

Sticky Stories Told with Numbers

A review of *Made to Stick* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath, two extraordinary communicators

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While examining the data, Cheryl discovers a large Hispanic population living within an easy drive to her company's East Bay store, which could be tapped as a significant consumer base. Not only are the products ideally suited for this community, these folks could save a great deal of money by purchasing them from Cheryl's company. The executive steering committee will be meeting in three days, so Cheryl reserves a 15 minute slot on the agenda and gets to work. She spends every minute of those three days preparing her presentation. She has read several books about data presentation, so she is not a novice. She knows how to communicate her findings accurately and clearly. When the time arrives, she delivers the presentation flawlessly, leading the executives through a series of charts that outlines the facts. At the end of her allotted time, she is thanked and dismissed. She then waits. Days pass and to her dismay, the matter is never again mentioned. So much for working hard and actually caring about doing a good job—what a waste! Convinced that she has done everything right, and that the executives either didn't care or are too dense to see the obvious, she never again takes her ideas to the steering committee.

I invented Cheryl's story to introduce an important truth about effective communication. Even though this particular scenario is a product of my imagination, you might find it all too familiar. Even a perfectly designed presentation can fail to communicate. It can be delivered flawlessly, but if people listen without sensing its importance, without caring, or without remembering the essential points, it fails.

Ultimately, It's All About Communication

It is important to remind ourselves from time to time that, much more than being about graphics, the visual displays that we create to present information are essentially about *communication*. Graphics describe the mode of communication—visual in this case—but communication is the essence and purpose of the activity.

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Despite what I'm known for professionally, I don't see myself primarily as a graphic or information designer, but as a *communicator* and a *teacher*. I don't focus on data visualization because of any natural talent or interest in graphics. I focus on it because, as someone who works to help people make sense of quantitative information and present what they've found to others, I've been convinced by overwhelming evidence that visual means are often the best. I try to read everything that's written about data visualization, but I spend just as much time reading about communication, education, analysis, decision making, critical thinking, perception, and the workings of the human brain. These areas of study merge to form an interdisciplinary whole that is more enlightening than any of its parts. Every once in a while I find a book that so profoundly explains something about one of these subjects, I feel compelled to tell you about it. *Made to Stick* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath is one such book. It reveals a set of truths about effective communication that will seem like common sense once you've read them, but are not necessarily intuitive until you do. This book doesn't deal with graphical communication at all—at least not specifically—but the lessons it teaches about crafting messages to make them not only understandable but also compelling and memorable, are essential to the work that we do

Chip Heath is a professor of organizational behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. His brother Dan Heath is a consultant at Duke Corporate Education and a co-founder of Thinkwell, a textbook company. A few years ago Chip and Dan realized that they were both working on the same problem, but from different angles: How can we make ideas stick? They were trying to answer two important questions:

Why do some ideas thrive while others die? And how do we improve the chances of worthy ideas?

Some ideas, such as urban legends, proverbs, and well-crafted advertisements have a sticky quality. They get into our heads and remain there. Most business communication, however, is instantly forgotten, and often isn't comprehensible or worth remembering anyway. If you have something important to say, how can you make your message stick?

The brothers Heath have recognized a problem that has long concerned me as well:

There is a curious disconnect between the amount of time we invest in training people how to arrive at an Answer and the amount of time we invest in training them how to Tell Others. It's easy to graduate from medical school or an MBA program without ever taking a class in communication. College professors take dozens of courses in their areas of expertise but none on how to teach... Business managers seem to believe that, once they've clicked through a PowerPoint presentation showcasing their conclusions, they've successfully communicated their ideas. What they've done is share data. If they're good speakers, they may even have created an enhanced sense, among their employees and peers, that they are "decisive" or "managerial" or "motivational"... Surprise will come when they realize that nothing they've said had impact. They've shared data, but they haven't created ideas that are useful and lasting. Nothing stuck. (pages 245 and 246)

The ability to communicate is essential to the work of all professionals—more so than almost anything else—but the need for training in the area remains largely ignored and is seldom even recognized. Poor communication is the cause of incalculable harm, both in our personal

and professional lives. The harm it does to business, which definitely affects the bottom line, is the stuff of tragicomedy. Most could be avoided, but the characters continue to stumble around the stage from one mistake to another, completely unaware. No one, however, is laughing.

Sticky Guidelines

Made to Stick devotes most of its pages to practical answers to the particular communication challenge it addresses: to make good ideas heard, understood, and remembered, and to provide guidance for how to respond. I won't give in to the temptation to share too much of the excellent advice that this book offers, because I don't want you to think that the glimpse that I provide is a substitute for reading the book yourselves. You need to get a copy of your own and keep it handy. I will say enough, however, to demonstrate this book's worth and to wet your appetite for more.

“For people to take action, they have to care”

Here are the book's lessons in a nutshell. Ideas that stick exhibit the following six characteristics:

1. Simplicity
2. Unexpectedness
3. Concreteness
4. Credibility
5. Emotions
6. Stories

Now, to put a bit of meat on these bones, here are a few excerpts from the book that describe these characteristics.

Simplicity

What we mean by “simple” is finding the core of the idea.

“Finding the core” means stripping an idea down to its most critical essence... It's about discarding a lot of great insights in order to let the most important insight shine... The more we reduce the amount of information in an idea, the stickier it will be. (pages 27, 28, and 46)

So, to make a profound idea compact you've got to pack a lot of meaning into a little bit of messaging. And how do you do that? You use flags. You tap the existing memory terrain of your audience. You use what's already there. (page 52)

Unexpectedness

We need to violate people's expectations. We need to be counterintuitive... 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... We can engage people's curiosity over a long period of time by systematically "opening gaps" in their knowledge—and then filling those gaps. (page 16)

Concreteness

How do we make our ideas clear? We must explain our ideas in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information... Speaking concretely is the only way to ensure that our idea will mean the same thing to everyone in our audience. (page 17)

Language is often abstract, but life is not abstract... Abstraction makes it harder to understand an idea and to remember it. It also makes it harder to coordinate our activities with others, who may interpret the abstraction in very different ways. Concreteness helps us avoid these problems. (pages 99 and 100)

The moral of this story is not to "dumb things down"... Rather, the moral of the story is to find a "universal language," one that everyone speaks fluently. Inevitably, that universal language will be concrete. (page 115)

Credibility

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. (page 17)

We can make our ideas more credible, on their own merits, by using compelling details or by using statistics. A third way to develop internal credibility is to use a particular type of example, an example that passes what we call the Sinatra Test... "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. (page 151)

Emotions

For people to take action, they have to care. (page 168)

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 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. (page 203)

Stories

Stories are important teaching tools. They show how context can mislead people to make the wrong decisions. Stories illustrate causal relationships that people hadn't recognized before and highlight unexpected, resourceful ways in which people can solve problems. (pages 205 and 206)

The story's power, then, is twofold: It provides simulation (knowledge about how to act) and inspiration (motivation to act). Note that both benefits, simulation and inspiration, are geared to generating action. (page 206)

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.” (page 214)

The Final Word

If the information that we work so hard to understand and then pass on to others is important, it is worth communicating well. Learning to make ideas stick involves a set of skills that we can't succeed without. We should be grateful to Chip Heath and Dan Heath, kindred spirits to serious business intelligence professionals like us, for learning through extensive research and many months of hard thinking, the principles of stickiness and then so graciously and clearly passing them on to us.



Made to Stick, Chip Heath and Dan Heath, Random House: New York, 2007

About the Author

Stephen Few has worked for over 20 years as an IT innovator, consultant, and teacher. Today, as Principal of the consultancy Perceptual Edge, Stephen focuses on data visualization for analyzing and communicating quantitative business information. He provides training and consulting services, writes the monthly *Visual Business Intelligence Newsletter*, speaks frequently at conferences, and teaches in the MBA program at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of two books: *Show Me the Numbers: Designing Tables and Graphs to Enlighten* and *Information Dashboard Design: The Effective Visual Communication of Data*. You can learn more about Stephen's work and access an entire library of articles at www.perceptualedge.com. Between articles, you can read Stephen's thoughts on the industry in his blog.