

Why Some Ideas Survive
and Others Die

MADE

to

STICK

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What Sticks?

Kidney heist. Halloween candy. Movie popcorn.

Sticky = understandable, memorable, and effective in changing thought or behavior.

SIX PRINCIPLES: SUCCESS.

SIMPLE UNEXPECTED CONCRETE CREDIBLE EMOTIONAL STORIES.

THE VILLAIN: CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE. *It's hard to be a tapper.*

Creativity starts with templates: Beat the Curse with the SUCCESS checklist.

1. Simple

FIND THE CORE.

Commander's Intent. Determine the single most important thing: "THE low-fare airline." Inverted pyramid: Don't bury the lead. The pain of decision paralysis. Beat decision paralysis through relentless prioritization: "It's the economy, stupid." Clinic: Sun exposure. Names, names, names.

SHARE THE CORE.

Simple = core + compact. *Proverbs: sound bites that are profound. Visual proverbs: The Palm Pilot wood block. How to pack a lot of punch into a compact communication: (1) Using what's there: Tap into existing schemas. The pomelo. (2) Create a high concept pitch: "Die Hard on a bus." (3) Use a generative analogy: Disney's "cast members."*

2. Unexpected

GET ATTENTION: SURPRISE.

The successful flight safety announcement. Break a pattern! Break people's guessing machines (on a core issue). The surprise brow: a pause to collect information. Avoid gimmicky surprise—make it “postdictable.” “The Nordie who . . .” “There will be no school next Thursday.” Clinic: Too much on foreign aid?

HOLD ATTENTION: INTEREST.

Create a mystery: What are Saturn's rings made of? Screenplays as models of generating curiosity. The Gap Theory of Curiosity: Highlight a knowledge gap. Use the news-teaser approach: “Which local restaurant has slime in the ice machine?” Clinic: Fund-raising. Priming the gap: How Boone Arledge made NCAA football interesting to nonfans. Hold long-term interest: the “pocketable radio” and the “man on the moon.”

3. Concrete

HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND AND REMEMBER.

Write with the concreteness of a fable. (Sour grapes.) Make abstraction concrete: The Nature Conservancy's landscapes as eco-celebrities. Provide a concrete context: Asian teachers' approach to teaching math. Put people into the story: accounting class taught with a soap opera. Use the Velcro theory of memory: The more hooks in your idea, the better. Brown eyes, blue eyes: a simulation that “cured” racial prejudice.

HELP PEOPLE COORDINATE.

Engineers vs. manufacturers: Find common ground at a shared level of understanding. Set common goals in tangible terms: Our plane will land on Runway 4-22. Make it real: The Ferraris go to Disney World. Why concreteness helps: white things versus white things in your refrigerator. Create a turf where people can bring their knowledge to bear: The VC

pitch and the maroon portfolio. Clinic: Oral Rehydration Therapy. Talk about people, not data: Hamburger Helper's in-home visits and "Saddleback Sam."

4. Credible

HELP PEOPLE BELIEVE.

The Nobel-winning ulcer insight no one believed. Flesh-eating bananas.

EXTERNAL CREDIBILITY. Authority and antiauthority. *Pam Laffin, smoker.*

INTERNAL CREDIBILITY.

Use convincing details. *Jurors and the Darth Vader Toothbrush. The dancing seventy-three year old.*

Make statistics accessible. *Nuclear warheads as BBs. The Human Scale principle. Stephen Covey's analogy of a workplace to a soccer team.*

Clinic: Shark attack hysteria.

Find an example that passes the Sinatra Test. "If you can make it there, you can make it anywhere." *Transporting Bollywood movies: "We handled Harry Potter and your brother's board exams." A business-friendly environmentalist and the textile factory that actually purified the water that fed it--and yielded fabric that was edible.*

Use testable credentials. "Try before you buy." *Where's the beef? Snapple supports the KKK?! Coaches: It's easier to tear down than to build up: Filling the Emotional Tank. NBA rookie orientation: "These women all have AIDS."*

5. Emotional

MAKE PEOPLE CARE.

The Mother Teresa principle: If I look at the one, I will act. People donate more to Rokia than to a huge swath of Africa. The Truth anti-

smoking campaign: What made kids care was not health concerns but anticorporate rebellion.

USE THE POWER OF ASSOCIATION.

The need to fight semantic stretch: the diluted meaning of "relativity" and why "unique" isn't unique anymore. Transforming "sportsmanship" into "honoring the game."

APPEAL TO SELF-INTEREST (AND NOT JUST BASE SELF-INTEREST).

Mail-order ads—"They laughed when I sat down at the piano. . . ."
WIIFY. Cable television in Tempe: Visualizing what it could do for you.
Avoid Maslow's basement: our false assumption that other people are baser than we are. Floyd Lee and his Iraq mess tent: "I'm in charge of morale."

APPEAL TO IDENTITY.

The firemen who rejected the popcorn popper. Understand how people make decisions based on identity. (Who am I? What kind of situation is this? And what do people like me do in this kind of situation?) Clinic: Why study algebra? Don't mess with Texas: Texans don't litter. Don't forget the Curse of Knowledge—don't assume, like the defenders of the duo piano, that others care at the same level that you do.

6. Stories

GET PEOPLE TO ACT.

STORIES AS SIMULATION (TELL PEOPLE HOW TO ACT).

The day the heart monitor lied: how the nurse acted. Shop talk at Xerox: how the repairman acted. Visualizing "how I got here": simulating problems to solve them. Use stories as flight simulators. Clinic: Dealing with problem students.

STORIES AS INSPIRATION (GIVE PEOPLE ENERGY TO ACT).

Jared, the 425-pound fast-food dieter. How to spot inspiring stories. Look for three key plots: Challenge (to overcome obstacles), Connection (to get along or reconnect), Creativity (to inspire a new way of thinking). Tell a springboard story: a story that helps people see how an existing problem might change. Stephen Denning at the World Bank: a health worker in Zambia. You can extract a moral from a story, but you can't extract a story from a moral. Why speakers got mad when people boiled down their presentations to stories.

What Sticks.

USE WHAT STICKS.

Nice guys finish last. Elementary, my dear Watson. It's the economy, stupid. The power of spotting. Why good speaking skills aren't necessarily good sticking skills: Stanford students and the speech exercise. A final warning about the Curse of Knowledge.

Remember how SUCCEs helps people to:

Pay attention	Unexpected
Understand and remember	Concrete
Believe and agree	Credible
Care	Emotional
Act	Stories

Simple helps at many stages. Most important, it tells you *what* to say.

Symptoms and solutions: For practical guidance, see pages 247–49.

John F. Kennedy versus Floyd Lee: How normal people, in normal situations, can make a profound difference with their sticky ideas.

paign was a huge success. And it wasn't created by a Madison Avenue advertising agency; it started with a single store owner who had the good sense to spot an amazing story.

But here's where our basketball analogy breaks down: In the world of ideas, we can genetically engineer our players. We can *create* ideas with an eye to maximizing their stickiness.

As we pored over hundreds of sticky ideas, we saw, over and over, the same six principles at work.

PRINCIPLE 1: SIMPLICITY

How do we find the essential core of our ideas? A successful defense lawyer says, "If you argue ten points, even if each is a good point, when they get back to the jury room they won't remember any." To strip an idea down to its core, we must be masters of exclusion. We must relentlessly prioritize. Saying something short is not the mission—sound bites are not the ideal. Proverbs are the ideal. We must create ideas that are both simple *and* profound. The Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one-sentence statement so profound that an individual could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.

PRINCIPLE 2: UNEXPECTEDNESS

How do we get our audience to pay attention to our ideas, and how do we maintain their interest when we need time to get the ideas across? We need to violate people's expectations. We need to be counterintuitive. A bag of popcorn is as unhealthy as *a whole day's worth of fatty foods!* We can use surprise—an emotion whose function is to increase alertness and cause focus—to grab people's attention. But surprise doesn't last. For our idea to endure, we must generate *interest* and *curiosity*. How do you keep students engaged during the forty-eighth history class of the year? We can engage people's curiosity over a long period of time by systematically "opening gaps" in their knowledge—and then filling those gaps.

PRINCIPLE 3: CONCRETENESS

How do we make our ideas clear? We must explain our ideas in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information. This is where so much business communication goes awry. Mission statements, synergies, strategies, visions—they are often ambiguous to the point of being meaningless. Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images—ice-filled bathtubs, apples with razors—because our brains are wired to remember concrete data. In proverbs, abstract truths are often encoded in concrete language: “A bird in hand is worth two in the bush.” Speaking concretely is the only way to ensure that our idea will mean the same thing to everyone in our audience.

PRINCIPLE 4: CREDIBILITY

How do we make people believe our ideas? When the former surgeon general C. Everett Koop talks about a public-health issue, most people accept his ideas without skepticism. But in most day-to-day situations we don't enjoy this authority. Sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials. We need ways to help people test our ideas for themselves—a “try before you buy” philosophy for the world of ideas. When we're trying to build a case for something, most of us instinctively grasp for hard numbers. But in many cases this is exactly the wrong approach. In the sole U.S. presidential debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Reagan could have cited innumerable statistics demonstrating the sluggishness of the economy. Instead, he asked a simple question that allowed voters to test for themselves: “Before you vote, ask yourself if you are better off today than you were four years ago.”

PRINCIPLE 5: EMOTIONS

How do we get people to care about our ideas? We make them *feel* something. In the case of movie popcorn, we make them feel dis-

gusted by its unhealthiness. The statistic “37 grams” doesn’t elicit any emotions. Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region. We are wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions. Sometimes the hard part is finding the right emotion to harness. For instance, it’s difficult to get teenagers to quit smoking by instilling in them a fear of the consequences, but it’s easier to get them to quit by tapping into their resentment of the duplicity of Big Tobacco.

PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES

How do we get people to act on our ideas? We tell stories. Firefighters naturally swap stories after every fire, and by doing so they multiply their experience; after years of hearing stories, they have a richer, more complete mental catalog of critical situations they might confront during a fire and the appropriate responses to those situations. Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we encounter that situation in the physical environment. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.

Those are the six principles of successful ideas. To summarize, here’s our checklist for creating a successful idea: a Simple Unexpected Concrete Credentialed Emotional Story. A clever observer will note that this sentence can be compacted into the acronym SUCCEsS. This is sheer coincidence, of course. (Okay, we admit, SUCCEsS is a little corny. We could have changed “Simple” to “Core” and reordered a few letters. But, you have to admit, CCUCES is less memorable.)

No special expertise is needed to apply these principles. There are no licensed stickologists. Moreover, many of the principles have a commonsense ring to them: Didn’t most of us already have the intu-

ition that we should “be simple” and “use stories”? It’s not as though there’s a powerful constituency for overcomplicated, lifeless prose.

But wait a minute. We claim that using these principles is easy. And most of them do seem relatively commonsensical. So why aren’t we deluged with brilliantly designed sticky ideas? Why is our life filled with more process memos than proverbs?

Sadly, there is a villain in our story. The villain is a natural psychological tendency that consistently confounds our ability to create ideas using these principles. It’s called the Curse of Knowledge. (We will capitalize the phrase throughout the book to give it the drama we think it deserves.)

Tappers and Listeners

In 1990, Elizabeth Newton earned a Ph.D. in psychology at Stanford by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: “tappers” or “listeners.” Tappers received a list of twenty-five well-known songs, such as “Happy Birthday to You” and “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Each tapper was asked to pick a song and tap out the rhythm to a listener (by knocking on a table). The listener’s job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped. (By the way, this experiment is fun to try at home if there’s a good “listener” candidate nearby.)

The listener’s job in this game is quite difficult. Over the course of Newton’s experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only 2.5 percent of the songs: 3 out of 120.

But here’s what made the result worthy of a dissertation in psychology. Before the listeners guessed the name of the song, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted that the odds were 50 percent.

The tappers got their message across 1 time in 40, but they thought they were getting their message across 1 time in 2. Why?

ideas driving Southwest Airlines as concentric circles. The central circle, the core, is “THE low-fare airline.” But the very next circle might be “Have fun at work.” Southwest’s employees know that it’s okay to have fun so long as it doesn’t jeopardize the company’s status as THE low-fare airline. A new employee can easily put these ideas together to realize how to act in unscripted situations. For instance, is it all right to joke about a flight attendant’s birthday over the P.A.? Sure. Is it equally okay to throw confetti in her honor? Probably not—the confetti would create extra work for cleanup crews, and extra clean-up time means higher fares. It’s the lighthearted business equivalent of the foot soldier who improvises based on the Commander’s Intent. A well-thought-out simple idea can be amazingly powerful in shaping behavior.

A warning: In the future, months after you’ve put down this book, you’re going to recall the word “Simple” as an element of the SUCCESSIONS checklist. And your mental thesaurus will faithfully go digging for the meaning of “Simple,” and it’s going to come back with associations like dumbing down, shooting for the lowest common denominator, making things easy, and so on. At that moment, you’ve got to remind your thesaurus of the examples we’ve explored. “THE low-fare airline” and the other stories in this chapter aren’t simple because they’re full of easy words. They’re simple because they reflect the Commander’s Intent. It’s about elegance and prioritization, not dumbing down.

Burying the Lead

News reporters are taught to start their stories with the most important information. The first sentence, called the lead, contains the most essential elements of the story. A good lead can convey a lot of information, as in these two leads from articles that won awards from the American Society of Newspaper Editors:

said had impact. They've shared data, but they haven't created ideas that are useful and lasting. Nothing stuck.

Making an Idea Stick: The Communication Framework

For an idea to stick, for it to be useful and lasting, it's got to make the audience:

1. Pay attention
2. Understand and remember it
3. Agree/Believe
4. Care
5. Be able to act on it

This book could have been organized around these five steps, but there's a reason they were reserved for the conclusion. The Curse of Knowledge can easily render this framework useless. When an expert asks, "Will people understand my idea?," her answer will be *Yes*, because she herself understands. ("Of course, my people will understand 'maximizing shareholder value!'") When an expert asks, "Will people care about this?," her answer will be *Yes*, because she herself cares. Think of the Murray Dranoff Duo Piano people, who said, "We exist to protect, preserve, and promote the music of the duo piano." They were shocked when that statement didn't arouse the same passion in others that it did in them.

The SUCCEsS checklist is a substitute for the framework above, and its advantage is that it's more tangible and less subject to the Curse of Knowledge. In fact, if you think back across the chapters you've read, you'll notice that the framework matches up nicely:

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|--------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Pay attention: | UNEXPECTED |
| 2. Understand and remember it: | CONCRETE |

- | | |
|--------------------------|-----------|
| 3. Agree/Believe: | CREDIBLE |
| 4. Care: | EMOTIONAL |
| 5. Be able to act on it: | STORY |

So, rather than guess about whether people will understand our ideas, we should ask, “Is it concrete?” Rather than speculate about whether people will care, we should ask, “Is it emotional? Does it get out of Maslow’s basement? Does it force people to put on an Analytical Hat or allow them to feel empathy?” (By the way, “Simple” is not on the list above because it’s mainly about the Answer stage—honing in on the core of your message and making it as compact as possible. But Simple messages help throughout the process, especially in helping people to understand and act.)

The SUCCEsS checklist, then, is an ideal tool for dealing with communication problems. Let’s look at some common symptoms of communication problems and how we can respond to them.

Problems getting people to pay attention to a message

SYMPTOM: “No one is listening to me” or “They seem bored—they hear this stuff all the time.”

SOLUTION: Surprise them by breaking their guessing machines—tell them something that is uncommon sense. (The lead is, There will be no school next Thursday! Nordies gift-wrap packages from Macy’s!)

SYMPTOM: “I lost them halfway through” or “Their attention was waver-
ing toward the end.”