

# Selling Your Ideas

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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 or marketeers.

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*. We can find sticky ideas everywhere. The Brothers Heath especially are interested in key questions like: What makes urban legends so compelling? Why do some chemistry lessons work better than others? Why does virtually every culture have a set of proverbs? Why do some political ideas circulate widely while others fall short? Gladwell's book was 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. He was interested in issues like Why did Hush Puppies experience a rebirth? Why did crime rates abruptly plummet in New York City? Why did the book *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* catch on?

This section draws on both books but mostly uses the elegant formula developed by the Heath Brothers.

## Six Principles of Sticky Ideas

The Heath Brothers have come up with six principles which are outlined below from their book.

### PRINCIPLE 1: SIMPLICITY

How do we find the essential core of our ideas? A successful defence 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 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 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 only 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." Voters decided that the answer was 'no.' And we got Reagan in charge...

## **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 *Make Poverty History*. In the case

of the movie popcorn, used by the Heath brothers and discussed in the seminar, we make them feel disgusted 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 how deceitful big business can be.

## **PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES**

How do we get people to act on our ideas? We tell stories. UNICEF has hired storytellers to help improve its knowledge management. Fire-fighters 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 catalogue 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 the 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. 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. Don't most of us already have the intuition 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 challenge in how we share ideas. The challenge is a natural psychological tendency that consistently confounds our ability to create ideas using these principles. It's called the *Curse of Knowledge*. We'll also explore this in the session.

