

■ Message Mechanics



What Makes Us Notice and Remember?

How often have you seen messages that have “gone viral,” and wondered, “what it is about those messages that make people notice them and pass them on, while I can’t even get my own team to understand our company’s mission?” In “Made to Stick,” brothers Chip Heath and Dan Heath deconstruct successful messages to provide answers to this and similar questions.

The brothers arrived at their conclusions from the perspectives of their different fields of expertise: Chip Heath is a professor of organizational behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University and Dan Heath is a senior fellow at the Center for the Advancement of Social Entrepreneurship at Duke University and founder of Thinkwell, an innovative new-media textbook company. Their combined research and accumulated knowledge led them to the conclusion that ideas stay with us not because they are particularly interesting, but rather because they have been crafted according to universal principles of “stickiness,” a term coined by Malcolm Gladwell in his book, *The Tipping Point*. In *Made to Stick*, the brothers give lively, vivid examples of how the reader can apply stickiness to their own messages.

The authors emphasize that there is no automatic formula for creating a message that sticks, but their research has revealed that sticky messages are usually made up of simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotion-provoking stories. They also explain why it is so hard for message-makers to follow these simple principles. The culprit, they explain, is the “Curse of Knowledge.”

Consider this situation. You’re doing your workout in the gym when you notice a tapping sound, metal on metal. Perplexed by the sound, you look around and realize that someone on the exercise bike is listening to music through earphones and tapping out the rhythm, hitting their wedding band against the metal handlebar. You try to figure out what kind of music the cyclist is listening to—jazz? Classical? Top 40? You really can’t tell. It all just sounds like random tapping.

The Heaths describe research by Elizabeth Newton, Ph.D., which showed there was only one chance in 40 that you would be able to correctly guess the type of music playing in the tapper's head. The same research showed that the tapper would be surprised that you had such a hard time identifying the music: tappers in an experiment estimated that listeners would be able to correctly guess the song 50 percent of the time. The authors draw an analogy to messages, pointing out that once a person holds a certain amount of knowledge (music) in their head, they find it difficult to design a message that conveys the essence of their vast knowledge in just a few words. The authors refer to this as the "Curse of Knowledge." It is this curse that must be overcome in order to create sticky messages.

Anyone who has read textbooks on ways to improve communication will have come across the concepts expressed in the "SUCCESS" formula outlined in this book: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotional stories. Most message-makers know that a simple message is better, that overly abstract language has little impact, that audiences are likely to remember a message to which they have an emotional response. But the authors soar above the textbook writers because their writing is a demonstration of the very principles they are writing about.

Take, for example, their discussion of the importance of the credibility of a message source, and compare it to the discussion in the textbook, *Strategic Planning for Public Relations* by Ronald D. Smith. The textbook covers the topic of credibility in abstract terms, for example when the author states: "a source who has credibility—the power to inspire belief—is one who demonstrates the qualities of expertise, status, competence and honesty." This and other ideas in Smith's book are important lessons for message designers to learn, but the reader has to work very hard to retain the knowledge.

In contrast, the Heaths begin their chapter on credibility with a concrete story about Barry Marshal and Robin Warren, two medical researchers who discovered that bacteria cause ulcers. At the time of the discovery in the early 1980s, no one took their discovery seriously. We read about the various reasons, such as that they did not have the credentials usually held by scientists making important discoveries and that they were located in Australia, far removed from the world's top research centers. Then the authors provide a graphic description of what turned the tide of acceptance: Barry Marshal induced an ulcer in himself by drinking a concoction of highly concentrated *H. pylori*, the bacterium implicated in causing ulcers. The story demonstrates various elements required for credibility in concrete terms that are engaging and memorable.

The authors continue their discussion of credibility to more completely answer the question, "what makes people believe ideas?" Each example is nested in a story: the value of "antiauthorities" is demonstrated through the story of Pam Laffin, a smoker who had emphysema and other smoking-related complications, who became a

spokesperson for an anti-smoking campaign; we learn about the power of concrete details in criminal trials, demonstrated by a story about research done by Jonathan Shedler and Melvin Manis, researchers at the University of Michigan, which suggested that details of a story (in this example the description of a child brushing his teeth not just with any toothbrush, but with a Darth Vader toothbrush) can have a quantifiable impact on the outcome of a jury's decision; and the ingenious demonstration of statistics by the group Beyond War that used the sound of increasing numbers of BBs hitting a metal bucket to aurally demonstrate the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The stories overcome the curse of knowledge by conveying large amounts of information that impart the core message without having to list the abstract concepts in the storyteller's mind. The quality and depth of these and other stories in the book provide goldmine of memorable lessons for both those who design messages and those who are just interested in why some messages succeed where others fail.

You can find information on purchasing this book at <http://www.heathbrothers.com/buy/> (I do not receive a commission for sales).