

“Made To Stick”

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Kindle Notes by Dave Kraft

Many of us struggle with how to communicate ideas effectively, how to get our ideas to make a difference. Good ideas often have a hard time succeeding in the world. One skill we can learn is the ability to spot ideas that have “natural talent.”

PRINCIPLE 1: SIMPLICITY

PRINCIPLE 2: UNEXPECTEDNESS

PRINCIPLE 3: CONCRETENESS

PRINCIPLE 4: CREDIBILITY

PRINCIPLE 5: EMOTIONS

PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES

By “stick,” we mean that your ideas are understood and remembered, and have a lasting impact—they change your audience’s opinions or behavior. This book will teach you how to transform your ideas to beat the Curse of Knowledge. 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.

Regardless of your level of “natural creativity,” we will show you how a little focused effort can make almost any idea stickier, and a sticky idea is an idea that is more likely to make a difference. The concept of tappers and Listeners (tapping on a table a tune in your head and see how many don’t have a clue what you are tapping)

In the 1980s the Army adapted its planning process, inventing a concept called Commander’s Intent (CI) The CI never specifies so much detail that it risks being rendered obsolete by unpredictable events. You can lose the ability to execute the original plan, but you never lose the responsibility of executing the intent.

Commander's Intent manages to align the behavior of soldiers at all levels without requiring play-by-play instructions from their leaders. When people know the desired destination, they're free to improvise, as needed, in arriving there. The Combat Maneuver Training Center, the unit in charge of military simulations, recommends that officers arrive at the Commander's Intent by asking themselves two questions: If we do nothing else during tomorrow's mission, we must _____ . The single, most important thing that we must do tomorrow is _____

You don't have to speak in monosyllables to be simple. What we mean by "simple" is finding the core of the idea. You can't have five North Stars, you can't have five "most important goals," and you can't have five Commander's Intents. Finding the core is analogous to writing the Commander's Intent—it's about discarding a lot of great insights in order to let the most important insight shine.

A common mistake reporters make is that they get so steeped in the details that they fail to see the message's core; what readers will find important or interesting. This tendency to gravitate toward complexity is perpetually at war with the need to prioritize.

Avoid burying the lead. Don't start with something interesting but irrelevant in hopes of entertaining the audience. Instead, work to make the core message itself more interesting.

Top management can know what the priorities are but be completely ineffective in sharing and achieving those priorities. We know that sentences are better than paragraphs. Two bullet points are better than five. Easy words are better than hard words. It's a bandwidth issue: The more we reduce the amount of information in an idea, the stickier it will be. The Golden Rule is a great symbol of what we're chasing in this chapter; ideas that are compact enough to be sticky and meaningful enough to make a difference. Vassallo said that the Palm Pilot became a successful product "almost because it was defined more in terms of what it was not than in terms of what it was."

Our messages have to be compact, because we can learn and remember only so much information at once. If a message can't be used to make predictions or decisions, it is without value, no matter how accurate or comprehensive it is. Accuracy to the point of uselessness is a symptom of the Curse of Knowledge.

What we've tried to show in this chapter is that the effort is worth it—that “finding the core,” and expressing it in the form of a compact idea, can be enduringly powerful. The most basic way to get someone's attention is this: Break a pattern. Humans adapt incredibly quickly to consistent patterns. Consistent sensory stimulation makes us tune out: We can't succeed if our messages don't break through the clutter to get people's attention.

Naturally sticky ideas are frequently unexpected. If we can make our ideas more unexpected, they will be stickier. Unexpected ideas are more likely to stick because surprise makes us pay attention and think. If we want to motivate people to pay attention, we should seize the power of big surprises. Using surprise in the service of a core message can be extremely powerful.

So, a good process for making your ideas stickier is:

- (1) Identify the central message you need to communicate—find the core;
- (2) Figure out what is counterintuitive about the message—i.e., What are the unexpected implications of your core message? Why isn't it already happening naturally?
- (3) Communicate your message in a way that breaks your audience's guessing machines along the critical, counterintuitive dimension. Then, once their guessing machines have failed, help them refine their machines.

In that instant I realized that journalism was not just about regurgitating the facts but about figuring out the point. The trick to convincing people that they need our message, according to Loewenstein, is to first highlight some specific knowledge that they're missing. The goal is not to summarize; it's to make you care about knowing something, and then to tell you what you want to know. To make our communications more effective, we need to shift our thinking from “What information do I need to convey?” to “What questions do I want my audience to ask?”

Set the context and give people enough back-story that they start to care about the gaps in their knowledge. The students are wisely trying to find a way to break up a big, abstract goal into smaller, more concrete sub-goals. If you've got to teach an idea to a room full of people, and you aren't certain what they know, concreteness is the only safe language.

Using concreteness as a foundation for abstraction is not just good for mathematical instruction; it is a basic principle of understanding. Novices crave concreteness. Have you ever read an academic paper or a technical article or even a memo and found yourself so flummoxed by the fancy abstract language that you were crying out for an example? Trying to teach an abstract principle without concrete foundations is like trying to start a house by building a roof in the air.

Memory, then, is not like a single filing cabinet. It is more like Velcro. If you look at the two sides of Velcro material, you'll see that one is covered with thousands of tiny hooks and the other is covered with thousands of tiny loops. When you press the two sides together, a huge number of hooks get snagged inside the loops, and that's what causes Velcro to seal. Your brain hosts a truly staggering number of loops. The more hooks an idea has, the better it will cling to memory.

Great teachers have a knack for multiplying the hooks in a particular idea. It can feel unnatural to speak concretely about subject matter we've known intimately for years. But if we're willing to make the effort we'll see the rewards: Our audience will understand what we're saying and remember it. Concreteness makes targets transparent. Even experts need transparency.

The use of vivid details is one way to create internal credibility—to weave sources of credibility into the idea itself. In Frank Sinatra's classic "New York, New York," he sings about starting a new life in New York City, and the chorus declares, "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." An example passes the Sinatra Test when one example alone is enough to establish credibility in a given domain.

The Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA). The mission of the PCA is to emphasize that youth sports should not be about winning at all costs; it should be about learning life lessons. The PCA holds positive-coaching seminars for youth sports coaches.

At the seminars, trainers use the analogy of an “Emotional Tank” to get coaches to think about the right ratio of praise, support, and critical feedback. “The Emotional Tank is like the gas tank of an automobile. If your car’s tank is empty, you can’t drive very far. If your Emotional Tank is empty, you are not going to be able to perform at your best.”

How do we get people to believe our ideas? We’ve got to find a source of credibility to draw on. This chapter tackles the emotional component of stickiness, but it’s not about pushing people’s emotional buttons, like some kind of movie tearjerker. Rather, the goal of making messages “emotional” is to make people care. Feelings inspire people to act.

The most basic way to make people care is to form an association between something they don’t yet care about and something they do care about. We make people care by appealing to the things that matter to them.

The duo piano group was rescued from the Curse of Knowledge by a roomful of people relentlessly asking them, “Why?” By asking “Why?” three times, the duo piano group moved from talking about what they were doing to why they were doing it.

Asking “Why?” helps to remind us of the core values, the core principles, that underlie our ideas.

How can we make people care about our ideas? We get them to take off their Analytical Hats. We create empathy for specific individuals. We show how our ideas are associated with things that people already care about. We appeal to their self-interest, but we also appeal to their identities—not only to the people they are right now but also to the people they would like to be. In the last few chapters, we’ve seen that a credible idea makes people believe. An emotional idea makes people care. And in this chapter we’ll see that the right stories make people act.

A story is powerful because it provides the context missing from abstract prose. It’s back to the Velcro theory of memory, the idea that the more hooks we put into our ideas, the better they’ll stick. This is the role that stories play—putting knowledge into a framework that is more lifelike, more true to our day-to-day existence.

More like a flight simulator. Being the audience for a story isn't so passive, after all. Inside, we're getting ready to act. And this is the second major payoff that stories provide: inspiration. Inspiration drives action, as does simulation. Jared (Subway fame) reminds us that we don't always have to create sticky ideas. Spotting them is often easier and more useful.

We came to the conclusion that there are three basic plots:

The Challenge plot,

The Connection plot,

The Creativity plot

The problem is that when you hit listeners between the eyes they respond by fighting back. The way you deliver a message to them is a cue to how they should react. If you make an argument, you're implicitly asking them to evaluate your argument—judge it, debate it, criticize it—and then argue back, at least in their minds. But with a story, Denning argues, you engage the audience—you are involving people with the idea, asking them to participate with you.

The hardest part of using stories effectively is making sure that they're Simple—that they reflect your core message. It's not enough to tell a great story; the story has to reflect your agenda. Stories have the amazing dual power to simulate and to inspire. And most of the time we don't even have to use much creativity to harness these powers—we just need to be ready to spot the good ones that life generates every day.

But let's not forget that it's just as effective to spot sticky ideas as it is to create them. If you're a great spotter, you'll always trump a great creator. Why? Because the world will always produce more great ideas than any single individual, even the most creative one.

The stars of stickiness are the students who made their case by telling stories, or by tapping into emotion, or by stressing a single point rather than ten. Stripping out information, in order to focus on the core, is not instinctual. For an idea to stick, for it to be useful and lasting, it's got to make the audience:

1. Pay attention
2. Understand and remember it
3. Agree/Believe
4. Care
5. Be able to act on