

# Principles of Stickiness

Based on the research of Chip and Dan Heath and their book, "Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die." By examining hundreds of naturally successful messages – from urban legends, wives-tales, and proverbs, to advertising slogans, conspiracy theories, and corporate mottos – the Heath brothers discovered a handful of characteristics that these durable stories shared. They have distilled these into the Principles of Stickiness.

## The "Greasy Food" Strategy: How to spell SUCCESS

Do you know what 37 grams of fat looks like? What if you heard that a medium-sized bag of buttered popcorn contained more artery-clogging saturated fat than a bacon-and-eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and fries, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings – *combined*? Thirty-seven grams of saturated fat might not mean much. But the image of three greasy meals, in a 1990s ad campaign, sparked a popcorn boycott in movie theaters from coast to coast.

### Why did it work? The message illustrates all of the Principles of Stickiness:

- (S) **simple** - an uncomplicated comparison;
- (U) **unexpected** – a surprising departure from nutrition facts in percentages and grams;
- (C) **concrete** – a vivid picture jumps to mind;
- (C) **credible** – it's factual without too many numbers;
- (E) **emotional** – we're disgusted, we don't identify ourselves as binge eaters; and
- (S) **a good story** – the kind we could easily recount at a cocktail party.
- (S) **stickiness**

These principles are easy to remember because together, their initials conveniently make the acronym **SUCCESS**.

## The Details: Dan and Chip Heath's Principles of Stickiness

### 1. Simplicity:

Strong messages strip ideas down to their core, not into sound bites but into proverbs, both simple and profound. A simple message is like a proverb or "The Golden Rule," time-tested cultural expressions of morality or ethics conveyed in the most essential terms.

#### Tips:

- Determine the single most important thing ("If you say three things, you don't say anything.")
- Don't bury the lead.

- Tap into existing schemas or analogies that evoke familiar concepts (the fatty foods schema, for example).

## 2. Unexpectedness:

Violating expectations grabs people's attention. When we open gaps in people's knowledge, we can be ready to fill them in with important, new information or new perspectives. JFK did this when he announced that the US would put a man on the moon within the decade.

### Tips:

- Common sense is the enemy of sticky messages – if people think they already "get it," they pay less attention.
- Get attention with surprise. Figure out what is counterintuitive about the message (all that fat packed in a bag of popcorn!?).
- Hold attention with interest.
- Avoid gimmicks.
- Present numbers or statistics in surprising ways, making them less abstract.

## 3. Concreteness:

Our brains are hardwired to remember visual or sensory information much better than abstract concepts. The most memorable messages are expressed in terms of vivid pictures, analogies, and human actions. For example, real images of the ravages of war are far more stirring than dry statistics about the numbers of nameless soldiers or citizens who've been killed or displaced. Short of images, supplying the real names of individuals killed has a very different effect than numbers alone. Similarly, footage of icebergs breaking apart in Al Gore's film, *An Inconvenient Truth*, underscored the reality of global warming in a way that charts and graphs cannot.

### Tips:

- Chip Heath calls it the "Velcro" theory of memory: the more hooks in your idea, the more chances to stick.
- Find your inner Aesop: Write with the concreteness of a fable.
- Make abstraction (and numbers) concrete with imagery (think of the popcorn example).
- Set the scene. Provide a concrete context.
- Put people in the story.

## 4. Credibility:

Sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials – not necessarily hard facts or numbers – but triggers that connect your story to audiences' real life experiences. For example, instead of citing specific economic statistics, Ronald Reagan asked Americans in a televised presidential debate, "are you better off than you were 4 years ago?" The "evidence" was alive in each audience member's mind. Credibility was built into the message.

### Tips:

- Show, don't tell: Use convincing details.
- Invite audiences to try it out or "see for themselves."

- Prove it by showing examples and case studies where the concept or solution is realized. Show that your idea is viable because it's worked elsewhere.

## 5. Emotions:

If you want people to care, make them feel something. They might forget what you said or what they read, but they'll remember exactly how you made them feel. They'll remember if they were filled with pride or if they cried, laughed, or shuddered. Most of us feel our emotions stirred when we hear even a very short clip of a speech by Martin Luther King, Jr. We remember how the full speech made us feel – we don't need to hear the words again to experience the emotion.

### Tips:

- Connect to people's sense of identity – make it matter to them.
- Try not to overwhelm. People shut down if a problem appears too big to surmount. Studies find that one starving child elicits more sympathy than millions starving in an epidemic.
- Help people imagine themselves acting on their convictions or living in a better world. Projecting a positive future motivates behavior.
- Engaging the individual is key, but remember that "group interest" – the community or worldview we identify with – is often a better predictor of political opinions than self interest.

## 6. Stories:

A story format combines all these principles and opens minds to new information. Stories are easy to retell – far easier than facts or statistics without context. If they're compelling – *concrete, credible, emotional, simple, and unexpected* – our stories will be more likely to spread by themselves.

### Tips:

- Spark people's imagination – invite them to picture themselves in a story or acting on a conviction.
- Think of the stories you tell at the water-cooler or the dinner table. Retelling gives people a sense of ownership and engagement.
- Look for three key plots found in inspiring stories: challenge (overcoming obstacles); connection (getting along or reconnecting with people); and creativity (encouraging a new way of thinking or changing perspective).
- Tell a "springboard story": a story that helps people see how an existing problem can change.
- Stories are best when they are **simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotional. SUCCESS**

## 7. Stickiness...