



Summary of Made to Stick:

WHY SOME IDEAS SURVIVE AND OTHERS DIE

(Chip and Dan Heath, Random House, 2007)

Making things “stick”



**“Understood”,
“Remembered”,
or “Impactful”**

This book summarizes ideas from researchers Chip and Dan Heath that have revolutionized how we think about communicating ideas, messages, plans, appeals, etc.

The biggest hindrance to your effective communication?

The “Curse of Knowledge” is the biggest roadblock to making communication stick.

Because you know a lot about the subject you are trying to communicate, you either tend to:

- Over communicate with way too many details. A good example is when you are telling others about your recent family vacation—you usually give your listener way more information than they really care about.
- Under communicate because you overestimate the recipient’s familiarity with the subject. For example, in the classical 1990 experiment by a Stanford graduate student, Elizabeth Newton, a group of subjects were asked to “tap” out well known songs with their fingers, while another group tried to name the melodies. When the “tappers” were asked to predict how many of the “tapped” songs would be recognized by listeners, they would always overestimate. The curse of knowledge is demonstrated here as the “tappers” are so familiar with what they were tapping that they assumed listeners would easily recognize the tune.



The authors of "Made to Stick" present six factors or principles to overcome the "Curse of Knowledge." Here's a quick summary of the six factors:



#1 – SIMPLE

Making your message simple is not about dumbing it down. It's about simplifying the focus. People will not remember 90% of what you tell them, so be absolutely clear with the one or two key things you want them to remember and just focus on those. (i.e.; "Southwest Airlines will be THE low-fare airline"). That's why entrepreneurs are taught to have an "elevator" speech to pitch their business idea. So ask yourself, "What is the core message our nonprofit needs to communicate?" Focus only on that message.

NONPROFIT TIP: Be careful. You care deeply and are emotionally connected to your mission, but your audience may not be at that same level. When you communicate, try to think about it from your audience's perspective—what do they REALLY need to know to understand the message you are trying to communicate. Leave out the rest of the details.



#2 – UNEXPECTED

The key is to disrupt people's expectations. One of the most powerful ways to get someone's attention is to break a pattern (our brains tend to filter out consistency and instead focus on what's different). Create mystery, use curiosity gaps, incorporate an element of surprise, or think of a counterintuitive approach to your core message. This is often used in movies—they use plot twists to hold your interest and draw you into the plot.

NONPROFIT TIP: Rather than just telling the facts about your work and mission, try to start with a question or a surprising fact/statement that will cause curiosity or surprise within your audience—and don't be so quick to resolve the question.



#3 – CONCRETE

Can your audience relate to what you are communicating? The more people can “see it”, “hear it”, “smell it”, or have experienced something like it, the more real it becomes to them. Our memories are like velcro, with lots of experiential “hooks”. The more “hooks” we can create in our message, the greater chance it has to be impactful and remembered.

NONPROFIT TIP: Don’t just share the same message to different audiences, tailor it to the audience you are addressing (i.e.; donors, volunteers, employees, general public) by framing it in a context that your audience can relate to. For example, they may not be able to relate to statistics/finances, but they can relate to real-life situations that they have experienced. Also, you can use analogies that translate your specific message into something most people can relate to.



#4 – CREDIBLE

People need to feel they can trust what is being communicated to them. Ideas can get added credibility (trust) from outside authorities (experts or people with recognized experience) or anti-authorities (like a dying smoker advertising a stop-smoking campaign). Other ways to give your message credibility are to use compelling benchmarks (i.e., “Our community ranks near the bottom in child literacy”), or employ a “try before you buy” approach (where people can test out the product or message ahead of time).

NONPROFIT TIP: Your message will have more “stickiness” if it comes from:

- someone who has personally been positively affected by your organization
- an expert in the field who is not directly employed by your organization
- an influential person who can communicate how much more valuable it would have been to have your product or service.



#5 – EMOTIONS

For people to take action, they have to care. People care when you can touch their feelings and emotions.

- Form an association between something they already care about and the message you are trying to communicate
- Appeal to their self-interest (What's in it for me?)
- Help people visualize the desired state in a way that touches their hearts, not their minds.

NONPROFIT TIP: Keep a list of emotional real-life situations or individuals that your organization has positively impacted. Rather than just providing facts and statistics, integrate the items on that list into your message.



#6 – STORIES

Stories are the oldest form of “stickiness”. They encourage a mental simulation or reenactment on the part of the listener that burns the idea into the mind. Study after study has shown that people recall messages communicated with stories rather than those that relied on facts and statistics. Biblical parables (The Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son) and Ancient Greek mythology (Pandora, Hercules, and Zeus) are great examples of how stories have impacted our beliefs and actions for thousands of years - that’s sticky!

NONPROFIT TIP: Nonprofit Tip: When you are selecting a story, try to incorporate the other five elements of “stickiness”:

- Touches emotions
- Credible sources
- Relatable to your audience
- Will surprise or pique the curiosity of your audience
- Communicates the core message



In conclusion, if you want to avoid “the curse of knowledge” and help your ideas, messages, plans, and appeals “stick” with your intended audiences, remember the following six factors:



S Simple - Focus on the Core Message

U Unexpected - Disrupt People’s Expectations

C Concrete - Relate to things that are real to your audience

C Credible - Look for ways to improve the “trust-factor” of your message

E Emotions - Touch people’s feelings to help them care

S Stories - People remember stories better than facts and statistics





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