

'Stickiness' – making your ideas powerful and memorable

Article by Bernard Ross (director of =mc) following the FINZ conference, New Zealand & IoF National Convention, UK – 2008

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 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* (Wiley 2008) co-written with my colleague Clare Segal.

We can find sticky ideas everywhere. The Heath Brothers were drawn to this area through interested 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 chemistry or geography lessons work better than others? Why does virtually every culture have a set of proverbs about birds and the benefits of short-term gain? Why do some political ideas circulate widely while others fall short?

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. He was also interested in issues like why did Hush Puppies shoes 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 eventually to become a bestseller?

And in *The Influential Fundraiser* Clare Segal and I explore how the twin sciences of psychology (*brain software*) and neurology (*brain hardware*) impact on how donors store information and ideas and how they make decisions. For example

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why do some fundraising messages – the Bolivian Priest with a brick for a mission statement, or 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.

Seven principles of sticky ideas

The Heath Brothers in their book have come up with six principles for making a message sticky. At **=mc** we've added a seventh with an additional S. The seven principles are outlined below.

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 prioritise. 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 or even tackle popular misconceptions. 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 fortyeighth history class of the year? We can engage

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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 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 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 help *Make Poverty History*. Research shows that people are more

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likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region or nation. We are hard-wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions. Sometimes the hard part is finding the right emotion to harness. 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 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. 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. UNICEF has hired storytellers to help improve its knowledge management. 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.

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 we're 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.

So those are the seven principles of successful ideas. To summarize, here's the checklist for creating a successful idea: **a Simple Unexpected Concrete Credible 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. There are no licensed 'stickologists'. 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.

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