

Made to Stick Summary

By Chip Heath

Have you ever stopped to wonder why some products sell better than others? Most often than not, it all comes down to packaging. So why should our ideas be any different?

The central question of *Made to Stick* is why some ideas gain traction, and others fall by the wayside? In the world of ideas, while substance matters, spin and presentation are absolutely critical. Ideas stick if we harness the power of narrative and storytelling.

We often see this in the world of conspiracy theories. Why is it that solid fact-based information has a hard time gaining momentum, yet ridiculous conspiracy stories keep circulating, with no resources whatsoever to support them? It's because they're compelling narratives. And narratives are a lot more memorable than complex jargon?

Let's check this out by comparing a story with jargon. So settle in for storytime.

A guy goes into a bar in an unfamiliar city, and orders a drink. He's then approached by an attractive woman who asks him if he'd like another. This is the last thing that he remembers, until he wakes up the following morning in a bathtub full of ice. He has a wound in his back with a tube sticking out. When he calls emergency services, and explains what has happened, the operator says, 'Sir, don't panic, but one of your kidneys has been harvested.'

Now let's look at jargon, through the following quote. 'Comprehensive community-building naturally lends itself to a return-on-investment rationale that can be modeled drawing on existing practice...'

It's an extreme comparison, because the kidney harvesting story is very compelling. However, between the kidney heist story, and the jargon, which is the easier to re-tell? Most of us could remember the details of the story, and almost none of us would remember the jargon-laden quotation. So, what does this tell us?

Dan Heath is an educational publisher, who has studied what makes teachers effective. His brother Chip, is a social science professor at Stanford. Both men were impressed by the concept of "stickiness," which Malcolm Gladwell explained in his book, *The Tipping Point*. The premise of stickiness is finding out why some ideas stick in the mind, while others don't.

Made to Stick lays out the most important characteristics of "stickiness," and explores what makes ideas "stick" in our minds. Furthermore, it looks at how we can design our communication so that people notice, care, and act on what we tell them. So, If you want your ideas to be effectively understood, remembered, and passed on, then this is the book for you. We'll briefly explore the "curse of knowledge" and how to overcome it using strategies provided by our authors. According to our authors' criteria, we'll unpack the art of "successful communication" using the mnemonic: "SUCCES."

But First, a Little Game

Next time you're with a friend, try playing the "tapper and listeners

game." The idea of the game is that without telling your friend the name of the song, tap out the rhythm and see if they can guess it. You might want to try it with a famous tune like "Happy Birthday," and see how easy your friend finds it. You'll probably be surprised that this game isn't as simple and easy as it seems, and that you struggle to guess many well-known songs, despite your best attempts.

In 1990, psychologist Elizabeth Newton played this game with students at Stanford University. She asked a person to tap out a song's rhythm and have another try decipher it. The listener almost always failed to identify the song. Only one in *forty* students could guess the song that the tapper was tapping. Interestingly, the tappers predicted that at least half the people listening would guess the song they were tapping. Because the tappers have the song playing in their heads, they naturally expect people to understand what they're trying to communicate. But of course, the person hearing the taps can't hear the song inside the other person's head, and therefore have no idea of what the taps mean.

This single experiment illustrates what's called "the curse of knowledge."

The curse of knowledge is a cognitive bias that occurs when we communicate with others, and assume they have the background knowledge to understand us. It's also known as "the curse of expertise." When we have insider information that others don't possess, it means we've already framed our idea, understood its relevance, and then communicate with the assumption that our audience has the same understanding we have. This can make our communication either confusing or boring.

The more we know about a subject, the more we're caught in the details, stats, facts, and abstracts, often forgetting the *essence* of what we're

trying to communicate. Therefore, we struggle to communicate our ideas in a way that makes them "stick" in others' minds.

To make our ideas sticky, we need to adhere to three principles. Firstly our ideas must be understood, next we must find a way to make them memorable, and finally, people should be eager to pass them on. Successful communication is simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and often involves a story. Our authors looked to see what makes for successful communication and found that the stories, adverts, and ideas that spread like wildfire, generally share six recognizable characteristics. To help make these principals stick, of course, our authors use the mnemonic: *SUCCES*.

Let's briefly unpack this.

S is for Simple

We're often told to "keep it simple." The goal here is to cut our idea down to a straightforward statement. We should find the core of the concept behind the idea, and state that. But simply.

It can be tempting to want to go into great detail when we explain an idea, but when it comes to ideas that stick, too much detail can be counterproductive. What we communicate must be simple enough for others to understand and remember.

However, don't mistake simple for easy. It's quite an art to encapsulate the core of any idea in just a few words without misleading an audience, or changing the meaning behind the message we're trying to convey. Journalists are trained to master this skill and develop attention-grabbing

headlines that capture an article's gist in just a few words. Our authors encourage us to borrow from the best in the business. Try to use the "inverted pyramid" technique from journalism. The inverted pyramid is how journalists structure an article by putting the most important points first, then tailoring the article, then adding the finer details. This forces prioritization and helps simplify and clarify our idea before we dive into detail.

Consider this simple slogan: Southwest Airlines is "THE low-cost airline." These four words serve two purposes; they make running the airline easier and help customers on board with what to expect if they choose to fly with Southwest. Herb Kelleher, the airline co-founder, said, 'Every decision involves meeting this concrete and simple goal.' For example, deciding whether to offer dinner on flights, the question always reverts to: will that help Southwest remain "THE low-cost airline?" Their main concern isn't passenger comfort; it's keeping costs low. So that's a 'no' on the dinner front. For customers, this slogan is catchy and easy to understand and remember. A complex breakdown of their prices compared to other airlines would be quickly forgotten and fail to make an impression.

U is for Unexpected

The first requirement of effective communication is *getting* attention; the second is *keeping* it. We can learn to capture people's attention with the element of surprise and using "curiosity gaps."

Imagine the following scenario. You're on a plane, and the flight attendant is giving the usual pre-flight safety ramble. If you're not a first-time flyer, you've heard the script before, and so it's likely that you're not paying full attention when it comes to the technicalities of putting on an oxygen

mask. But what if, mid-speech, the attendant suddenly goes off script and says something completely unexpected and unrelated? Like, 'While there may be fifty ways to leave your lover, there's only one way off this plane.' Our attention is likely to be captured immediately.

When confronted with the element of surprise, our brain jolts out of autopilot mode and into manual control, and this unexpected shift receives our full attention.

To capture and hold attention, we can also use "curiosity gaps." Do you like reading detective novels or watching crime films that keep you guessing right up until the very end? The success of these thrillers is that they keep us guessing; they play to our insatiable need to fill the curiosity gap. Curiosity is our intellectual need to answer questions and close gaps.

Local television news uses this technique well. A presenter might lead with, 'There's a new drug sweeping the teenage community, and it may be in your medicine cabinet! The story after these adverts.' When we present our idea, the key is to open gaps first, then work to close them; rather than give in to the tendency to give facts first.

As the Heath brothers say, 'Before a message can stick, the audience has to want it.'

C is for Concrete

Concrete ideas stick.

For instance, "bicycle" and "avocados" are easier to visualize and

remember than abstract terms like "justice" and "personality." The problem is, the more we know about a subject, the more abstract we tend to think and express ourselves. The curse of knowledge raises its head, and we use unnecessary jargon, or conceptual explanations to get our point across.

Consider the following fact: Did you know that a bag of movie popcorn prepared in coconut oil contains 20g of saturated fat? This might strike you as unhealthy, but is this statement enough to inspire you to switch over to a healthier packet of popcorn instead? Probably not. But did you know, 'A medium-sized butter popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theatre contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon-and-eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings – combined?' It's the same fact; it's just been presented in concrete and visual terms. American health organizations used the latter, more concrete statement to raise awareness about the health risk of consuming popcorn this way. Unsurprisingly, their marketing worked. Eventually, coconut oil was replaced with healthier alternatives in American cinema chains.

Factual statements can be too bland, abstract, and academic to stick in people's minds. But concrete explanations are more likely to stick and inspire behavioral change. Vivid, sensory descriptions make it easier for our audience to understand, remember and pass on our ideas.

C is for Credible

Did you know that bacteria cause ulcers? In the 1980s, a pair of medical researchers made the amazing discovery that bacteria cause ulcers. The only problem was that no one believed them. They lacked "credibility." They didn't come from a well known medical research establishment,

neither of their credentials was seen as strong enough, and one researcher wasn't yet a qualified doctor. It took a decade before their research was accepted, for which they were eventually awarded the Nobel prize.

If what we say doesn't sound true, and we don't have the authority to back it up, it can easily be dismissed. However, no need for a stress ulcer; there are several ways to sound credible and persuade people to shift their beliefs, even if we don't have the authority to back what we say. There are three techniques: use an anti-authority, and draw on statistics and testable credentials. Let's quickly run through each.

We don't need the authorities to tell us that smoking is bad for us. An anti-smoking campaign featured a frail, elderly looking woman facing her second lung transplant. The shocking part is that she was only in her late twenties. She had been smoking since she was ten years old, and her health had suffered as a result. Her appearance alone gave credibility to the fact that smoking isn't good for one.

Statistics can be powerful credit boosters. However, our authors warn, while facts and figures can be used to illustrate a point, make sure they're used in such a way that they paint a clear, concrete picture for your audience. For example, author Stephen Covey emphasizes teamwork in his writing. He tried using dry statistics like, 'Only 37% of employees had a clear idea of the company's mission.' However, he realized that he got more impact by speaking concretely, so he rephrased his idea using a soccer analogy. 'If the soccer team had the same makeup, only four out of eleven would know where the goal was.' By using this analogy, his idea meant the same thing to everyone in the audience.

The third technique is to use testable credentials. In 1984, Wendy's fast-food chain came up with the commercial catchphrase, 'Where's the Beef?' The advert suggested that the hamburgers at Wendy's were larger than their competitors, and that the other burger chains had more "bun than burger." Consumers tested this provoking question and verified it for themselves, making the campaign a huge success. Personal experience is a powerful way to shift beliefs.

E is for Emotional

To raise funds to combat poverty in Africa, the Heath brothers say there are two approaches we could use. We could present the statistics that show that millions of African children lose their lives daily due to starvation, or we could show a picture of a child in need of help. Facts and figures appeal to our analytical mind, and we might consider donating money to an important cause. But researchers found that we don't tend to give to "African poverty," whereas we are likely to sponsor a specific child. A photo of a child in need is just as credible as statistics, but it appeals to our emotional side. Emotions are powerful conveyors of the importance of an idea. People take action because they feel moved to act. Hence, we see a human being suffering and feel inspired to help.

Mother Teresa famously said, 'If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will.' The message is that if you want people to take action, think about how to bypass dry statistics and evoke emotion instead.

S is for Story

We're a storytelling species. Stories evoke emotion and also inspire action.

The fast-food chain, Subway, profited substantially from the true story of Jared Fogle. Jared struggled with being overweight. But Subway came to the rescue. He tried a sandwich from them and liked it, so he developed his own "Subway diet." He ate two sandwiches a day, and after three months, he dropped almost 100 pounds. The story caught Subway's marketing team's attention, and true to the "succes formula," they turned it into one of their most successful advertising campaigns.

Subway marketed an unexpected yet straightforward story: fast food isn't healthy and can be the culprit of weight gain. The story is concrete and credible, relying on a personal anecdote. It's also emotional because it's a tale about an individual who overcame personal weight-related issues.

So, food for thought: a catchy slogan might be useful to gain attention, but nothing beats the power of a good narrative.

In Conclusion

In this surprisingly funny read, Chip and Dan Heath teach us why some ideas catch on, and why others don't. They unpack the anatomy of how ideas stick, and how to make them even stickier. Like a good diet, this book tells you how to slim your ideas down. Simplicity is the key, and "succes" is the acronym that can help us to make our ideas stick, leaving a memory that others can act on or share, *long* after we have presented them.

So, next time you want to present an idea, think of it as a potential

bestseller. Give it a simple title, develop an unexpected twist, use concrete and credible examples, draw on emotions, and make it the most captivating story you can tell. And hopefully soon, everyone will be talking about it.