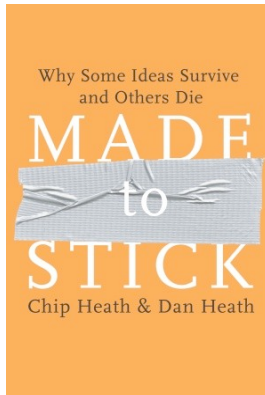


Book Review



Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die: Made to Stick, by Chip Heath and Dan Heath; New York: Random House, 2007, 2008, 336 pp., \$26.00 (hardcover), \$14.99 (eBook), \$29.95 (audiobook)

Reviewed by Sarah Cleveland

When was the last time you attended a presentation and were gripped by the presenter, so much so that you found yourself immediately sharing it with others? Reading *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* by Chip Heath and Dan Heath (Random House, 2008) had that effect on me.

I was introduced to the book by a climatologist I happened to meet on a plane. He referred me to it when I asked him how people reacted to his presentations, given the controversy around his topic. He said he had struggled with alternative framing and messaging in his presentations. His most difficult challenge had been communicating impact—translating metrics such as greenhouse gas emissions into something tangible the audience could understand. In environmental investing, clear messages are particularly critical because this is a relatively new field, and misconceptions cause decision makers to close themselves off to new ideas.

In their book, Chip and Dan Heath help sort out how to communicate what matters. The authors identify six principles of sticky ideas and combine them into the acronym SUCCEsS:

S = Simplicity

U = Unexpectedness

C = Concreteness

C = Credibility

E = Emotions

S = Stories

This simple memory tool (SUCCEsS) has allowed me to describe the book’s key concepts by remembering only a few letters in a memorable order, and building off knowledge I already have (for example, knowing the word “success,” which allowed me to recall the acronym). The process *sounds* easy. All we need to do is create simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional stories, and we’ll be able to have people listen to us, remember what we say, and act on our advice. The process may be “simple,” but it’s not easy.

Made to Stick feels like a cross between a how-to guide and a reference book. The main chapters “show,” rather than describe, each of the principles. At the end of the book, the authors include a handy reference guide and some advice based on their consulting experiences with many companies. I found three sections especially useful: the epilogue “What Sticks,” the chapter “Sticky Advice,” and the “Easy Reference Guide.”

Here is a very brief synopsis of the principles.

Principle	My Simple Takeaway
<p>Simple. In order to be effective communicators, we need to find the core of our message. Simple = core + compact. Proverbs exemplify the idea: “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.” Finding the core of your message and communicating it in one compact statement is very difficult.</p>	<p>Simple does not equal easy.</p>
<p>Unexpected. Our challenge is to get someone’s attention (surprise) and keep it (interest). Have you noticed how Southwest Airlines flight attendants carry out the routine safety announcement? Mundane descriptions of the dos and don’ts for buckling your seat belt are peppered with outrageous statements that catch our attention and make us laugh.</p>	<p>Boring is deadly.</p>
<p>Concrete. We get lost in abstraction unless it’s based on concrete ideas. Fables like “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” and “The Goose That Laid the Golden Egg” pull all this together. We create a memorable message by grounding it in concrete examples and including visual, sensory representation. Case studies are an effective example of this idea.</p>	<p>Come down out of the clouds and walk with the humans.</p>
<p>Credible. We believe because of family (our parents told us), personal experience, or faith. To get others to believe our ideas, we need to have a credible source to draw upon: authorities, celebrities, and anti-authorities. Also, don’t discount the power of details. Statistics are best used to illustrate a relationship or context, rather than only units of measure.</p>	<p>Believing is seeing and connecting.</p>

<p>Emotional. To take action, we have to care. Feelings inspire us to act. Self-interest is a motivator for action (“What’s in it for me?”). Our analytical filter can stifle our ability to feel and can cause us to react differently to emotional requests.</p>	<p>Trust your gut.</p>
<p>Story. Stories are part entertainment and part instruction. They provide the context for abstractions and make them real, or concrete. The following are three basic plot templates for inspirational stories: the Challenge Plot (David and Goliath), the Connection Plot (good Samaritan), and the Creativity Plot (apple falls on Newton’s head). Stories take information and make it more relevant to our day-to-day existence.</p>	<p>Stories stimulate and inspire action.</p>

The summary in the epilogue brings the most important concepts neatly together in a checklist framework. For an audience to take up an idea and have it last, we need to make the audience:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Pay attention: | UNEXPECTED |
| 2. Understand and remember it: | CONCRETE |
| 3. Agree/Believe: | CREDIBLE |
| 4. Care: | EMOTIONAL |
| 5. Be able to act on it: | STORY |

I can’t think of a situation involving communication where these principles *wouldn’t* be relevant. For many years I worked as an investment consultant advising corporate retirement plans and other institutional investors. Clients typically structure quarterly investment committee meetings around communicating and assessing information (for example, finding out how their fund performed) and making a decision based on the detailed information provided. Even though the information format tends to be the same from quarter to quarter, we have the opportunity to create more “stories” that illustrate what is happening in the markets. The appeal of the story depends on its relevance, simplicity, and emotional content. Its power is educational and persuasive, but it is also a vehicle for developing a personal relationship with the client that goes far beyond the information in the presentation.

This is all easier said than done. Every time we present information to institutional clients, we are overwhelmed by data—in the authors’ words, the “Curse of Knowledge.” Data. Data. Data. The numbers alone do not communicate *the* core message. As consultants, our job is to synthesize the data, boil it down to a few key points, and show the relevance to the client. It’s a skill and it takes practice.

I'm sure we all share the experience of attending a presentation or meeting where the presenter lost the audience. It doesn't take much to alienate them: industry jargon, too many abstractions, a monotone reading of material, or just generally not engaging the audience. People don't have the patience to sit through your talk and figure it out for themselves. Blackberries and iPhones will command their attention, and you'll wonder whether anyone is listening. One of my clients had all-day meetings that included quarterly updates from several money managers. Besides the pension trustees, one key staff member and two legal counsels attended. The key staff member was continuously using his Blackberry *and* laptop. I was embarrassed for the staff member because of his blatant disrespect for the presenters, and I wondered how much he was absorbing. One time I was surprised to find that he was exchanging emails on a completely different topic with the legal counsel who was sitting at the opposite end of the conference table!

Since reading *Made to Stick*, I listen differently to presentations and am challenging myself to be clear and more focused. I find myself asking: What's the core message? Where is the excitement and urgency? Is this translated into everyday language? Where's the emotional appeal? How do I communicate with a compelling story? I am constantly fighting the Curse of Knowledge. I see that the SUCCEs approach can help all of us become more effective communicators.

In *Made to Stick*, Chip and Dan Heath offer a valuable tool to help improve communication. Investment professionals in the environmental investing field would be well served to adopt the authors' approach. Communicating to institutional investors in *their* language will help build the bridge necessary to have environmental, social, and corporate governance issues routinely considered throughout the investment process. Just imagine what our world would be like if we were able to move the topic of climate change from "important" to "urgent." We would all be in action, working to improve the chances of having a habitable planet for future generations.

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