

‘Stickiness’ – making your ideas powerful and memorable

By Bernard Ross, director of =mc

Some ideas are ‘sticky’ – that is they seem to acquire credibility quickly and spread incredibly widely very easily. For example, the story that the Great Wall of China is the only man made object visible from space was endlessly repeated all over the world after the first space missions. But if you think about it for a minute it’s obviously not true. (Many motorways are wider and should be more visible.) So interestingly successful sticky ideas don’t need to be *true*, they just need to appear *credible*.

Some of these ideas are *natural* – that is they have grown up seemingly spontaneously. Urban legends like the Great Wall of China above are a good example. But many have been *created* – consciously designed by campaigners, advertising executives, marketers, or charity fundraisers. Non-profit examples might range from Gandhi’s famous salt march or the ‘eat five pieces of fruit a day’ for health or ‘Make Poverty History.’ The question is how can we, as fundraisers, take systematic advantage of this phenomenon?

A number of social scientists and writers have explored how ideas take hold in this way – famously Malcolm Gladwell in *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 – especially when designing case statements – in the book *The Influential Fundraiser (Wiley 2008)* co-written with my colleague Clare Segal.

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 – mostly US – examples ranged from issues like why did boring *Hush Puppies* shoes suddenly become fashionable to why did crime rates abruptly plummet in New York City?

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 why do some fundraising messages make such a powerful impact on donors? In our book we mention the Bolivian Priest who literally uses a house brick for a mission, or the Sarajevan musician collecting a \$1M donation using the music of Bach as a case statement.

This brief article draws on all three books but mostly uses the elegant SUCCE(S) formula developed by the Heath Brothers to explain what they call the Velcro theory of memory.

It's worth considering initially that we don't always create memorable messages. This is what the Heaths call the Curse of Knowledge: "Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. [It] becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can't readily re-create our listeners' state of mind." So how do we overcome this curse?... By applying seven key principles.

Seven principles of sticky ideas

In their book the Heath Brothers 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 a way to make our issue simple? Even if the context is complex we need to identify the essential core message – too much info risks losing the main point. Alan Dershowitz, famous defence lawyer says, "if you argue ten points, even if each is good, when the jury get back to the deliberation room they won't remember *any*." To strip an idea down we need to ruthlessly prioritise. This is *not* the same as simply designing a short and snappy sound bite. We need to create *ideas* that are simple *and* profound. (Many proverbs – e.g. "neither a borrower nor a lender be" – are a great model. They are

core *and* snappy and, in the case of the above economic advice, possibly *profound!*)

PRINCIPLE 2: UNEXPECTEDNESS

How do we get our audience – donors, board members, supporters – to pay attention to our ideas? And, more of a challenge, how do we maintain their interest when they've heard it for the 100th time? For new audiences part of the answer is to challenge expectations – including 'popular wisdom' or misconceptions. Consider the two newspaper headlines below – one from a right wing newspaper (Daily Mail) and one from a liberal UK newspaper (Guardian). The liberal newspaper printed the right wing one *above* its own to make the point:

"Britain lets too many foreigners come in – we're a soft touch for immigrants!"

The Daily Mail

"More Britons go abroad to live and work abroad every year than come in... we're the immigrants!"

The Guardian

In this case the Guardian made a powerful liberal point by reframing the context. We can also use *surprise* to grab attention. But mere surprise doesn't last. For our idea to endure, we must generate interest and above all *curiosity*. A *question* beats a *statement* for this. For example, UNICEF's famous mailer "How can a 10 cent bag of sugar and a 10 cent bag of salt save a life?" (Answer when you open the envelope: it rehydrates after diarrhoea.)

PRINCIPLE 3: CONCRETENESS

How do we make our ideas really understandable? We need to explain them in terms of people, and the sights, sounds and feelings they have. There are way too many cookie-cutter visions, vanilla mission statements, and even look-alike programmes. Worse still they are often full of NGO jargon to the point of being meaningless.

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Here's a 100% real example from a wonderful charity sadly talking NGO jargon to donors about helping children: "[We need money for] Provision of paediatric treatment to children (provide ARV and/or cotrimoxazole or both to at least 80% of children in need by 2010)."

We think that means "we need you help ensure 4 out of 5 children get the daily medicine they need to stop them developing AIDS." That's concrete!

Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images – looking out of the spacecraft window at the great wall, a priest holding a brick instead of a book – because our brains are wired to remember sensory data. (Back to proverbs where 'abstract' truths are coded 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 arrive powerfully to the audience.

PRINCIPLE 4: CREDIBILITY

How do we make people *believe* our ideas? When the health minister of your country declares smoking is bad for you most people believe this. After all, it's the *minister* and she's backed by lots of *scientific data*. But in most day-to-day situations we don't enjoy this status or authority. Sticky ideas need to have their own credentials embedded. We may even need to let people test our ideas for themselves – a "try before you buy" guarantee for ideas.

When we're trying to build a case for something, many of us try to use data or numbers. But this may be the wrong approach. The Heath Brothers quote a famous example: "In the only U.S. presidential debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Reagan could have cited statistics indicating the weakness 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.' The result, as you know, was we got Reagan in charge in the USA ...

What's your killer self-test?

PRINCIPLE 5: EMOTIONS

How do we get people to *care* about our ideas? We want them to *feel* something. We may make them feel something odd – like it's *unfair* that people in Ethiopia don't know it's Christmas (Remember the UK charity pop song?) – or inspiring e.g. that we can help *Make Poverty History*. But all our charity research shows that people are more likely to make a gift to a single needy individual – e.g. ActionAid's adopt-a-child campaign versus an abstract but maybe more accurate "help this impoverished region." As Per Stenbeck, the legendary ex-CEO of Resource Alliance, used to say, "*people give to people not causes.*"

Sometimes it's hard to find the right emotion to harness. For instance, another study quoted by the Heath Brothers explores how it is difficult to get teenagers to quit smoking by creating a fear of the dreadful health consequences. The researchers found it's easier to get them to quit by tapping into their resentment of how deceitful big business can be – hiding the truth about tobacco for so long.

PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES

How do we get people to connect to and relay our ideas? We offer shareable stories. Some INGO emergency response staff – like Médecins Sans Frontières – make a point of swapping stories after a mission, and by doing so they share experience and wisdom. Through stories, they have a richer catalogue of situations they might confront in the future and the appropriate responses to those situations. Research shows that mentally rehearsing a possible situation helps us perform better when we actually encounter it – like a kind of mental flight simulator.

Building on this thinking, UNICEF has also hired storytellers to help improve its fundraising effectiveness. At a recent conference in Prague almost 400 staff participated in a storytelling session – learning to make their message memorable.

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 were trying to convey a *complex* idea. *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.

Summary

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*. An observant reader will note that this sentence can be expressed as the acronym SUCCESS. 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.

About this download

This download is one of a series based on the book *The Influential Fundraiser* by Bernard Ross and Clare Segal, directors of =mc. To find out more about the book or to secure more downloads visit: www.theinfluentialfundraiser.com

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