Book Discussion: Made to Stick

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# Introduction

Imagine: a teacher stands in front of a classroom filled with bored, listless students. As he repeatedly fills the board and erases it, fills the board and erases it, he drones out a list of names and dates, formulae and proofs, theories and evidence. His students drop one by one into a dazed stupor, drool puddling beneath their vacant faces, necks craning to catch quick glimpses of the clock, thumbs twiddling against phonepads beneath their desks. Neither teacher nor students are inspired; six months later, neither will remember what was said or done that day or, indeed, any day.

Now imagine: A period later, a different teacher stands in front of a different group of students teaching her section of the same class. As she goes over the same material from the same book, her students buzz with excitement, falling over themselves to answer every question she poses to the class, their gazes riveted tightly to hers as she spins out ever-more-fascinating details. Years later, her students remember vividly the material from her class, and look back at their semester together as a crucial turning point in their lives.

Same material, same subject, very different outcomes. What is it that makes some teachers — along with some politicians, pundits, authors, scientists, novelists, corporate executives, advertisers, designers, engineers, and others — able to totally capture their audience’s attention while others communicate the same ideas an get ignored? What combination of strong ideas and strong presentation is necessary to get through to people, to be persuasive, memorable, and influential? Why do some ideas stick in the public’s consciousness while others — as good or even better — fade without a trace? What makes ideas “sticky” and how can we create “stickiness” in our own communications?

These are the questions that Chip Heath and Dan Heath set out to answer in their new book *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (Random House, 2007). Drawing on their backgrounds and research as a Stanford business professor and an educational publisher, the Brothers Heath explore the mechanics and psychology of the spread of ideas ranging from ad slogans to urban legends to political campaigns. What they find and relate to their readers is a handful (six, to be exact) of principles that characterize nearly all of the good ideas that “stick” — and whose absence plagues the ones that don’t.

## What are Sticky Ideas?

The world is full of ideas. Some are small: putting googly-eyes on a rock and selling it as a no-maintenance pet, for instance. Some are huge: consider the Golden Rule, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. Most are somewhere in between: a better way to slice bread, transport data over phone lines, get to work, or catch mice. History is littered with good ideas that failed to catch on, as well as bad ideas that, alas, didn’t.

The ones that stay, that are passed from person to person and from generation to generation are the sticky ones. They’re not necessarily the best ideas, or even the right ones — people have been telling each other that Jews killed Christian children and cooked their blood into Passover matzoh since the Middle Ages, a pretty good run for an idea without a scrap of evidence outside of the fevered imaginations of the ignorant. The ideas that stick are the ones, good or bad, right or wrong, that sink hooks into people’s imaginations and stay there.

## What Makes Ideas Stick

What makes it hard to communicate our ideas in ways that make them sticky? The most important factor in the failure of ideas to stick is what the Heaths call “the Curse of Knowledge”, the difficulty we have as knowledgeable people imagining what it’s like for people who do not share our knowledge. I run into this a lot as a teacher and as a step-parent, when it occurs to me that even the simplest, most common-sense ideas have to be learned at some point — we have to learn even the most basic stuff, like “fire bad” and “mommy good”. Parents, whose job is essentially to make the whole of our culture’s knowledge and wisdom stick in their children’s heads, face this repeatedly, and often give up — which is why the number one reason most parents can give for why things have to be done a certain way is “because mommy (or daddy) said so”.

Overcoming the Curse of Knowledge means keeping a few basic principles at the front of our minds as we shape our communications. Chip and Dan Heath offer us six qualities that make ideas sticky, all wrapped up in a clever (if a bit hokey) acronym: ***Simple Unexpected Concrete Credible Emotional Stories*** (SUCCESs).

* **Simple:** Simplicity is achieved when an idea is stripped down to its core, to the most essential elements that make it work. Perhaps the simplest of all sticky ideas is Einstein’s E=MC2, which renders the complexity of the material universe and the mystery of relativity in five letters, numbers, and symbols. Simple does not have to mean short (but it helps); what is important is that the single most important thing be highlighted.
* **Unexpected:** The best ideas represent a break from the everyday, the ordinary, the status quo. They become sticky when they interject themselves into our established patterns, forcing us to sit up and take notice. Once our attention is grabbed, sticky ideas refuse to let go, holding our interest by creating in us a need to discover the outcome, to see how things work. Think of a mystery novel that simply refuses to leave our hands until the last page is turned and our curiosity fulfilled.
* **Concrete:** Abstraction is the enemy of stickiness. Sticky ideas don’t promise better nourishment for untold millions, they put a chicken in every pot, a steak dinner on the table of Tom Everyman, or rice into the bowl of the wide-eyed African child whose name and life history are sent to you with a letter and photograph. Some of the stickiest ideas are fables, myths, and legends — the fox and the (sour) grapes, Moses and the golden calf, Robin Hood, and the friend of your friend’s uncle who found a lump on the back of his neck and one day it opened up and a million baby spiders crawled out. The piling on of specific details — who, what, where, when, why, in journalism-speak — makes ideas become realities and allows us to directly relate to them. They also make ideas more memorable — every fable has a patronizing moral attached to it, but it’s the *image* of the fox leaping to reach the sweet, ripe grapes that sticks with us.
* **Credible:** Sticky ideas give us a reason to believe they’re true (even when they’re not). Some of us are just naturally credible — a physicist explaining the nature of the atom, for instance, or the Secretary of Education describing a new testing policy. The rest of us must construct our ideas so that they defend themselves. Statistics are useful, though they suffer from a lack of concreteness; sticky ideas make statistics accessible, bringing them too a human scale that makes their significance clear. Another source of credibility is personal experience, ideas that are clear to anyone who has come across a situation before. Comedians do this all the time, from Jerry Seinfeld’s “did you ever notice…” (of course you have!) to Chris Rock’s ruminations on the differences between black and white people.
* **Emotional:** Give your audience a reason to care about your idea. Sticky ideas resonate with us on a level below our immediate consciousness — we can see this in stark clarity with the recent iPhone launch, where thousands stood in line for a product (a little bundle of ideas) that promised to make them cooler, more efficient, better informed, and more capable of dealing with whatever their lives threw at them. Sticky ideas appeal to our wishes, desires, and hopes, and interlock with our image of ourselves.
* **Stories:** Why do we go to the trouble of telling fables and myths when we could just as easily tell people the moral? Beware of envy. Don’t worship false idols. Don’t go camping with your college buddies in the woods where that guy with the hockey mask killed those kids last summer. Beside satisfying a number of the other principles of stickiness — offering surprises, concrete details, and emotional resonance — stories act as simulation chambers, allowing us to come to their morals on our own terms. Stories are like the kid who learns that fire hurts by sticking his hand in the burner, only instead of sticking our hands in the burner, we experience somebody else doing so. In addition, stories provide us with a surplus of meaning, allowing us to extend ideas beyond their original domains — which only increases their stickiness.

Over the next few weeks, I will revisit each of these principles, one at a time, to help show how they work and what they do. As far as I’m concerned, *Made to Stick* is essential reading for anyone who deals with ideas — marketers and business leaders, of course, but also teachers, knowledge workers, designers, parents, clergy, copy writers, journalists, activists, authors, and so on. If taken seriously, the ideas in *Made to Stick* will have as big an effect on readers as David Allen’s *Getting Things Done* has — it’s that powerful (and, like Allen’s book, told in a simple, homey voice that brings you along for the ride instead of preaching at you).

# Sticky Ideas Workshop (Part 1): Simple

Just Do It.” Those words make up perhaps the stickiest marketing slogan of the past couple decades. In three words, only eight letters, Nike manages to say everything they want you to think, feel, believe about their brand. Three words to sum up the competitive edge Nike shoes and sports equipment promises, the can-do attitude that Americans so strongly believe, the strength, control, and optimism that Nike relies on to sell shoes.

“Just do it” is, in a word, simple. It’s everything Nike is (or wants us to think it is) boiled down to its absolute essence. Certainly Nike could rattle off a dozen reasons its shoes are superior to its competitors (and surely its competitors could rattle off the same number of reasons that they’re superior to Nike) but they don’t. “Just do it” speaks for itself.

## Keep It Simple, Stupid

In Chip and Dan Heath’s Made to Stick (”M2S” hereafter), simplicity is the first principle of stickiness. Most of us shy away from simplicity — simple is seen as less than, inferior, dumb. Simple is seen as the opposite of complex (better, more, superior, smart), when the reality couldn’t be more different.

**Simple is not the opposite of complex.** Consider the example I gave in my introduction to M2S, Einstein’s formula E=MC2, which wrestles the vastness and mystery of the universe into a bite-size slogan that practically everyone knows (even if few understand it). Einsteinian relativity certainly doesn’t lack for complexity, yet it can be grasped, at least in part, in the simplicity of an elegant mathematical formula.

**Simple is opposed to not complexity but complication, the “clutter” that stands between us and an idea.** Think of the average person at the camera counter at Best Buy — each camera sits above a card listing specifications like shutter delay time, built-in memory, megapixels, the size of the CCD, and the f-stop range of the lens. Most of which means nothing to the average consumer; all they want to know is which camera is the best for them. Standing there, assailed by facts and figures — even if we allow that the specs are accurate — they literally have no idea.

What is wanted is someone to cut through the clutter and say “this is the camera that’s right for you”, and if you’re a communicator (whether you write, lecture, give presentation, podcast, produce commercials, or whatever) **you could do worse than setting as your goal to be the one who sweeps the choices aside and says “this is the one you want”**.

## Eliminate Choices

In today’s relentlessly Darwinian free market philosophy, choice is supposed to be the best thing since freeze-dried ice cream. But **your job as a communicator is not to celebrate the free market, it’s to inspire action in your audience** — to get them to do what you want, whether that’s buying your product, voting for your candidate, funding your proposal, or accepting you into a graduate program.

In M2S, the Heath’s discuss a research program studying the psychology of choices in college students. One group of students were told that a prominent speaker whose work they’re interested in would be on campus that night, and asked whether they would prefer to see the presentation or stay in and study. As you can expect, a large percentage of students chose to see the speaker. Another group was told the same thing, but they were also told that there was a foreign film they’d wanted to see showing in the campus theater at the same time as the presentation. In this group, something odd happened — the largest group of students chose to go neither to the presentation nor to the foreign film; the majority chose to stay in and study!

This study demonstrates something psychologists call “decision paralysis”. As it happens, **our brains simply don’t handle choice all that well**. Given a choice between two equally good options, we seize up, riddled with anxiety over making the wrong choice or, in choosing, giving up an opportunity, so we retreat to the tried and true.

So to make an idea sticky, we have to eliminate competing choices, to strip our ideas down to the core. There may be ten good reasons why someone should vote for you, buy from you, or promote you, but nobody can hold ten thoughts, even ten good thoughts, in their mind at once. **Instead of offering the ten good reasons to do something, you offer the one best reason.**

## Communicating the Core?

Sticky ideas are more than just the pared-down essence of more complex ideas, though. **Finding the core of your message is the first step; figuring out how to get it across is the next.** Ideas need to be more than just good, or even great, they need to resonate with your audience, to hit ‘em where it hurts.

One way to do this is to take advantage of the ideas that your audience is already carrying around with them. Returning yet again to Einstein (who apparently knew what he was doing!), when Einstein wanted to explain what it meant that motion is relative, he turned to an experience that everyone of his generation would have been familiar with: riding on a train. Imagine, he said, someone walking backwards on a moving train at the same speed the train was moving forward; to the observer beside the tracks, it would look as if he were not moving at all, while to an observer on the train. it would appear he was moving quite fast indeed. Relativity, Einstein assured us, was like that.

The use of analogy relates something we have never experienced to something we are already familiar with, making it that much easier to understand and accept. If we’re really good at it, we can even tap into all the positive feelings people hold for the thing we’re using to explain our idea. The Heaths highlight a particularly good example of this, done by people who are especially talented at manipulating feelings: the Hollywood high concept pitch.

As you can imagine, most Hollywood people are busy, busy, busy — and have to wade through a lot of crap to find the handful of movies worth spending money to make and distribute (consider that — the movies in the cineplex right now are what was left after the worst stuff was thrown out). So **Hollywood has developed a kind of shorthand for pitching movies, the high concept, which sums up the proposed movie by comparing it to movies everyone wishes they had made.** Speed’s high concept is well-known: Die Hard on bus. Everyone wants to produce a movie as successful as Die Hard, so this pitch appeals directly to the primal urges that drive Hollywood filmmakers.

## Guided by the Core

**When ideas are presented simply enough, they become guides to further action.** The Heaths call this “generative analogy”, a decidedly un-sticky phrase, which simply means that the ideas tell us what to do. They use the example of Disney’s park employees, who are referred to as “cast members”; when they’re working, they’re “onstage”. By comparing employees to the cast of a theatrical production, Disney is providing them with a model for their actions that guides them even when no explicit rule or script tells them what to do. Should you scream at a kid who’s being rude? Would an actor stop in mid-scene to chastise a rude child in the audience? Then you’d better grin and bear it, Disney boy!

Compare the associations and meanings wrapped up in the idea of “cast members” with the kind of label your name-tag might have borne at your first job: maybe you were something like “customer relations associate”. Maybe you don’t remember — most of them aren’t too sticky. How does a customer relations associate act when someone is rude to them? Can a customer relations associate take her break in front of the store? (”Cast members” know the answer — absolutely not. You wouldn’t step off-stage and have a seat in the audience, would you?)

# Sticky Ideas Workshop (Part 2): Unexpected

He was dead the whole time! Darth Vader is Luke’s father! She’s his sister and his daughter!

The endings of movies like Sixth Sense, The Empire Strikes Back, and Chinatown — and the stories that lead up to them – stick with us for years and even decades because they trigger a deep psychological reflex: surprise. They come at us out of nowhere (seemingly – repeat viewings tend to reveal dozens of clues) and literally force us to sit up and take notice.

Psychologists see surprise as something akin to the “fight or flight” reflex. **The typical expression associated with surprise – rigid body and widened eyes – signals the mind’s desire for more information.** We stop still and take it all in.

## Breaking Patterns

In order to be truly unexpected, an idea has to break the preconceived notions and routines that we live our lives by. Trivial changes go unnoticed or, when noted, quickly forgotten. **In order to evoke surprise, an idea has to interrupt our established ways of acting or thinking** – as the surprise endings of the movies listed above force us to reconsider the meaning of the whole movie. Sixth Sense is a movie about a psychologist’s relationship with a child, up until the very end, when it… isn’t.  
  
**Unexpected ideas, then, demand some action from their recipients**; they ask us to change our view of the world, or at least some part of it. There is, of course, a danger here – ideas that should be surprising become expected when overused. 9/11 was truly unexpected – and the events of that day will stick with us for a long time. But now that we’ve been on heightened security alert for going on six years, does it surprise anyone to find that the threat level for US flights as I write this is “Orange: High Risk of Terrorist Attacks”? There is no longer any information contained in that statement – it’s always orange. What should be a sticky idea indeed has instead become merely the status quo, the expected.

## Hook ‘Em and Reel ‘Em In

Surprise helps make ideas sticky in two ways. First, it gets our attention – **we notice the unexpected in a way we don’t notice the expected**. Think of your drive home from work: how many times have you arrived home with almost no recollection of anything you saw on the way? Can you remember what color the car in front of you was? But if a three-car pileup or high speed pursuit should happen to take place, I’ll bet you have something to talk about when you get home!

Second, surprise keeps us engaged. **Once we notice something unexpected, we experience a powerful urge to understand it, to integrate it into what we already know.** The Heath’s call this “The Gap Theory of Curiosity”, drawing on the work of behavioral economist (didn’t know there were behavioral economists, did you? Surprise!) George Loewenstein, who holds that **gaps in our knowledge, once exposed, cause us discomfort and pain**.

We’ve all directly experienced this, of course – I remember well the agony of waiting three whole years to find out if Darth Vader was really Luke’s father. Mystery novels, movie trilogies, serial fiction, and potboilers rely on this need to keep us coming back or turning the pages. The new Harry Potter novel is approximately a million pages long, but you just keep turning and turning, page after page, chapter after chapter, all in a quest to find out “what happens next?”

## Using Surprise

Knowing how people react when surprised can help us make our ideas stickier. Knowing that people will pursue a piece of information once it gets their attention, we can **“prime the gap” by introducing a surprising fact and promising an explanation**. Your local evening news does this all the time, with their teaser commercials during prime time. “Is something in your cabinets killing you? Find out at 11!”

Priming the gap doesn’t have to be sleazy, though. Imagine a teacher telling their students something surprising to get and keep their attention through the class period. TV news spots are sleazy not because they use surprise, but because they use it in the service of the trivial (if it were really important, what moral right in the world would they have to withhold it? Image “Are terrorists attacking our town right this moment? Find out at 11!”) They trigger our need to know – if Loewenstein is right, they actually intentionally cause us pain – in the service of getting us to sit through a bunch of commercials before finally paying off with a useless, stupid piece that tells us absolutely nothing.

## Simply Unexpected

The power of the Heath’s Made to Stick is how the six principles of stickiness interact with each other. No idea need satisfy all six principles, but the more the better, and **when two or more principles come together in one idea, they reinforce each other, multiplying the stickiness factor**.

Consider, yet again, Einstein’s famous formula. I said [last week](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-1-simple.html) that the simplicity of Einstein’s formula, summing up one of the great mysteries of the world in 5 symbols E=MC2, made it sticky. But it also made it unexpected – who would have thought that the nature of mass and energy could be summed up so simply? Its simplicity itself was surprising, energizing decades of research in an attempt to prove Einstein was either right or wrong – and then to explore the ramifications of the idea. Scientists are still working on the implications of Einstein’s theory of relativity, a century later – now that’s sticky!

# Sticky Workshop (Part 3): Concrete

Remember Mikey, the kid from those Life cereal commercials in the ’70s? “Hey Mikey, he likes it!” In 1983, the [actor](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-3-concrete.html) who played Mikey was at a birthday party where he ate six bags of Pop Rocks, that fizzy candy, and also drank an entire six-pack of Pepsi. The pressure from the reaction of the two in his stomach caused his stomach to explode and he died! That’s why they stopped making Pop Rocks in the mid-’80s!

As part of their research into what makes ideas stick, Chip and Dan Heath studied reams of urban legends, likely including the one about poor Mikey above. **Urban legends are almost never true — the one above certainly isn’t — and yet they prove to be remarkably sticky**: I heard about the dangers of Pop Rocks and Pepsi as a child in the early ’80s, and the idea was still alive in 1998, when the movie Urban Legends mentioned “that kid in the cereal commercial” in a scene where a professor tries to convince a student to down a can of Pepsi and a bag of Pop Rocks. According to [snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com/horrors/freakish/poprocks.asp), the candy’s manufacturers sent letters to 50,000 school principals, put full-page ads in 45 major publications, and even sent the product’s inventors on the road in a vain attempt to counteract rumors that were already widespread in 1979.

The Pepsi/Pop Rocks story doesn’t even accord well with common sense — we’re all pretty well aware that our bodies have two very effective release mechanisms for the release of excess gas in the digestive tract. So why do [stories](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-3-concrete.html) like this one continue to circulate after almost 30 years, when far more important information can barely get traction in the popular mind?

## What’s Sticky About Pop Rocks?

According to the Heaths, **one of the reasons urban legends stick so well is that they are so very concrete**. For folklorists, urban legends express underlying anxieties and concerns shared in the culture at large; in the case of Mikey’s tale, we might read it as a reflection of concerns over the popularity of “foods” like Pop Rocks and Pepsi that owe more to the chemist’s lab than to Mom’s kitchen. It is probably also significant that “Mikey” was at a birthday party, that is, among strangers (or at least non-family members); these are the same years that saw the first (always false) rumors of Halloween candy poisonings. But these are abstract concerns, the stuff of academic papers and graduate seminars; people don’t sit around talking about how worried they are about food manufacturing processes or the unfamiliar sources of their kids’ nourishment — they talk about KFC serving rats, McDonald’s serving worms, and, of course, Pop Rocks making kids explode.

These rich details make urban legends compelling for a number of reasons. First of all, they add credibility by telling of real dangers that affected real people — we could, if we wanted, verify the stories at a local library or, these days, the Internet. Not that we do, of course, but the idea that we could seems to be more than enough to make us believe. Second, **urban legends — though they don’t explicitly lay out a moral — provide us with a do-able, meaningful course of action**: don’t eat Pop Rocks while drinking Pepsi. A story about “some foods” that might be dangerous isn’t all that compelling (think of the US Dept. of Agriculture’s “food pyramid”, with it’s admonishment to “limit the intake of added sugars”); one that tells you, implicitly, that you’ll be safe if you avoid a particular product, brand, or chain is reassuring, even as it frightens us.

## The Concrete Brain

Stories with lots of concrete detail also seem to resonate well with the way our brains work. **Concrete details allow us to imagine a scene and, crucially, imagine ourselves in it.** As some recent psychological research shows, imagining ourselves doing an activity can often have the same effect on us as actually doing it — this has been especially useful in [sports psychology](http://coachsci.sdsu.edu/csa/vol125/table.htm), where visualization of exercise processes has been shown to actually stimulate muscle development.

The Heaths use an interesting metaphor to describe the way concreteness engages the brain. Imagine, they ask us, that the brain is like the loop side of a piece of Velcro, and our ideas are like the hook side. The more “hooks” your idea has, the more “loops” it will catch in the brain, making its “grip” that much tighter. (Aside: note how using a metaphor makes the abstractness of neuropsychology much more concrete and graspable!) **Careful use of detail, then, provides ideas with more and more hooks: more imagery, more emotional resonance, more personal relevance.** It’s not just some kid that got killed, it’s Mikey (or, since fewer and fewer people alive today were around when the commercials originally aired, it might be a friend’s uncle’s boss’s son or a neighbor’s sister’s boyfriend’s little brother, or whomever). We know Mikey, he’s a reminder of our own childhoods; he evokes a rich stew of nostalgia, childhood innocence, and recognition. Further, it’s not just any candy, it’s Pop Rocks; it’s not just soda, it’s Pepsi — both of whose makers have invested plenty in making their brands a part of our individual [identity](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-3-concrete.html).

## Concrete Begats Concrete

It’s not enough, of course, to simply pile on detail after detail to create sticky ideas — if it were, “purple prose” would be the highest compliment, not a dismissive insult. **Concreteness relies not so much on the amount of detail, but on providing the right detail for the intended audience.** Urban legends work well because they relate to experiences we’ve all had — drinking soda, eating at a fast food outlet, staying in a hotel. The detail is drawn from our everyday experience, and helps to create a vivid, living impression in our minds.

**To know what level of detail will work in our ideas’ favor, it is necessary to know who our audience is** — to have a concrete image in mind of who our reader, viewer, or buyer is. Many writers, for example, imagine an “ideal reader” whose imagined responses to their work actually guides them in the creation of the work. Marketing companies often do the same thing, developing detailed profiles of their ideal or typical user, and then trying to figure out what this imagined character’s response to a new product or ad campaign would be.

# Sticky Workshop (Part 4): Credible

”I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” Back in the early ‘80s, Vick’s Formula 44 cough syrup ran commercials that opened with that line, featuring Peter Bergman, who indeed played a doctor on [*All My Children*](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-4-credible.html). Vick’s could, of course, have chosen an actual doctor to tell us how good Vick’s product was, but instead chose a TV star – someone much better known at the time than any doctor would have been.

Bergman’s appearance in this commercial was a bid by Vick’s for credibility – their hope was that by securing the endorsement of someone that TV viewers trusted, people would be more inclined to see Vick’s cough syrup as a product they could trust. I have no idea how well the campaign worked as far as selling cough syrup, but it’s well over 20 years later and people are still quoting the commercial!

## Where Does Credibility Come From?

In Made to Stick, the Heath brothers outline two kinds of credibility. The Vick’s commercial above, and other celebrity endorsements, are examples of external credibility, credibility lent a product, theory, or thought by its association with someone we find trust-worthy, for whatever reason. Often this kind of credibility comes from a person’s authority; Einstein talking about physics or the surgeon general talking about smoking are likely to be listened to and believed because we know they are experts in their fields.  
  
Another kind of external credibility can come from figures the Heath’s call anti-authorities — the [actor](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-4-credible.html) who played the Marlboro Man doing an anti-smoking commercial as he fights cancer, for instance, or a recovering drug addict talking to a group of teenagers about the dangers of drugs. These people are credible not because of their expertise but because of their experiences, their authentic connection with the ideas they are expressing.

## It’s In the Details

Lacking a prominent actor, government figure, or anti-authority to push your ideas, though, most of us must rely on internal credibility. Internal credibility is the ability of our ideas themselves to convince through an appeal to our audience’s sense of how the world works and how they see it. For instance, I’ve already mentioned the importance of [concrete details](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/) in establishing credibility. We assume that a high level of detail can only be gained through authentic experience – people who are lying about something wouldn’t know the level of fine detail that someone who actually experienced it would.

Of course, too much detail can undermine credibility, for the same reason: we know there’s only so much a person can remember about a scene or event, so we believe they’re making stuff up when they start overwhelming us with detail. (Plus, we get bored – a very important thing to keep in mind!) In On Writing, Stephen King, whose been known to create a sticky idea or two in his time, puts it like this:

Thin description leaves the reader feeling bewildered and nearsighted. Overdescription buries him or her in details and images. The trick is to find a happy medium. It’s also important to know what to describe and what can be left alone while you get on with your main job, which is telling a story.

Too much detail distracts from the point, which is getting your audience to believe something.

## 4 Out of 5 Dentists Prefer Statistics

Statistics are another source of internal credibility – when used well. As I said above, boring your audience is a sure way not to see your ideas stick, and nothing bores an audience more than reams of statistics. Statistics suffer, too, from being too abstract: is a 42% correlation between income level and test scores a lot? What does it mean? (By the way, I totally made up that statistic!)

The trick, then, is to draw from the data a simple, concrete statement (even better if it’s unexpected, too!). I love the example they give in the book: Shark attacks are very rare but every summer the news is filled with reports of shark attacks, shark attack victims file through the round of talk shows, and little kids gain new reasons to fear the ocean. If you wanted to show how ridiculous our annual national panic over sharks is, you could tell everyone that only .4 people per year die in shark attacks. Or, once they’ve woken up, you could explain how they were some 25 times more likely to die by drowning than by shark attack – that’ll get the kids to the beach! Or you could tell them of the dangers of marauding Bambis, the deadly deer that roam our backwoods and kill 300 times more people every year than sharks. Automotive collisions with deer are much more common than shark attacks, and usually have deadlier [consequences](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-4-credible.html) – but we don’t huddle in our homes terrified of death by deer!

## ”Don’t Take My Word for It…”

Statistics are a source of credibility, but only when used well. Although they can be quite compelling, people have also learned to be somewhat suspicious of statistics, which we believe can be twisted to tell any story they want to. Another source of credibility, then, is found in your audience’s own experiences, whether past or future. This is the promise of the money-back guarantee: a company that promises to pay you back if you don’t like something is much more credible than one with an “as-is” policy.

The Heaths call this a testable credential, meaning that the credibility comes directly from your audience, who uses your product or follows your advice and agrees that, indeed, it does work. This kind of credibility is hard-won, though, and erased by dishonesty. As with statistics, the misuse of testable credentials can undermine your credibility, even faster than they build it up.

## And Now: Sinatra!

Finally, credibility can be earned through what the Heaths call “The Sinatra Test”, inspired by the chorus of “New York, New York”: “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere”. The basic principle here is to demonstrate competency in dealing with the extremes: if you can make it in crazy, hectic, punishing New York City, then Ames, Iowa isn’t going to present much of a challenge. If your product is used successfully by NASA in its space missions, it can probably hold up to everyday office use. If your life-coaching can make a serial killer into a good neighbor, it can probably help ease the tensions in the typical workplace.

# Sticky Workshop (Part 5):

If you want to connect — I mean, really connect — with an audience, you have to hit ‘em square in their emotions. Movie makers know this, and exploit it to the fullest, making us laugh, cry, punch the air in triumph, jump out of our seats in terror, and even swell with love for all humanity — almost [on demand](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-5-emotional.html).

A lot of times this is pretty cheap, and leaves us feeling manipulated and used. This is because the movie (or novel, or TV show, or commercial, or whatever) seems to play on our emotions for no other reason than because they can. The emotional response is triggered without satisfying any real need.

But the emotions roused by the greatest works of art — whether in film, paint, words, or stone — do satisfy a need, and it is for that reason that we return films like Casablanca or paintings like Vermeer’s [Girl with a Pearl Earring](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/V/vermeer/pearl_earring.jpg.html) after decades and even centuries.

## Enlightened Self-Interest

Chip and Dan Heath refer to Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs” to explain why some emotional appeals fall flat, and others not only succeed but can even change lives. Abraham Maslow, a mid-20th century psychologist, theorized that **human behavior is driven by a number of innate needs**. What’s more, these needs are hierarchical; that is, the most basic needs (food, water, sleep, sex, etc.) had to be met before higher needs (friendship, family, self-esteem, and ultimately “self-actualization”, where we turn our attentions to the needs of our society and its members). Maslow represented his idea with a pyramid (itself a pretty sticky idea) placing the basic needs at the bottom and the higher levels built on top of them. Although few psychologists today still hold to the hierarchical nature of needs — recognizing, for instance, that seeing to the common good is often necessary to assure that more “basic” needs are met — Maslow’s schema is still useful as a rubric to measure our ideas and their [presentation](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-5-emotional.html) against.

For example, let’s say you are offering a recipe for a super-healthy cookie. Yes, a cookie meets a basic need — the need for food. Notice, though, that you rarely see commercials for cookies with the tagline “You can eat this” or “it’s a kind of food!” Instead, ads for cookies or articles on cooking try to appeal to the higher stretches of Maslow’s pyramid. They might appeal to mothers’ need to provide for their family (like the peanut butter commercial: “Choosy moms choose Jif!”) or to our need to protect our environment (”these cookies are made with 100% organic ingredients”) or to our need to feel independent and self-reliant (”don’t eat store-bought cookies — stick it to the Man by making your own!”).

In these examples, **we are looking for ways of engaging our audience’s self-interest — their need to fulfill their needs — in ways that allow them to be the kind of people they want to be**: better parents, better eaters, and better citizens. Instead of offering something to eat, we offer self-fulfillment. Not bad for a [cookie](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-5-emotional.html)!

## Who Am I, Anyway?

In order to be effective, **emotional appeals need to engage with individuals’ identities in a profound way** (which is why the horror gross-out, while momentarily effective, is rarely remembered longer than a few sleepless nights). As the Heaths point out, people make decisions based on their identities, so emotional appeals have to confront them with their own selves. The best ask us to consider who we are — and more, what do people like us do in situations like this?

Consider those late-night famine relief commercials, the ones with the swollen-bellied children staring into the camera with huge, liquid eyes and Sally Struthers begging us to help. These commercials are pretty effective — effective enough to have been run most of my life, anyway — because they force viewers to either act or face an uncomfortable disconnect between the kind of person they think they are and the kind of person they are acting like. If it’s important to you to be the kind of person that helps those in need, then it’s going to be hard not to do so when given the opportunity to contribute.

What this means in practical terms is that **you have to really know not just who your audience is but who your audience thinks it is**. It also means that we have to be especially on guard against the Curse of Knowledge. We may be blinded by the brilliance of our own ideas — which always seem innately useful — so that we don’t consider the ways our ideas meet our audience’s actual needs. Or, for that matter, that our ideas may well meet needs that are far different from the needs they meet for us.

## Caring is Sharing

**No idea gets picked up and passed around unless it meets somebody’s needs.** They have to care, and it’s your job to make them care. **When people care about an idea, they become its greatest advocates**; in marketing terms, this is called “going viral” (which is, of course, deeply offensive to people who deal with actual viral transmission and its often horrific consequences).

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book [The Tipping Point](http://www.gladwell.com/tippingpoint/index.html) (the book the Heaths credit with inspiring them to write Made to Stick), one of the phenomena the author returns to again and again is the sudden revival of Hush Puppies, the somewhat dorky shoes popular in the ’70s among white-bread middle-class American moms. In the ’90s, a handful of East Village hipsters started sporting Hush Puppies and, in the blink of an eye, sales suddenly boomed, bringing the brand back from the brink of obscurity.

The company that makes Hush Puppies had little to do with this revival; they’d failed for years to make Hush Puppies relevant again. Instead, it was a handful of people who found something in these goofy shoes to care about — likely a way to distinguish themselves from the rest of their scene and show off their sense of irony and nostalgia. These trendsetters, in turn, managed to make others around them care as they did, setting off a ripple effect that eventually reached the malls of Middle America and put the Hush Puppies brand back on the map.

Ideas don’t have to spread like wildfire to be effective (though it doesn’t hurt!) but they do have to spread, and **ideas don’t spread unless people care enough about them to a) integrate them into their own lives and b) sharing them with others**. In one way, this makes our job easier — if we can figure out who the trendsetters are, we can focus our energies on crafting an appeal specifically to their sensitivities and let them do much of the legwork. At the same time, though, it means that ideas have to be over-loaded with emotional resonance — they have to meet a number of different needs to spread widely enough to take off on their own.

# Sticky Workshop (Part 6): Stories

**We humans are story-telling creatures.** On the face of it, telling [stories](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-6-stories.html) seems absurd, for anything other than entertainment, and yet throughout the various societies of humankind, and throughout all the history we’ve uncovered in dusty libraries and remote archaeological sites, humans have told stories not just to entertain, but to teach, to build and strengthen social ties, to convey the deepest truths of their personal, spiritual, and religious systems.

Jesus told stories to convey the framework of his moral system; the walls of the tombs and other monuments of the Pharaohs are covered with stories; the stellae and chamber walls of the Central American civilizations are lined with stories; the oldest documents we know of are stories. Stories of kings, of gods and goddesses, of knights errant, of peasants turned heroes, of little girls who save empires, of wars between spirits and wars between nations and wars between families, stories of virtually all of humanity’s triumphs, failures, and mixed blessings have been passed down from generation to generation, added to and reshaped by their tellers.

In a word, **stories are important**.

Beyond that, though, stories are sticky. **Stories are far more easily retained in our minds than information presented in just about any other way.** We might not remember what we said to our mother on the phone last time we talked, but we can almost all remember what Goldilocks said when she tried the bears’ porridge — and what the baby bear said when he found little Goldilocks asleep in his bed.

Likewise, urban legends flow easily from our tongues, while facts about actual dangers seem to slip through our minds without ever getting a chance to take hold. Everyone knows the dangers of waking up in a bathtub full of ice with their kidneys out; few know the risk of E. coli transmission from eating at a typical buffet.

And while we might goggle at the brilliance of Einstein’s formula E=MC2, it is the tale of the lowly patent clerk who daydreams the answer to one of the most pressing problems facing physicists in his time that really catches out interest — that, for most people, is what the figures E=MC2 really stand for, unskilled at theoretical physics as most of us tend to be.

## How Stories Work

There is a lot of research that suggests that **the reason stories work so well is because their narrative structure mirrors the way we experience our actual lives**. Life in its rawest form is, literally, one thing after another; by carefully selecting a start-point and end-point and filtering out details we deem irrelevant, the raw stuff of life is transformed into a narrative arc that builds to some climax, imparting along the way the teller’s point. Think of how we whittle the events of our daily experience down to a few [stories](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-6-stories.html) when we get home from work, each illustrating the fact that our boss is a jerk, our co-worker is hilarious, our child is brilliant (aren’t they all?), our dog is the smartest dog in the world (again, aren’t they all?), police officers are unreasonable and inflexible, poor drivers should probably not be allowed to reproduce, and so on. **We constantly transform the never-ending flow of life into stories, which seems to reflect the way our memory itself works.**

Stories, then, allow us to impart not just our conclusion, but the actual experiences by which we came to that conclusion. A well-told tale draws its audience in, walking them through the events relayed and, some research suggests, actually produces in our brains the physical response we would have experiencing the events first-hand. The Heaths relate the results of one study in which subjects were asked to read a story on a computer about a man going running. The stories were identical, except in half the stories, the runner takes a shirt off before going out for his run, and in the other, he puts a shirt on. The computer tracks the amount of time the reader spends on each sentence. Two sentences after the sentence about the sweatshirt, a reference to his shirt is made. Subjects reading the version where the character takes his shirt off actually took a longer time to read the same sentence as subjects whose story included the line about him putting it on. The readers of the story where he took the shirt off had not only imagined the scene, but they had in a sense “put the shirt away” and had to “go get it” to bring it back into the story!

Other studies reinforce this kind of interpretation, including tests where students are asked to visualize themselves rehearsing some skilled action who then go on to perform equally with students who physically rehearsed it; both outperform students who neither rehearse nor visualize rehearsal. Or studies where subjects are asked to mentally replay the events leading up to some crisis (like a fight with a significant other) while other subjects are asked to visualize themselves having resolved the problem; the first group is far more likely to come up with and implement a course of action than the second. It seems that **telling stories, even to ourselves, simulates real life well enough that it can create in us real world effects**!

## The Surplus of Meaning

Although stories are generally pared down versions of reality, they still carry with them more meaning than just what the author or teller intends. Anyone who’s ever told a joke only to be asked “what’s funny about that?” or argued with someone over the meaning of a book knows first-hand that no matter how we trim the details of our stories there’s always a little more room for interpretation than we expected. **Like life itself, stories offer more meaning than we imagine.**

The secret of stories’ success lies in this surplus of meaning; if stories only ever meant what they were about, they would’nt be applicable outside of the limited chain of events relayed in the story itself. But they’re not; **stories are adaptable**, the lessons they teach applicable to a wide range of scenarios unimagined by their creators and tellers. So, for instance, law enforcement agents [get together](http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/sticky-ideas-workshop-part-6-stories.html) in bars or elsewhere and swap stories of successful arrests, failed investigations, run-ins with institutional bureaucracies, dealings with other agencies, and so on. As they listen to each other’s stories, the are adding their colleagues’ experiences to their on “stock” of experience, ready to draw on not when they encounter the exact same circumstances — which, it’s clear enough would be useless — but when they encounter similar experiences. The experiences embedded into stories “flex” to apply well beyond their original context.

In effect, then, **stories take on the character of lived experience**, which is far more memorable than, say, dry facts and figures. It might be useful to know the symptoms of crystal meth abuse, but far more compelling to know how a specific officer figured out that he was dealing with an addict. As communicators, it is to our advantage to leverage the power of stories for their innate ability to open up virtually direct access to our audience’s minds. What’s more, stories become the perfect vehicle for the other principles of stickiness the Heath’s have compiled: simplicity, unexpectedness, concreteness, credibility, and emotion. Urban legends are perfect examples of this: simple (blunt, even) stories packed with details, usually backed by the authority of a relative, friend, or famous subject, and with a straight-to-the-gut emotional wallop that both surprises us and lingers on.

Thus we come to the end of this in-depth discussion of the principles and ideas in Chip Heath and Dan Heath’s book Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die. If you’re a writer, salesperson, marketer, freelancer, designer, advertiser, activist, politician, or anyone else charged with the task of influencing an audience, this book should be on your “next reads” list. I’ve made an effort in these posts to come up with my own examples and supplement the Heath’s work with ideas from other sources, leaving as much as possible the text of the book itself for you to discover. Enjoy!