



'Stickiness' – Making Your Ideas Powerful and Memorable

Some ideas are 'sticky' – that is they seem to very quickly and easily acquire status and circulation. Some of these ideas are natural, that is they have grown up seemingly spontaneously, and some have been created – consciously designed by advertising executives, marketers or even charity fundraisers.

A number of social scientists and scientists have explored this phenomenon – famously Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point* and most recently Chip and Dan Heath in their book *Made to Stick*. I also explore the practical implications of this phenomenon for fundraisers in the book *The Influential Fundraiser* co-written with my colleague Clare Segal.

We can find sticky ideas everywhere. The Brothers Heath were drawn to this area through interest in questions like: What makes 'urban legends' – like the myth that the Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from space – so compelling? Why do some teachers make their prosaic chemistry or geography lessons work much better than others? Why does virtually every culture have a set of proverbs about birds and short-term gain¹? Why do some political ideas circulate widely while others are forgotten almost instantly?

Gladwell's book examined the forces that cause social phenomena to "tip", or make the leap from small groups to big groups, the way contagious diseases spread rapidly once they infect a certain critical mass of people. His book explores issues like why did Hush Puppies shoes experience a sales rebirth? Why did crime rates abruptly plummet in New York City? And why did the book *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* catch on eventually to become a bestseller? For fundraisers or social marketers it's essential that we combine the Bros Heath and Gladwell's ideas if our social messages are to achieve the impact they need.

In *The Influential Fundraiser* Clare Segal and I explore how the twin sciences of psychology – *brain software* – and neurology – *brain hardware* – can help. These sciences offer us insights on how stakeholders including donors acquire and store ideas as well as how they make decisions. They explain why some fundraising messages – the Bolivian Priest with a brick for a mission statement, the Sarajevan musician collecting a \$1M donation using Bach as a case statement – make such a powerful impact on donors.

This brief article draws on all three books but mostly uses the elegant SUCCE(S) formula developed by the Heath Brothers to offer advice on how to make your ideas sticky.

It is intended for people who have attended a seminar run by me or one of my colleagues. It will help you secure **headshare** and **heartshare**.

¹ Ornithology and Return on Investment (RoI)

- "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush" **United Kingdom**
- "Rather one bird in the hand than ten in the bush" **Sweden**
- "A bird in the hand is worth one hundred flying in the air" **Spain**
- "A sparrow in the hand is better than a pigeon on the roof" **Poland**
- "Better a titmouse in the hand than a crane on the roof" **Russia**

Seven Principles of Sticky Ideas

The Heath Brothers in their book have come up with six principles for making a message sticky based around the word formula SUCCEES. At **=mc** we've – sort of – added a seventh principle with an additional 'S'. The seven **=mc** principles are outlined below:

- **Simplicity:** identify your core message and make a short and sweet summary
- **Unexpectedness:** engage and intrigue the audience with counterintuitive ideas
- **Concreteness:** make it real and visceral: see, smell and touch the idea
- **Credibility:** use detail and information that symbolises and supports your idea
- **Emotions:** evoke and attach feelings about what is important
- **Stories:** use stories to make the idea memorable and personal
- **Simplicity:** remove every extraneous element from the message

Below we walk through the principles using examples from the seminar and elsewhere – focussing on words and structure.

Remember, however, some of the other techniques we explore in the seminar using **sensory anchors** connected with colour, touching, gestures, rhythm etc. Using these in connection with your message will subconsciously add extra impact beyond the words. To find out more about these techniques and how they can help in your work read ***The Influential Fundraiser*** book.

Principle 1: Simplicity

How do we find the essential core of our ideas? As famous successful US defence lawyer, Johnny Cochrane says, "Don't argue ten points, even if each is a good point – when the jury get back to the verdict room they won't remember any. Find one simple idea to sell." As a great way to prove his point he used the infamous "glove that didn't fit" simple message to secure OJ Simpson's acquittal.

Think of **$e=mc^2$** . This is, with H_2O , the best-known scientific formula on the planet. The thinking behind and implications of **$e=mc^2$** are wide-ranging and outside most of our understanding. But Einstein wanted to summarise his profound idea for scientists *and* make it memorable for everyone. Aim to make your ideas simple but profound in the Einstein way.

To strip an idea down to its core, we need to pare away all the extras and prioritise the key elements in the message. Saying something that is *only* short is not the goal – 'sound bites' or slogans are not what we're suggesting. *Proverbs* could be seen as an interesting format – "look before you leap" has some real wisdom in it as well as being a catchy thought.

Our aim has to be to 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? To do this we need to *disrupt* people's expectations. We may even need to be counterintuitive or tackle popular misconceptions. In this way you gain attention – or 'headshare.'

One way to do this is to embed in your story a challenging fact. In one example a refugee organisation began a presentation by telling people that Britain is a nation of net *emigrants* – more of us settle overseas every year than enter the UK. That counters the traditional view sometimes

reported in the conservative media that we're being 'flooded with foreigners.' The implication? If we're against immigration we need to stop *Britons* going abroad.

We can also use mystery – an effect which can increase alertness and focus – to grab people's attention. Remember the phrase on the t-shirt: **“woman without her man is nothing.”**² The punctuation makes the difference.

Remember too the fundraiser who asked his corporate sponsors for more money to do – apparently – less well. The sponsors were expecting an increase in money would involve an increase in results. By asking for the “right to fail” (= right to innovate) he captured their attention. But surprise doesn't last forever. For our idea to endure, we must generate long term some different responses – interest and curiosity. 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 and understandable? We need to explain our ideas in terms of human actions and in terms of the senses that we use – vision, words, smell, taste etc. This is where so much business and charity communication goes wrong. Way too many mission statements, synergies, strategies, and visions – are ambiguous or vague to the point of being meaningless. We showed you these three mission statements for three of the largest child protection charities in the world. They all sound the same. And they're all full of NGO jargon.

1. xxx insists that the survival, protection and development of children are universal development imperatives that are integral to human progress
2. xxx fights for children's rights. We deliver immediate and lasting improvements to children's lives worldwide.
3. xxx believes that children have the right to shape their future. A key part of xxx's work is to provide children and young people with opportunities to participate in decisions and plans which affect them.

These are taken from websites. One of these is CARE, one is UNICEF and one is Save the Children. But which is which? And if they aren't saying different things how am I supposed to make an informed judgement about which to support?

Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images – for example ice-filled bathtubs – because our brains are wired to remember concrete data. Going back to our earlier point about proverbs notice how abstract truths are couched in concrete language: "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush."

Speaking or writing concretely is the only way to ensure that our idea will impact on everyone in our audience. It also helps enormously with memory. Think about the story of the Titanic – what do you remember? It's the concrete details – the iceberg, the band playing on as the ship sinks, the women and children going first, the captain going down with his ship etc. These details make the event come alive.

² I saw this message on a t-shirt on a woman in a gym. How many of you would agree with this sentiment? How many disagree? Well I was puzzled. And when I went up close to the woman I noticed the message on the t-shirt wasn't quite what it seemed. It actually said “woman: without her, man is nothing.” Some of the punctuation had been greyed out. It caught my attention!

Principle 4: Credibility

How do we make people believe in our ideas? When the head of the British Medical Association talks about a public-health issue, like smoking being bad for you most people accept his or her ideas without scepticism. But in many 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 – the Heath Brothers call this 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 or data. But in many cases this is exactly the wrong approach. In the only U.S. presidential debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Reagan could have cited innumerable statistics demonstrating the sluggishness of the US 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." Voters decided that the answer was 'no.' (And we got Ronald Reagan in charge in the White House...)

On the other hand a simple powerful statistic can be very compelling. "One in three women in this country will be affected by breast cancer at some point in their life. I need your support to help take that call from a woman when she needs help. At the moment we can only answer the call for 50% of the women who need our help."

Remember that on the seminar we worked on your organisational USPs (Unique Selling Propositions). To test for simple credibility use the three books that drive USPs.

- Guinness Book of Records: for *quantitative* data
- Who's who: for *qualitative* data
- Bible: for *values-based* data

Finally remember that credibility can come from a candid admission that we're not perfect. At all costs avoid **Stepford Wives Syndrome**³ where your annual report simply becomes a way to claim that all your programmes and processes worked perfectly over the last year. For more on this idea you might like to visit my blog post on this <http://wp.me/pEudD-38>. This blog explores the importance of brutal honesty in building credibility for individuals, companies and charities.

Principle 5: Emotions

How do we get people to *care* about our ideas? We make them *feel* something. We make them feel like it's unfair that people in Ethiopia may not know it's Christmas or that we can help *Make Poverty History*. We make them angry at the way victims of domestic violence are ignored by the legal system. (Note that it's often a feeling that creates action – the word is **e-motion**.)

Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region or nation. We seem to be hard-wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions. (Have a look at this interesting website for some background on this. <http://bit.ly/4Exv7z>.)

Sometimes the challenge is finding the best or most appropriate emotion to engage. For instance, another study quoted by the Heath Brothers explores how it's difficult to get teenagers to quit smoking by instilling in them a fear of the long-term consequences, but it's easier to get them to quit by tapping into their resentment of how deceitful the tobacco big business can be. When you share an example of great customer/donor care do you want people to feel proud of the organisation for what it did or embarrassed that you haven't always met that standard?

³ This famous movie, you may remember, involves a community where all the wives are 'perfect.' (The original version from the 70s is darker and more sinister than the remake.) But the premise is the same – nothing that seems 'perfect' can be true. And the illusion of perfection makes us uneasy. Real life is messy and we have to acknowledge that in our communications.

Think carefully about what emotion(s) you want to instil in others. This will also help you shape your sticky idea. And in this way you secure *heartshare* to complement the *headshare* you need.

Principle 6: Stories

How do we get people to remember and our act on our ideas? We tell stories. Aid workers, firefighters and soldiers naturally swap stories after an emergency situation, a fire, or a battle, and by doing so they multiply and share their experience, looking for resonance and commonality.

These stories have a very specific purpose. They become an informal system of knowledge management. After years of hearing stories, they have a richer, more complete mental catalogue of critical situations they might confront and the appropriate responses to those situations. UNICEF has hired storytellers to help improve its knowledge management. And =mc worked with MSF to create board games based around stories that captured and codified the learning that experienced staff had of working in emergency relief situations.

Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we actually encounter that situation. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.

Finally stories are a great way to celebrate your organisation's heroines and heroes – they are a great guide to culture. Think about the stories in your organisation. Who are they about? – The CEO or the frontliner? What do they celebrate? – Imagination, risk taking, user/donor care etc? Make sure your story celebrates the person and values you want to champion.

Your sticky idea should have a story as a mnemonic – remember Jim and the bath and the priest and the brick? The basic messages use these stories as memory pegs.

Principle 7: Simple (Again!)

We've repeated 'simple' and made it up to a seventh principle for two reasons. One is that *simple* is so important it's worth repeating. You should make your message as simple as possible – like the famous Picasso drawing of a bull that's only 8 lines or the Einstein formula – $e=mc^2$. Note that both of these communicators are trying to convey *complex* ideas. *Simple* is not the same as *simplistic*. A second reason for the repetition is that to fix something in the brain it's helpful to repeat it in a memorable way so by using the SUCCESS acronym you actually help make the formula itself memorable.

Sticky Success Summary

So those are the seven principles of successful sticky ideas. To summarise, here's the checklist for creating a successful idea: **a Simple Unexpected Concrete Credentialed Emotional Story – Simply told**. A clever observer will note that this sentence can be compacted into the acronym SUCCESS.

No special expertise is needed to apply these principles – it's not about being a brilliant copywriter or trained psychologist. It is about being a communicator.

But by using these principles consistently you'll achieve significant results in terms of making your messages – whether fundraising ones or those directed at your board, colleagues or volunteers more memorable and powerful.

Further help

=mc has a team of unrivalled fundraising consultants able to assist with the biggest and smallest campaigns. Between us we share experience in small and large charity work, international development, arts and culture, disability and the environment. **=mc** consultants have worked with a variety of not-for-profits on their fundraising. We're proud to have helped Oxfam, **UNICEF**, **Christian Aid**, **Greenpeace International**, **Imperial War Museum**, **MIND**, **Mama Cash**, the **NSPCC**, the **Tate Gallery** and the **British Red Cross**.

To find out how we've helped these organisations achieve their big ideas - and how we could help you - call us on +44 (0) 20 7978 1516 or visit www.managementcentre.co.uk/fundraising.

We hope you found this download useful and enjoyable.

If you want to access more downloads, visit www.managementcentre.co.uk/knowledgebase where you can search for a range of management and fundraising tools, ideas and case studies.

About =mc

The Management Centre (**=mc**) is an international management training and consultancy agency working exclusively for not-for-profit organisations worldwide. We provide help in management consultancy, fundraising consultancy and training.

To find out more about us, please visit our website at www.managementcentre.com