, gets remembered but most importantly, helps to shift attitude or behaviour.

In society we spend a lot of time training people to develop good answers (e.g. a doctor's diagnosis) but no time is invested in teaching people how to communicate it. Many people feel that merely presenting a powerpoint deck has communicated what they need to say. But sadly most of what we want to communicate falls onto stony ground.

The authors have developed the SUCCEsS model that helps make an idea sticky (NB not every idea needs to have all 7 elements of the model). Any good piece of communication needs to be focused (**S**imple), Create attention (**U**nexpected) Be understood and remembered (**C**oncrete), Be agreed upon (**C**redible), Make people care enough (**E**motion) and then to Do something about it (**S**tory).

An example of stickiness in action is the popcorn story. Rather than just reel off the facts about the unhealthiness of popcorn, the Center for Science in the Public Interest set up a press conference where they laid out a day's worth of greasy food. They then juxtaposed this with one medium size carton of popcorn, telling the press that this one carton of butter popcorn contains the same amount of fat as a whole day's worth of food. This led to newspaper headlines such as "Popcorn gets an 'R' rating". The message was **S**imple, **U**nexpected, **C**oncrete, **C**redible, **E**motional and created a good **S**tory around it.

The advertising model has been predicated on the adage, 'Repetition, repetition repetition'. Yet we find urban legends (like the 'wake up in a bath of ice having had your Kidney's stolen' story) do not need a lot of paid-for repetition to be remembered.

The curse of knowledge

In experiments, a person is asked to tap out the tune of a well known song. Then another person tries to guess it. Only 3 songs out of 120 were guessed. The tappers are always amazed the other person cannot guess it! For them, their tapping pattern could *only* be that song. This hints at a common malaise that affects us all called 'Knowledge curse'. When we know one thing it makes it very difficult to imagine what it is like to not know it. Thus we often get our communication wrong - either because we under communicate ("Surely *everyone knows this?*") or we over communicate, creating too many layers of distinctions and complexities that people cannot absorb. When a CEO decides to communicate about 'unlocking shareholder value' he is hearing his own tune in his head and is not aware that people do not get the tune. The techniques in this book provide strategies to overcome the curse of knowledge.

Simplicity

Simplicity means finding the core of the idea.

People will not remember 90% of what you tell them, so be clear what are the key one or two things you want them to remember and just focus on those (i.e. cut away most of the other stuff). We therefore need to become 'masters of exclusion' in order to strip an idea



down to its bare essentials (without losing its profoundness). Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the French Aviator defined engineering thus: *“A designer knows he has achieved perfection not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away”*.

Colonel Tom Kolditz head of behavioural science at West Point, once said, *“No plan survives contact with the enemy - you might start off trying to fight your plan, but the enemy gets a vote”*. Hence why they instigated a concept called Commander’s Intent - i.e. it’s the overarching objective of the mission. This creates a fixed outcome but allows local adaptation of the strategy against the prevailing environment and circumstances. Ironically, through its simplicity it accommodates complexity as it has only a few ‘fixed’ points allowing greater flexibility (unlike highly detailed strategic plans whose rigidity causes their failure).

The reality is too many choices paralyze us into inaction. Tversky and Shafir demonstrated that with choice comes uncertainty. Direction and focus (through a CI) helps us cut through this and make more timely, confident decisions.

Once an organisation has this ‘CI’ it helps drive every decision in the organisation. For example SouthWest airline’s ‘We are THE low fare airline’ or Bill Clinton’s, “It’s the economy stupid” (which gave his campaign focus and momentum).

Dunn in North Carolina has a newspaper that has a very clear focus on local issues with their mantra, ‘Names, names and names’ - local names trumps well written prose. All these three examples are concrete, simple and memorable. This allows the driving focus to be referenced every day upon every decision (as it lives in peoples’ heads rather than being locked away in some powerpoint presentation).

Simplicity cuts through. One point is better than five. Easy words are better than long words - the less we say, the easier it is to take in and remember - it’s a simple case of ‘bandwidth’. Hollywood uses the concept of ‘High-concept pitches’ (for example Speed was defined as ‘Die Hard on a bus’).

Analogies and Metaphors can also help land a complex idea. Disney liken their parks to Theatre (with their staff being called cast members). The analogy can be applied to all decisions/actions in the park (unlike Subway’s misguided attempt to suggest their sandwich makers are ‘Artists’). Likewise, Proverbs are testament to how simple makes sticky (Cervantes defined proverbs as *“Short sentences drawn from long experience”*). *A bird in the hand is worth more than two in the bush* has survived for 2500 years and appears in most languages - That is because it reduces to the core a universal truth.

This is the problem with the ‘curse of knowledge’ - one quickly loses the art of simplicity - in our attempt to show how clever we are, we forget the fundamental principle of communication.

Unexpectedness

The key to get a message heard is first to capture their attention. The most powerful way to get a person’s attention is to break a pattern (as our brains filter out consistency and only focuses on what’s different). Sticky ideas disrupt people’s expectations. Furthermore we



need to maintain attention - thus we need both 'surprise' to create attention and 'interest' to maintain it.

The nature of surprise is critical in learning. It starts to jolt our models of reality and destabilizes our locked-in beliefs. It opens us up for re-evaluation as we try to make sense of them. When things remain the same they just unconsciously reaffirm our current schemas. To get change, you need to destabilize the status quo.

Nordstrom's ran a successful campaign where they told stories of unexpected standards of service (e.g. where an employee ironed a new shirt for a customer or when a 'Nordie' gift-wrapped presents purchased at Macy's). Persil's Dirt is Good is another example of unexpectedness (Ed).

A group of students were given the task of writing the headline for a story about how every teacher would be off-site on a certain day to learn about new teaching methods. Having heard all the headlines about new teaching methods etc the teacher suggested a better headline - 'No school next Thursday'.

Surprise creates an interesting facial expression. Surprise 'opens' up the face (and as such we are open to new ideas. With anger we are focused and closed (when we get angry we become more certain of our views).

One way of keeping people's interest is to create mystery - something that 'hooks' them and makes them want to stay on to find the answer. Freakonomics uses this principle to create curiosity gaps - e.g. Why do so many drug dealers live with their mums?

Robert McKee, the hollywood script writer believes every scene needs a turning point. By opening up a new plot or twist it keeps us wanting to discover what will happen next or how it will turn out. Lowenstein defined curiosity as a time when we feel a gap in our knowledge. Like a vacuum, it sucks us in. Thus to create that void, you must first open the gap - often by telling them about something they do not know about. This can often be done by asking them questions that they do not know the answers to (or suggest other people know about it but you do not). Many 'teaser' campaigns set up this void e.g "There's an invisible chemical in your home -and it may be killing you right now!..."

One of the problems is that people think they know more than they actually do know. Often to help overcome this, one sometimes needs to set up a situation where they fail. Another way is to make them state publicly their point of view (and then compare it versus others). This creates an imbalance that shakes up their view of reality.

Roone Arledge, a famous TV producer for Wide World of Sports had to make college sports more enticing for viewers in other states. He did this by first telling the story of the local community and the football club.

Discord creates energy (in an attempt to resolve the conflict). Thus juxtaposing two mutually incompatible elements creates tension, interest and mystery.



Back in 1957, when Sony stated its ambition to create a a 'pocketable radio' it was regarded as almost impossible (At that time radios were valve driven and made by cabinet makers) but this tension drove it fruition.

Concreteness

The easier it is for us to relate to something, the easier it is for us to understand it (and hence remember it). thus if we can visualize it or link it into our own personal lives the better chance of it being sticky.

The more people can 'see' it, 'smell it', 'hear' it the more something feels real. Conceptual thought is not real - we can envision a V8 engine but not 'high performance'. Likewise, we can envision a Nordstrom employee ironing a shirt but not 'World-class service' So we need to simplify our ideas back down into everyday concreteness

The Halloween myth (of people putting razors into apples) has been shown to be false - yet it has lingered and has a profound affect on the behaviour of parents. One of the reasons is its concreteness. The imagery is vivid and helps implant it within our brains. It also taps into our primal focus on survival and hence we recall emotional images of threat.

Yale researcher, Eric Havelock studied tales passed down through word and mouth. He found the ones that had lasted were full of concrete details (who did what to whom...) and light on conceptual ideas.

At Georgia State University two lecturers who wanted to make their accounting course less dry, developed a fictitious company called Safe Night Out, run by a couple of characters they invented called Kris and Sandy. As the term progresses, the students followed Kris and Sandy through their new start-up. The students (as their imaginary friends) were asked to advise them with the feasibility of the project, before helping them with cash flow, profit and loss and balance sheets.

Concreteness makes it much easier for people to understand what the vision/objective it. "To land a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" is tangible and clear about what 'success' looks like. Too many vision statements are meaningless hot air that 'touches no-one' as it has no tangibility.

Our memories are like velcro, with lots of little metaphorical hooks. The reality is we store things in different ways (for example if you try to recall these five items you will find you search differently: e.g The capital of Kansas; The first line of Hey Jude; Remembering the Mona Lisa; Remembering the house you grew up in; Remembering the definition of 'truth'. Thus we store things in different places - some visually, some aurally etc. Thus the more 'hooks' one can create around an idea, the greater chance it has to be sticky (think how easy it is to recall a song versus a credit card number - even though one has much more data).

In 1968, Jane Elliott, an elementary school teacher in Iowa was trying to explain the assassination of Martin Luther King. Rather than talk about the concept of discrimination, she knew she had to bring it to life to help her young children really understand it. So the next day she told the class that research had shown that all children with brown eyes have been shown to be superior to those with blue eyes - "They're the better people in this class". Then the groups were separated: brown eyes were to sit at the front of class, blue eyes at the back. The



brown eyes were given extra time at breaks and told they were more intelligent. The blue eyed kids had to wear a special collar and were not allowed to mix with the brown eyed children. Elliott was surprised how quickly the class was transformed: Third graders turned nasty, and friendships disappeared. The next day she came in and said she was wrong. It was the blue eyed children who were superior! the blue eyed kids shouted with glee and rushed to hand over the collars to the brown eyed children. When in the inferior group, the children described themselves as "stupid" and "bad". Furthermore there was a clear difference in attainments once given their respective identities. In one test they took 5.5 minutes to complete and the next day when they were 'the chosen ones' they took just 2.5 minutes. When asked why they were not as fast the first day one girl replied "Because we had those collars on".

Concreteness makes it easier as one can more easily picture it. When HP pitched to Disney parks to be their IT supplier, then did not take them through a powerpoint presentation, but instead built a 6,000 square feet exhibition that followed a fictitious family through a visit to the park (and the way HP technology could make their trip more enjoyable) - i.e. they brought to life the benefits.

When James Grant, the Director of UNICEF visited world leaders, he would pull out a packet with a teaspoon of salt and eight of sugar (the ingredients of oral rehydration therapy when mixed with a litre of water) and say, "Do you know that this costs less than a cup of tea and yet it can save hundreds of thousands of children in your country?"

Credible

In the cynical untrusting world that we have created, people need to feel they can trust in these ideas.

In 1980's two medical researchers in Perth made an amazing discovery: Ulcers are caused by bacteria. No-one believed them. They lacked credibility as they did not come from a well known medical research establishment and their personal credentials were not strong (one of whom was still not a qualified doctor). It took ten years before this view was accepted (finally winning a Noble prize).

It is hard to shift a belief. Rational arguments are often rejected. However, we know there are some strong influencers on belief change. One of them is authority. If we 'believe and trust' a person (be it family, friend, expert or even celebrity as long as we can be convinced of their authenticity with no hidden agenda), then we are more likely to be influenced by them.

Furthermore, we are seduced by detail. We assume if someone can discuss something in detail then it must be true.

In a mock jury experiment, one group were given the transcript of evidence which was filled out with detailed descriptions of irrelevant events (such as a description of the type of toothbrush used by the child before going to bed). With the other set, they were also given transcripts where the other side's transcript had be filled out with irrelevant detail. Even though the detail was irrelevant it did sway the voting patterns.

The trouble with numbers as a source of credibility is we quickly lose sight of its meaning as we can't visualize a thousand, let alone a million. In these situations it's best to resort to analogy - something the audience can more meaningfully relate to (cf the popcorn analogy).



Different things have different levels of authority. For example if one is given security clearance at Fort Knox, then one is pretty much cleared everywhere else. Or if you have provided catering at the White House... Other examples include torture test scenarios (e.g if one was able to handle the logistics of the Harry Potter supply of books across India at exactly midnight...)

Finally, personal experience is the most powerful way to shift a belief. Wendy's run a successful campaign called 'Where's the beef?' that highlighted the paucity of meat in many competitor's burgers. You could test it yourself. Ronald Reagan asked one question: "Are you better off now than you were four years ago"

A few weeks before the start of the NBA season, all the new Rookies were required to attend a workshop where they were given advice about entering the big league (from how to deal with media to making sensible investments). In the evening they went down to the bar and flirted with the pretty girls there (who knew they were in town). The next day, the same girls were wheeled into the meeting. Two of them confessed to being HIV positive. This had a more profound effect on them than a mere presentation about safe sex.

Emotions

Emotions are a powerful influencer of thought and behaviour. It also helps lock the message in memory. Mother Theresa once said, "If I look at the mass I will never act. If I look at the one, I will".

Save the Children ran a test of two campaigns. One talked about problems in Zambia, Malawi, Angola and Ethiopia. The other campaign featured just one seven year old girl. The single child raised twice as much money. Statistics makes us re-engage with our rational mind, and thus think less emotionally. In another experiment when primed with logic through asking a maths questions it reduced the size of their charitable donations (versus a second group who were asked to write down how they felt when they heard the word 'baby').

Feelings inspire action. Thus for one's message to be sticky, one has to help make them 'care'. To drive care one needs to create an association between something they do care about and something they do not. Self interest is also a way of creating an emotional connection. WIIFM (What's in it for me) is key to spell out if you want to make an idea sticky for someone - i.e. don't tell people it's the best seed, tell them it creates the best lawn (i.e. spell out the benefit of the benefit).

In a study for Goodyear tyres, people were asked to visualize the benefits they would get from safer tyres. This led to higher levels of purchase intent (as they themselves made the sell very personal).

Two anti-tobacco campaigns were run simultaneously. One had the end line, "Think. Don't smoke" and the other showed body bags being dumped outside the HQ of a tobacco company (based on the facts that 1800 people die a day from smoking). One engaged logic, the other emotion. The emotional ad was recalled by 22% of teenagers whilst the logic campaign was only recalled by 3%.



All too often we lose the heart of an idea in trying to write it up in business-eze. It's better to get people to express why something is so personally important to them and capture that emotion.

Story

Story is the oldest form of stickiness. We are innately set-up to pass information on through story - and we still use it all the time. Firefighters and Printer engineers share stories that spreads their knowledge and experience in a way that is entertaining to hear and is more easily recalled. Stories help us 'concrete' it into an emotional experience. We effectively re-live the event inside. Research has shown the when someone re-lives a story in their head it re-triggers the same areas of the brain as the original experience.

Fedex has used the power of stories inside their organisation to inspire similar behaviour (for example, carrying packets by hand to the airport due to traffic jams). Likewise Costco talks about their salmon stories (how the company were able to find many ways to drive improved quality of salmon to its customers whilst also bringing down prices). These are vivid, concrete examples that help define what success looks like in those organisations.

The story of Jared (a 425lb student who lost 100lbs by eating Subway everyday) did more to shift the perception of subway as unhealthy than any campaign could have done. It follows the SUCCEs model as its simple (eat subway-lose weight); Unexpected (healthy food from unhealthy fast food chain); Concrete (100lbs, smaller jeans etc); Credible (look at the before and after photos); Emotional and Story (Man overcomes big odds to triumph). This story reminds us that sometimes we do not need to create stickiness but just find it.

One of the beautiful things about story is they are less confrontational - one metaphorically walks side by side with the listener rather than across the table (with a set of powerpoint charts full of tables and statistics).

In one experiment based on debating society at Stanford, the audience were asked to recall information from each of the talks. They found the ones that used story were recalled in greater detail than those that relied on facts and data (63% Vs 5%). Its difficult to make statistics stick

Stories are very good at preventing the curse of knowledge as they force one to simplify and use concrete language.

So how do you unstick a sticky idea? In reality you can't so instead you have to create a better, stickier story to counteract it. For example when cars were first invented people were saying 'Why would you want to sit on top of an explosion?' They did not try to argue against it, but acted their way out of it. To fight back, the automobile companies ran a series of reliability races which ran from 1895 to 1912

CRITIQUE

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Years ago, when I was at Saatchi's we had a phrase '*To bring alive a single-minded idea in a compelling and unexpected way*'. This to me sums up what a sticky idea is (and was created well before this book) - i.e they have very neatly re-expressed a concept that most advertising people have known for years. That said, its an easy book to read and does cover some interesting ground - and uses a simple mnemonic to make their own ideas stick!

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