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Made to Stick

Why some ideas hold and others come unstuck

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Time

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dan Heath is a Senior Fellow at Duke University's CASE centre, which supports social entrepreneurs. Previously, Dan worked as a researcher and case writer for Harvard Business School. **Chip Heath** is a professor at Stanford Graduate School of Business, teaching courses on business strategy and organisations. He has also consulted with clients ranging from Google and Gap to The Nature Conservancy and the American Heart Association. Together the brothers have written four *New York Times* bestselling books: *Made to Stick*, *Switch*, *Decisive* and *The Power of Moments*. Their books have sold over two million copies worldwide and have been translated into thirty-three languages.

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To Dad, for driving an old tan Chevette
while putting us through college.

To Mom, for making us breakfast
every day for eighteen years. Each.

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INTRODUCTION

WHAT STICKS?

A friend of a friend of ours is a frequent business traveler. Let's call him Dave. Dave was recently in Atlantic City for an important meeting with clients. Afterward, he had some time to kill before his flight, so he went to a local bar for a drink.

He'd just finished one drink when an attractive woman approached and asked if she could buy him another. He was surprised but flattered. Sure, he said. The woman walked to the bar and brought back two more drinks—one for her and one for him. He thanked her and took a sip. And that was the last thing he remembered.

Rather, that was the last thing he remembered until he woke up, disoriented, lying in a hotel bathtub, his body submerged in ice.

He looked around frantically, trying to figure out where he was and how he got there. Then he spotted the note:

DON'T MOVE. CALL 911.

A cell phone rested on a small table beside the bathtub. He picked it up and called 911, his fingers numb and clumsy from the ice. The operator seemed oddly familiar with his situation. She said, "Sir, I want you to reach behind you, slowly and carefully. Is there a tube protruding from your lower back?"

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Anxious, he felt around behind him. Sure enough, there was a tube.

The operator said, "Sir, don't panic, but one of your kidneys has been harvested. There's a ring of organ thieves operating in this city, and they got to you. Paramedics are on their way. Don't move until they arrive."

You've just read one of the most successful urban legends of the past fifteen years. The first clue is the classic urban-legend opening: "A friend of a friend . . ." Have you ever noticed that our friends' friends have much more interesting lives than our friends themselves?

You've probably heard the Kidney Heist tale before. There are hundreds of versions in circulation, and all of them share a core of three elements: (1) the drugged drink, (2) the ice-filled bathtub, and (3) the kidney-theft punch line. One version features a married man who receives the drugged drink from a prostitute he has invited to his room in Las Vegas. It's a morality play with kidneys.

Imagine that you closed the book right now, took an hourlong break, then called a friend and told the story, without rereading it. Chances are you could tell it almost perfectly. You might forget that the traveler was in Atlantic City for "an important meeting with clients"—who cares about that? But you'd remember all the important stuff.

The Kidney Heist is a story that sticks. We understand it, we remember it, and we can retell it later. And if we believe it's true, it might change our behavior permanently—at least in terms of accepting drinks from attractive strangers.

Contrast the Kidney Heist story with this passage, drawn from a paper distributed by a nonprofit organization: "Comprehensive community building naturally lends itself to a return-on-investment ra-

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tionale that can be modeled, drawing on existing practice," it begins, going on to argue that "[a] factor constraining the flow of resources to CCIs is that funders must often resort to targeting or categorical requirements in grant making to ensure accountability."

Imagine that you closed the book right now and took an hourlong break. In fact, don't even take a break; just call up a friend and retell that passage without rereading it. Good luck.

Is this a fair comparison—an urban legend to a cherry-picked bad passage? Of course not. But here's where things get interesting: Think of our two examples as two poles on a spectrum of memorability. Which sounds closer to the communications you encounter at work? If you're like most people, your workplace gravitates toward the nonprofit pole as though it were the North Star.

Maybe this is perfectly natural; some ideas are inherently interesting and some are inherently uninteresting. A gang of organ thieves—inherently interesting! Nonprofit financial strategy—inherently uninteresting! It's the nature versus nurture debate applied to ideas: Are ideas born interesting or made interesting?

Well, this is a nurture book.

So how do we nurture our ideas so they'll succeed in the world? Many of us struggle with how to communicate ideas effectively, how to get our ideas to make a difference. A biology teacher spends an hour explaining mitosis, and a week later only three kids remember what it is. A manager makes a speech unveiling a new strategy as the staffers nod their heads enthusiastically, and the next day the frontline employees are observed cheerfully implementing the old one.

Good ideas often have a hard time succeeding in the world. Yet the ridiculous Kidney Heist tale keeps circulating, with no resources whatsoever to support it.

Why? Is it simply because hijacked kidneys sell better than other topics? Or is it possible to make a *true, worthwhile* idea circulate as effectively as this false idea?

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The Truth About Movie Popcorn

Art Silverman stared at a bag of movie popcorn. It looked out of place sitting on his desk. His office had long since filled up with fake-butter fumes. Silverman knew, because of his organization's research, that the popcorn on his desk was unhealthy. Shockingly unhealthy, in fact. His job was to figure out a way to communicate this message to the unsuspecting moviegoers of America.

Silverman worked for the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit group that educates the public about nutrition. The CSPI sent bags of movie popcorn from a dozen theaters in three major cities to a lab for nutritional analysis. The results surprised everyone.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that a normal diet contain no more than 20 grams of saturated fat each day. According to the lab results, the typical bag of popcorn had 37 grams.

The culprit was coconut oil, which theaters used to pop their popcorn. Coconut oil had some big advantages over other oils. It gave the popcorn a nice, silky texture, and released a more pleasant and natural aroma than the alternative oils. Unfortunately, as the lab results showed, coconut oil was also brimming with saturated fat.

The single serving of popcorn on Silverman's desk—a snack someone might scarf down between meals—had nearly two days' worth of saturated fat. And those 37 grams of saturated fat were packed into a *medium*-sized serving of popcorn. No doubt a decent-sized bucket could have cleared triple digits.

The challenge, Silverman realized, was that few people know what "37 grams of saturated fat" means. Most of us don't memorize the USDA's daily nutrition recommendations. Is 37 grams good or bad? And even if we have an intuition that it's bad, we'd wonder if it was "bad bad" (like cigarettes) or "normal bad" (like a cookie or a milk shake).

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Even the phrase "37 grams of saturated fat" by itself was enough to cause most people's eyes to glaze over. "Saturated fat has zero appeal," Silverman says. "It's dry, it's academic, who cares?"

Silverman could have created some kind of visual comparison—perhaps an advertisement comparing the amount of saturated fat in the popcorn with the USDA's recommended daily allowance. Think of a bar graph, with one of the bars stretching twice as high as the other.

But that was too scientific somehow. Too rational. The amount of fat in this popcorn was, in some sense, not rational. It was ludicrous. The CSPI needed a way to shape the message in a way that fully communicated this ludicrousness.

Silverman came up with a solution.

CSPI called a press conference on September 27, 1992. Here's the message it presented: "A medium-sized 'butter' popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theater 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!"

The folks at CSPI didn't neglect the visuals—they laid out the full buffet of greasy food for the television cameras. An entire day's worth of unhealthy eating, displayed on a table. All that saturated fat—stuffed into a single bag of popcorn.

The story was an immediate sensation, featured on CBS, NBC, ABC, and CNN. It made the front pages of *USA Today*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Washington Post*'s Style section. Leno and Letterman cracked jokes about fat-soaked popcorn, and headline writers trotted out some doozies: "Popcorn Gets an 'R' Rating," "Lights, Action, Cholesterol!" "Theater Popcorn is Double Feature of Fat."

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The idea stuck. Moviegoers, repulsed by these findings, avoided popcorn in droves. Sales plunged. The service staff at movie houses grew accustomed to fielding questions about whether the popcorn

was popped in the "bad" oil. Soon after, most of the nation's biggest theater chains—including United Artists, AMC, and Loews—announced that they would stop using coconut oil.

On Stickiness

This is an idea success story. Even better, it's a *truthful* idea success story. The people at CSPI knew something about the world that they needed to share. They figured out a way to communicate the idea so that people would listen and care. And the idea stuck—just like the Kidney Heist tale.

And, let's be honest, the odds were stacked against the CSPI. The "movie popcorn is fatty" story lacks the lurid appeal of an organ-thieving gang. No one woke up in an oil-filled bathtub. The story wasn't sensational, and it wasn't even particularly entertaining. Furthermore, there was no natural constituency for the news—few of us make an effort to "stay up to date with popcorn news." There were no celebrities, models, or adorable pets involved.

In short, the popcorn idea was a lot like the ideas that most of us traffic in every day—ideas that are interesting but not sensational, truthful but not mind-blowing, important but not "life-or-death." Unless you're in advertising or public relations, you probably don't have many resources to back your ideas. You don't have a multimillion-dollar ad budget or a team of professional spinners. Your ideas need to stand on their own merits.

We wrote this book to help you make your ideas stick. By "stick," we mean that your ideas are understood and remembered, and have a lasting impact—they change your audience's opinions or behavior.

At this point, it's worth asking why you'd *need* to make your ideas stick. After all, the vast majority of our daily communication doesn't require stickiness. "Pass the gravy" doesn't have to be memorable. When we tell our friends about our relationship problems, we're not trying to have a "lasting impact."

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So not every idea is stick-worthy. When we ask people how often they need to make an idea stick, they tell us that the need arises between once a month and once a week, twelve to fifty-two times per year. For managers, these are "big ideas" about new strategic directions and guidelines for behavior. Teachers try to convey themes and conflicts and trends to their students—the kinds of themes and ways of thinking that will endure long after the individual factoids have faded. Columnists try to change readers' opinions on policy issues. Religious leaders try to share spiritual wisdom with their congregants. Nonprofit organizations try to persuade volunteers to contribute their time and donors to contribute their money to a worthy cause.

Given the importance of making ideas stick, it's surprising how little attention is paid to the subject. When we get advice on communicating, it often concerns our delivery: "Stand up straight, make eye contact, use appropriate hand gestures. Practice, practice, practice (but don't sound canned)." Sometimes we get advice about structure: "Tell 'em what you're going to tell 'em. Tell 'em, then tell 'em what you told 'em." Or "Start by getting their attention—tell a joke or a story."

Another genre concerns knowing your audience: "Know what your listeners care about, so you can tailor your communication to them." And, finally, there's the most common refrain in the realm of communication advice: Use repetition, repetition, repetition.

All of this advice has obvious merit, except, perhaps, for the emphasis on repetition. (If you have to tell someone the same thing ten times, the idea probably wasn't very well designed. No urban legend has to be repeated ten times.) But this set of advice has one glaring shortcoming: It doesn't help Art Silverman as he tries to figure out the best way to explain that movie popcorn is *really* unhealthful.

Silverman no doubt knows that he should make eye contact and practice. But what message is he supposed to practice? He knows his audience—they're people who like popcorn and don't realize how unhealthy it is. So what message does he share with them? Compli-

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cating matters, Silverman knew that he wouldn't have the luxury of repetition—he had only one shot to make the media care about his story.

Or think about an elementary-school teacher. She knows her goal: to teach the material mandated by the state curriculum committee. She knows her audience: third graders with a range of knowledge and skills. She knows *how* to speak effectively—she's a virtuoso of posture and diction and eye contact. So the goal is clear, the audience is clear, and the format is clear. But the design of the message itself is far from clear. The biology students need to understand mitosis—okay, now what? There are an infinite number of ways to teach mitosis. Which way will stick? And how do you know *in advance*?

What Led to *Made to Stick*

The broad question, then, is how do you design an idea that sticks?

A few years ago the two of us—brothers Chip and Dan—realized that both of us had been studying how ideas stick for about ten years. Our expertise came from very different fields, but we had zeroed in on the same question: Why do some ideas succeed while others fail?

Dan had developed a passion for education. He co-founded a start-up publishing company called Thinkwell that asked a somewhat heretical question: If you were going to build a textbook from scratch, using video and technology instead of text, how would you do it? As the editor in chief of Thinkwell, Dan had to work with his team to determine the best ways to teach subjects like economics, biology, calculus, and physics. He had an opportunity to work with some of the most effective and best-loved professors in the country: the calculus teacher who was also a stand-up comic; the biology teacher who was named national Teacher of the Year; the economics teacher who was also a chaplain and a playwright. Essentially, Dan enjoyed a crash course in what makes great teachers great. And he found that, while

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each teacher had a unique style, collectively their instructional *methodologies* were almost identical.

Chip, as a professor at Stanford University, had spent about ten years asking why bad ideas sometimes won out in the social marketplace of ideas. How could a false idea displace a true one? And what made some ideas more viral than others? As an entry point into these topics, he dove into the realm of "naturally sticky" ideas such as urban legends and conspiracy theories. Over the years, he's become uncomfortably familiar with some of the most repulsive and absurd tales in the annals of ideas. He's heard them all. Here's a very small sampler:

- The Kentucky Fried Rat. Really, any tale that involves rats and fast food is on fertile ground.
- Coca-Cola rots your bones. This fear is big in Japan, but so far the country hasn't experienced an epidemic of gelatinous teenagers.
- If you flash your brights at a car whose headlights are off, you will be shot by a gang member.
- The Great Wall of China is the only man-made object that is visible from space. (The Wall is really long but not very wide. Think about it: If the Wall were visible, then any interstate highway would also be visible, and maybe a few Wal-Mart superstores as well.)
- You use only 10 percent of your brain. (If this were true, it would certainly make brain damage a lot less worrisome.)

Chip, along with his students, has spent hundreds of hours collecting, coding, and analyzing naturally sticky ideas: urban legends, wartime rumors, proverbs, conspiracy theories, and jokes. Urban legends are false, but many naturally sticky ideas are true. In fact, perhaps the oldest class of naturally sticky ideas is the proverb—a nugget

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of wisdom that often endures over centuries and across cultures. As an example, versions of the proverb "Where there's smoke there's fire" have appeared in more than fifty-five different languages.

In studying naturally sticky ideas, both trivial and profound, Chip has conducted more than forty experiments with more than 1,700 participants on topics such as:

- Why Nostradamus's prophecies are still read after 400 years
- Why *Chicken Soup for the Soul* stories are inspirational
- Why ineffective folk remedies persist

A few years ago, he started teaching a course at Stanford called "How to Make Ideas Stick." The premise of the course was that if we understood what made ideas naturally sticky we might be better at making our own messages stick. During the past few years he has taught this topic to a few hundred students bound for careers as managers, public-policy analysts, journalists, designers, and film directors.

To complete the story of the Brothers Heath, in 2004 it dawned on us that we had been approaching the same problem from different angles. Chip had researched and taught what made ideas stick. Dan had tried to figure out pragmatic ways to make ideas stick. Chip had compared the success of different urban legends and stories. Dan had compared the success of different math and government lessons. Chip was the researcher and the teacher. Dan was the practitioner and the writer. (And we knew that we could make our parents happy by spending more quality time together.)

We wanted to take apart sticky ideas—both natural and created—and figure out what made them stick. What makes urban legends so compelling? Why do some chemistry lessons work better than others? Why does virtually every society circulate a set of proverbs? Why do some political ideas circulate widely while others fall short?

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In short, we were looking to understand what sticks.We adopted

the "what sticks" terminology from one of our favorite authors, Malcolm Gladwell. In 2000, Gladwell wrote a brilliant book called *The Tipping Point*, which 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. Why did Hush Puppies experience a rebirth? Why did crime rates abruptly plummet in New York City? Why did the book *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* catch on?

The Tipping Point has three sections. The first addresses the need to get the right people, and the third addresses the need for the right context. The middle section of the book, "The Stickiness Factor," argues that innovations are more likely to tip when they're sticky. When *The Tipping Point* was published, Chip realized that "stickiness" was the perfect word for the attribute that he was chasing with his research into the marketplace of ideas.

This book is a complement to *The Tipping Point* in the sense that we will identify *the traits* that make ideas sticky, a subject that was beyond the scope of Gladwell's book. Gladwell was interested in what makes social epidemics epidemic. Our interest is in how effective ideas are constructed—what makes some ideas stick and others disappear. So, while our focus will veer away from *The Tipping Point*'s turf, we want to pay tribute to Gladwell for the word "stickiness." It stuck.

Who Spoiled Halloween?

In the 1960s and 1970s, the tradition of Halloween trick-or-treating came under attack. Rumors circulated about Halloween sadists who put razor blades in apples and booby-trapped pieces of candy. The rumors affected the Halloween tradition nationwide. Parents carefully examined their children's candy bags. Schools opened their doors at night so that kids could trick-or-treat in a safe environment. Hospitals volunteered to X-ray candy bags.

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In 1985, an ABC News poll showed that 60 percent of parents worried that their children might be victimized. To this day, many parents warn their children not to eat any snacks that aren't prepackaged. This is a sad story: a family holiday sullied by bad people who, inexplicably, wish to harm children. But in 1985 the story took a strange twist. Researchers discovered something shocking about the candy-tampering epidemic: It was a myth.

The researchers, sociologists Joel Best and Gerald Horiuchi, studied every reported Halloween incident since 1958. They found no instances where strangers caused children life-threatening harm on Halloween by tampering with their candy.

Two children did die on Halloween, but their deaths weren't caused by strangers. A five-year-old boy found his uncle's heroin stash and overdosed. His relatives initially tried to cover their tracks by sprinkling heroin on his candy. In another case, a father, hoping to collect on an insurance settlement, caused the death of his own son by contaminating his candy with cyanide.

In other words, the best social science evidence reveals that taking candy from strangers is perfectly okay. It's your family you should worry about.

The candy-tampering story has changed the behavior of millions of parents over the past thirty years. Sadly, it has made neighbors suspicious of neighbors. It has even changed the laws of this country: Both California and New Jersey passed laws that carry special penalties for candy-tamperers. Why was this idea so successful?

Six Principles of Sticky Ideas

The Halloween-candy story is, in a sense, the evil twin of the CSPI story.

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Both stories highlighted an unexpected danger in a common activity: eating Halloween candy and eating movie popcorn. Both sto-

ries called for simple action: examining your child's candy and avoiding movie popcorn. Both made use of vivid, concrete images that cling easily to memory: an apple with a buried razor blade and a table full of greasy foods. And both stories tapped into emotion: fear in the case of Halloween candy and disgust in the case of movie popcorn.

The Kidney Heist, too, shares many of these traits. A highly *unexpected* outcome: a guy who stops for a drink and ends up one kidney short of a pair. A lot of *concrete* details: the ice-filled bathtub, the weird tube protruding from the lower back. *Emotion:* fear, disgust, suspicion.

We began to see the same themes, the same attributes, reflected in a wide range of successful ideas. What we found based on Chip's research—and by reviewing the research of dozens of folklorists, psychologists, educational researchers, political scientists, and proverb-hunters—was that sticky ideas shared certain key traits. There is no "formula" for a sticky idea—we don't want to overstate the case. But sticky ideas do draw from a common set of traits, which make them more likely to succeed.

It's like discussing the attributes of a great basketball player. You can be pretty sure that any great player has some subset of traits like height, speed, agility, power, and court sense. But you don't need all of these traits in order to be great: Some great guards are five feet ten and scrawny. And having all the traits doesn't guarantee greatness: No doubt there are plenty of slow, clumsy seven-footers. It's clear, though, that if you're on the neighborhood court, choosing your team from among strangers, you should probably take a gamble on the seven-foot dude.

Ideas work in much the same way. One skill we can learn is the ability to *spot* ideas that have "natural talent," like the seven-foot stranger. Later in the book, we'll discuss Subway's advertising campaign that focused on Jared, an obese college student who lost more than 200 pounds by eating Subway sandwiches every day. The cam-

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paign was a huge success. And it wasn't created by a Madison Avenue advertising agency; it started with a single store owner who had the good sense to spot an amazing story.

But here's where our basketball analogy breaks down: In the world of ideas, we can genetically engineer our players. We can *create* ideas with an eye to maximizing their stickiness.

As we pored over hundreds of sticky ideas, we saw, over and over, the same six principles at work.

PRINCIPLE 1: SIMPLICITY

How do we find the essential core of our ideas? A successful defense lawyer says, "If you argue ten points, even if each is a good point, when they get back to the jury room they won't remember any." To strip an idea down to its core, we must be masters of exclusion. We must relentlessly prioritize. Saying something short is not the mission—sound bites are not the ideal. Proverbs are the ideal. We must create ideas that are both simple *and* profound. The Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one-sentence statement so profound that an individual could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.

PRINCIPLE 2: UNEXPECTEDNESS

How do we get our audience to pay attention to our ideas, and how do we maintain their interest when we need time to get the ideas across? We need to violate people's expectations. We need to be counterintuitive. A bag of popcorn is as unhealthy as *a whole day's worth of fatty foods!* We can use surprise—an emotion whose function is to increase alertness and cause focus—to grab people's attention. But surprise doesn't last. For our idea to endure, we must generate *interest* and *curiosity*. How do you keep students engaged during the forty-eighth history class of the year? We can engage people's curiosity over a long period of time by systematically "opening gaps" in their knowledge—and then filling those gaps.

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PRINCIPLE 3: CONCRETENESS

How do we make our ideas clear? We must explain our ideas in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information. This is where so much business communication goes awry. Mission statements, synergies, strategies, visions—they are often ambiguous to the point of being meaningless. Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images—ice-filled bathtubs, apples with razors—because our brains are wired to remember concrete data. In proverbs, abstract truths are often encoded 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 mean the same thing to everyone in our audience.

PRINCIPLE 4: CREDIBILITY

How do we make people believe our ideas? When the former surgeon general C. Everett Koop talks about a public-health issue, most people accept his ideas without skepticism. But in most day-to-day situations we don't enjoy this authority. Sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials. We need ways to help people test our ideas for themselves—a "try before you buy" philosophy for the world of ideas. When we're trying to build a case for something, most of us instinctively grasp for hard numbers. But in many cases this is exactly the wrong approach. In the sole U.S. presidential debate in 1980 between Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter, Reagan could have cited innumerable statistics demonstrating the sluggishness 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."

PRINCIPLE 5: EMOTIONS

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How do we get people to care about our ideas? We make them *feel* something. In the case of movie popcorn, we make them feel dis-

gusted by its unhealthiness. The statistic "37 grams" doesn't elicit any emotions. Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region. We are wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions. Sometimes the hard part is finding the right emotion to harness. For instance, it's difficult to get teenagers to quit smoking by instilling in them a fear of the consequences, but it's easier to get them to quit by tapping into their resentment of the duplicity of Big Tobacco.

PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES

How do we get people to act on our ideas? We tell stories. Firefighters naturally swap stories after every fire, and by doing so they multiply their experience; after years of hearing stories, they have a richer, more complete mental catalog of critical situations they might confront during a fire and the appropriate responses to those situations. Research shows that mentally rehearsing a situation helps us perform better when we encounter that situation in the physical environment. Similarly, hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.

Those are the six principles of successful ideas. To summarize, here's our checklist for creating a successful idea: a Simple Unexpected Concrete Credentialed Emotional Story. A clever observer will note that this sentence can be compacted into the acronym SUCCESs. This is sheer coincidence, of course. (Okay, we admit, SUCCESs is a little corny. We could have changed "Simple" to "Core" and reordered a few letters. But, you have to admit, CCUCES is less memorable.)

No special expertise is needed to apply these principles. There are no licensed stickologists. Moreover, many of the principles have a commonsense ring to them: Didn't most of us already have the intu-

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ition that we should "be simple" and "use stories"? It's not as though there's a powerful constituency for overcomplicated, lifeless prose.

But wait a minute. We claim that using these principles is easy. And most of them do seem relatively commonsensical. So why aren't we deluged with brilliantly designed sticky ideas? Why is our life filled with more process memos than proverbs?

Sadly, there is a villain in our story. The villain is a natural psychological tendency that consistently confounds our ability to create ideas using these principles. It's called the Curse of Knowledge. (We will capitalize the phrase throughout the book to give it the drama we think it deserves.)

Tappers and Listeners

In 1990, Elizabeth Newton earned a Ph.D. in psychology at Stanford by studying a simple game in which she assigned people to one of two roles: "tappers" or "listeners." Tappers received a list of twenty-five well-known songs, such as "Happy Birthday to You" and "The Star-Spangled Banner." Each tapper was asked to pick a song and tap out the rhythm to a listener (by knocking on a table). The listener's job was to guess the song, based on the rhythm being tapped. (By the way, this experiment is fun to try at home if there's a good "listener" candidate nearby.)

The listener's job in this game is quite difficult. Over the course of Newton's experiment, 120 songs were tapped out. Listeners guessed only 2.5 percent of the songs: 3 out of 120.

But here's what made the result worthy of a dissertation in psychology. Before the listeners guessed the name of the song, Newton asked the tappers to predict the odds that the listeners would guess correctly. They predicted that the odds were 50 percent.

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The tappers got their message across 1 time in 40, but they thought they were getting their message across 1 time in 2. Why?

When a tapper taps, she is *hearing the song in her head*. Go ahead and try it for yourself—tap out "The Star-Spangled Banner." It's impossible to avoid hearing the tune in your head. Meanwhile, the listeners can't hear that tune—all they can hear is a bunch of disconnected taps, like a kind of bizarre Morse Code.

In the experiment, tappers are flabbergasted at how hard the listeners seem to be working to pick up the tune. *Isn't the song obvious?* The tappers' expressions, when a listener guesses "Happy Birthday to You" for "The Star-Spangled Banner," are priceless: *How could you be so stupid?*

It's hard to be a tapper. The problem is that tappers have been given knowledge (the song title) that makes it impossible for them to imagine what it's like to *lack* that knowledge. When they're tapping, they can't imagine what it's like for the listeners to hear isolated taps rather than a song. This is the Curse of Knowledge. Once we know something, we find it hard to imagine what it was like not to know it. Our knowledge has "cursed" us. And it becomes difficult for us to share our knowledge with others, because we can't readily re-create our listeners' state of mind.

The tapper/listener experiment is reenacted every day across the world. The tappers and listeners are CEOs and frontline employees, teachers and students, politicians and voters, marketers and customers, writers and readers. All of these groups rely on ongoing communication, but, like the tappers and listeners, they suffer from enormous information imbalances. When a CEO discusses "unlocking shareholder value," there is a tune playing in her head that the employees can't hear.

It's a hard problem to avoid—a CEO might have thirty years of daily immersion in the logic and conventions of business. Reversing the process is as impossible as un-ringing a bell. You can't unlearn what you already know. There are, in fact, only two ways to beat the Curse of Knowledge reliably. The first is not to learn anything. The second is to take your ideas and transform them.

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This book will teach you how to transform your ideas to beat the Curse of Knowledge. The six principles presented earlier are your best weapons. They can be used as a kind of checklist. Let's take the CEO who announces to her staff that they must strive to "maximize shareholder value."

Is this idea simple? Yes, in the sense that it's short, but it lacks the useful simplicity of a proverb. Is it unexpected? No. Concrete? Not at all. Credible? Only in the sense that it's coming from the mouth of the CEO. Emotional? Um, no. A story? No.

Contrast the "maximize shareholder value" idea with John F. Kennedy's famous 1961 call to "put a man on the moon and return him safely by the end of the decade." Simple? Yes. Unexpected? Yes. Concrete? Amazingly so. Credible? The goal seemed like science fiction, but the source was credible. Emotional? Yes. Story? In miniature.

Had John F. Kennedy been a CEO, he would have said, "Our mission is to become the international leader in the space industry through maximum team-centered innovation and strategically targeted aerospace initiatives." Fortunately, JFK was more intuitive than a modern-day CEO; he knew that opaque, abstract missions don't captivate and inspire people. The moon mission was a classic case of a communicator's dodging the Curse of Knowledge. It was a brilliant and beautiful idea—a single idea that motivated the actions of millions of people for a decade.

Systematic Creativity

Picture in your mind the type of person who's great at coming up with ideas. Have a mental image of the person? A lot of people, when asked to do this, describe a familiar stereotype—the "creative genius," the kind of person who thinks up slogans in a hot advertising agency. Maybe, like us, you picture someone with gelled hair and hip clothing, carrying a dog-eared notebook full of ironies and epiphanies, ready to drop everything and launch a four-hour brainstorming ses-

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sion in a room full of caffeine and whiteboards. Or maybe your stereotype isn't quite so elaborate.

There's no question that some people are more creative than others. Perhaps they're just born that way. So maybe you'll never be the Michael Jordan of sticky ideas. But the premise of this book is that creating sticky ideas is something that can be learned.

In 1999, an Israeli research team assembled a group of 200 highly regarded ads—ads that were finalists and award winners in the top advertising competitions. They found that 89 percent of the award-winning ads could be classified into six basic categories, or *templates*. That's remarkable. We might expect great creative concepts to be highly idiosyncratic—emerging from the whims of born creative types. It turns out that six simple templates go a long way.

Most of these templates relate to the principle of unexpectedness. For example, the *Extreme Consequences* template points out unexpected consequences of a product attribute. One ad emphasizes the power of a car stereo system—when the stereo belts out a tune, a bridge starts oscillating to the music, and when the speakers are cranked up the bridge shimmies so hard that it nearly collapses. This same template also describes the famous World War II slogan devised by the Ad Council, a nonprofit organization that creates public-service campaigns for other nonprofits and government agencies: "Loose Lips Sink Ships." And speaking of extreme consequences, let's not forget the eggs sizzling in the 1980s commercial "This is your brain on drugs" (also designed by the Ad Council). The template also pops up spontaneously in naturally sticky ideas—for example, the legend that Newton discovered gravity when an apple fell on his head. (For the other templates, see the endnotes.)

The researchers also tried to use their six templates to classify 200 other ads—from the same publications and for the same types of products—that had not received awards. Amazingly, when the researchers tried to classify these "less successful" ads, they could classify only 2 percent of them.

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