

Using Communications As An Agent of Organizational Change:

Applying The Principles Of *Made To Stick*

Version : 1.0
Date : July 2008
Author : Jack Probst, IT Management Consultant
Location : Pink Elephant, Burlington, ON



1 INTRODUCTION

Thinking back to your last process implementation project, surely there were many challenges and times perhaps when you weren't sure if the project would succeed or fail. Doing the necessary amount of planning, naturally you found the right resources that would make the project successful. You identified risks and developed the right mitigation strategies. You performed all the right project management tasks; however, project success was sitting on the fence – not because the project hadn't been well managed, but due to a substantial factor that most, if not all, process projects face.

The greatest challenge that Pink Elephant's consultants have found with process projects is not necessarily all the hard work that goes into planning the project, doing the process design, testing that design, configuring the tool and planning for implementation. At the end of the day, the greatest challenge is changing the behavior of our fellow associates.

The change issue really boils down to the fact that people in your organization are being asked to do something very different from what they have done in the past – which they were very successful at doing. There is also the perception, right or wrong, that implementing process will impinge on individual creativity or initiative. If we multiply the individual concerns across the organization, the issue becomes culture change. So, when the process project team “shows up” one day with a new way of working – it is quite certain the organization will push back. No one likes surprises, and much less surprises about the way someone is asked to do their job.

One critical and vital ingredient that is needed to assure process project success is solid project communications. This does not mean just an article in the company newsletter about the process project. What this refers to is a well thought-out and planned communication strategy that has a focus and is designed to have maximum impact on the reader or listener.

Much has been written and talked about regarding communication strategies – especially project communications. The commonly accepted approach is to identify your stakeholders; determine what information they need; identify the best forum to deliver the message; determine how often and when the message should be delivered, and so forth.

In Pink Elephant's experience, the real key to successful project communications is not just the planning and the execution of a project communications strategy and plan. The key ingredient for affecting individual and cultural change is carefully crafting and designing a message that will have maximum impact. When communicating to a target audience, the message must be designed in such a way that the project team is assured that those impacted by the project will act or behave differently. In other words, the message has to “stick”.



Communications, in and of itself, is not the silver bullet to affect individual or organizational change. There are other factors such as governance, policies, elimination of systemic or organizational roadblocks and so forth that must be brought to bear; however, the purpose of this paper is to outline how communications can be an instrument of that change.



Table Of Contents

1	INTRODUCTION	2
2	ORIGINS OF THE STICKINESS FACTOR: THE TIPPING POINT	5
3	SIX PRINCIPLES OF THE STICKINESS FACTOR	7
4	SPUTNIK: 'MADE TO STICK' IN THE REAL WORLD	18
5	REFERENCES	21



2 ORIGINS OF THE STICKINESS FACTOR: THE TIPPING POINT

The premise of communication's role in organizational change was first outlined in Malcolm Gladwell's book, *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell described how massive societal change or social epidemics were about the rapid spread of ideas and a resultant change in group behavior.

What Gladwell suggests as societal epidemics or societal change sounds a lot like organizational change. Consider what is done when new processes are implemented. In effect, mass or organizational change is stimulated when a concept about a new way of working is developed and spread throughout the organization – this is a very similar concept to what Gladwell described on a larger scale.

Gladwell noted that behavior change will move at a moderate pace until certain factors come together to reach a “tipping point”, after which the behavior change is no longer gradual but quite dramatic. Similarly, when new processes are implemented there is the “break-in period”: the time during the process project when individuals achieve an understanding of the different way of working, the challenges of managing the rough spots are done, and the benefits of working differently are identified. But, there is that point in the life of a new process when the organization embraces the new way of working – the tipping point is reached.

Gladwell then described how social epidemics (*or organizational change*) were affected. He found that social “epidemics are a function of the people (*project team*) who transmit infectious agents (*communications*), the infectious agent itself (*the process and process documentation*) and the environment (*the work place or organizational culture*) in which the infectious agent is operating. When *the organization tips*, when it is jolted out of equilibrium, it tips because something has happened, some change has occurred in one (or two or three) of those areas.”ⁱ

Gladwell named three agents of social change that underlie social epidemics:

- Law of the Few
- The Stickiness Factor
- The Power of Context

Although all the agents are important as we think about organizational change, it is the Stickiness Factor which is the “infectious agent” – the message of change is transmitted in such a way that a Tipping Point is reached. In other words, a message's “stickiness” assures the influence of a key message about a change is heard and not ignored.

To put it differently, a goal in implementing new or updated processes is to change individual and collective behavior; therefore, if we can craft a message such that the



audience hears and internalizes that message, and acts or behaves differently, then we would say that the message is “sticky” – a clear goal of any change initiative.

A sticky message is a message that has long lasting impact. It becomes that nagging “tune” you can’t get out of your head or the slogan that you find easy to repeat. Most importantly, the message is such that it subtly, or overtly, causes you to change your behavior and influence the behavior of others.



3 SIX PRINCIPLES OF THE STICKINESS FACTOR

Unfortunately, Gladwell didn't provide a prescription as to how to design the "sticky" message. That void was filled by the work of Chip and Dan Heath, authors of *Made To Stick*. The Heath brothers extended the concept of stickiness through their own research into the impact of communications on consumer behavior and on learning.

The Stickiness Factor is defined by Six Principles. These principles, when applied to communications, create the "sticky message". The principles are:

- Simple
- Unexpected
- Concrete
- Credible
- Emotional
- Stories

The balance of this paper focuses on describing each of these principles and identifying techniques that can be used to support organizational change.

3.1 Simple

The first principle is "keep the message simple" – the idea is that all messages must be stripped down to their core. Core is the essence of the message – in other words, finding and illustrating what is most important to the message and ignoring everything else; but, simple doesn't imply inane.

The message must be poignant through its simplicity. For instance, we have all heard and understood the "Golden Rule" or "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" – or some translation of the phrase. The message is quite compact, but the effect can be life changing in its meaning. Compact refers to the way the message is condensed to just a few words, but words that are powerful and compelling. In the case of the Golden Rule, the message is so simple that any child can recite it, clearly understand the intent, and hopefully act accordingly.

Simplicity's application can be illustrated by three concepts. The first is called the Commander's Intent. This concept is derived from a military approach used when conveying orders of battle. The Commander's Intent is the simple, direct communications to field officers, before an engagement, about the engagement's goal. The communication strips out all unnecessary detail, leaving only the necessary guidance the field officers can, within their own discretion, act upon. This is essential because, on the battle field, a general can't anticipate in advance all the conditions the field officers will face – in other words, the commanding officer can't be so prescriptive regarding battle orders that no deviation is allowed. Instead, the battle commander cites the



objective simply and clearly, and leaves the implementation of the objective to those engaged in the affair.

The second simplicity concept is known as avoiding “burying the lead”. The idea here is to prioritize the components of the message and deliver the most essential or core elements first in a communication. Then, as additional support or clarification is needed, additional elements can be appended to the message. In the first few words of the message, the focus is clear, can stand on its own and if needed, additional information follows.

This concept was developed during the American Civil War (1861 – 1865). During the war, newspaper field correspondents would gather the facts about a key battle and then head to the nearest telegraph site to transmit their story back to their editors. But, telegraph was not used just to transmit news stories to newsrooms. Each side – the Union and the Confederacy – would also use the telegraph to communicate with field commanders and with headquarters. It wasn’t an uncommon event for one side to cut the telegraph wires of their opponent. The news reporters developed a practice, which continues today, of first stating the most important facts of the story (the lead), then following the lead with supporting details, never knowing when the telegraph service might be disrupted.

The final simplicity concept the Heath brothers suggest is the use of proverbs or analogies. These simple constructs convey a very powerful message. An example of an analogy often used to make a point is a Far Side cartoon published years ago. The cartoon depicts a deer with a bull’s eye on his side. The punch line, from one of his fellow deer, reads, “Bummer birthmark Fred!” This analogy is useful when talking about the laser-like attention change agents receive on projects. Ever feel that way? The message comes across very simply and without the need for additional clarification so that everyone understands.

To streamline the principle of simplicity, a simple formula is:

“Simple = core + compact”ⁱⁱ

One approach for applying project simplicity is for project sponsors to borrow from the work of Professor John Kotter in *Leading Change: Create A Vision*. The vision “refers to a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create the future”ⁱⁱⁱ. To be impactful, the vision must be core and compact. It must be easily understood in terms of its intent, and stripped clean of superfluous language. In Kotter’s approach, the vision serves as the magnetic north for organizational change. A simple, well constructed and communicated vision will:

- Simplify decision making by the project teams
- Serve as a motivational force to keep people moving in the right direction

- Help coordinate the work of many individuals who are all attempting to change the organization

A vision, or the sponsor's key message about a change project, could not accomplish these outcomes if it wasn't easily understood. Do your projects have a solid vision statement developed by the sponsor and his or her guiding coalition, which meets the principles of simplicity – core and compact?

Another application of simplicity in project communications is the effective use of brands or logos. One project team developed a catchy project slogan and logo which was associated with the project. The tag line and logo were used for all project communications. When members of the organization saw the logo or read the label, they immediately associated a message with the project – a very effective use of simplicity.

3.2 Unexpected

What makes a good joke? A punch line is something you don't expect – that's what makes it funny. For instance, what makes this cartoon funny?



A doctor and patient talking to each other is commonplace – a doctor and frog might not be; but, the unexpected nature of the x-ray grabs your attention. It's funny – at least we think so.

Sticky messages must grab the attention of the audience. The Heaths point out that “one of the first problems of communications is getting people's attention”.^{iv} A message that



is a repeat of the same and the mundane doesn't work – think about how many e-mails you delete without reading them because you know that the message or the author is the same old, same old. The message must work in contrast to expectations, and the result must be unexpected – out of context.

For example, consider the start of a recent flight on Southwest Airlines. The flight attendant, for probably the fourth time that day, performed the obligatory safety speech. What was different about this message was the result – everyone looked up from whatever they were doing and listened. It wasn't because the message was any different – they all are basically the same – it was because she SANG the safety speech to a rendition of “Somewhere over the Rainbow”, made famous in the Wizard of Oz. And, of course, it was during a flight to Orlando, so the theme fit. For one of the first times in recent memory, this message held the attention of the audience. The context was completely unexpected and a delightful surprise.

Another approach to hold an audience's attention is to pose an impactful but unanswered question. At times, Pink Elephant consultants find the need to make a point about service or system availability. Of course, everyone understands how important system availability is and why we should focus on uptime and “well performing” systems to keep the customer happy; but, what if we made the availability message personal and used something unexpected to make the point?

My example regarding service availability involves the use of short video and a question about when the cost of service availability is too much (or not enough). I start with a short pitch about the size and complexity of the Boeing 747 jumbo jet. The 747 can carry over 500 passengers on trips exceeding 7,000 nautical miles. The audience may not be aware that computers play a big part in maneuvering the 747. It would make sense that computer availability is important, especially if you are a passenger on a 747.

Now for the question about availability: “What does six 9s availability mean to the 747?” If six 9s or 99.9999% availability translates to roughly 30 seconds of unplanned downtime a year, would the group want their 30 seconds of unplanned annual downtime (begin a video clip of a 747 landing) right about here? The video clip is of a 747 in the last seconds before a landing at the old Hong Kong airport. Imagine a 747 approaching a runway at a 45 degree angle to the runway. Then, mere seconds before the aircraft touches down, the pilot makes an abrupt turn to straighten the plane with the runway. The turn is so abrupt that the plane lands first on the inside set of wheels. The question – right here – is asked just as the pilot makes the abrupt turn. The unexpected nature of the visual, and the question that is asked, results typically in a collective gasp from the audience. The point is made – availability comes with a price. For simple systems or applications, high availability may be too expensive and unwarranted. But the price of high system availability is not too large when life is at risk.

How do you apply this principle in project communications? The key is to find ways to break the mold of the intended or expected context. One approach used by a team to



present project and process information was to couch the communications into the topics of a game show. The message was more poignant, as one of the participants was the program sponsor. The game show questions were based on the facts or process knowledge required for or about the project. Most of those invited to the meeting weren't expecting more than the typical Power Point presentation and "lecture". What was unexpected was that people had fun. Those who attended got the message, and outside the standard context of the typical project communication.

Another approach is to find ways to build mystery and suspense into the message. Can you use a leading and compelling question at the start of your presentation that you will only answer at the end? This method requires some nifty design, but the right message can be targeted by tying the question and answer – something important to the audience – to the key message to be delivered.

Last but not least, tie your message to another story or anecdote. Trust me, the change agents in the room know and understand the "bummer birthmark".

3.3 Concrete

The concrete message is one that is figuratively, if not literally, felt by the senses. What if it was said that a noise was as painful as the sound of dragging fingers across a chalkboard, or the sound of a dentist's drill? Your reaction is visceral – you feel it because you have physically experienced the sound before.

Our brains remember concrete data from our experience base. One of the most poignant memory keys suggested by the Heath brothers is the need to associate a message with memory "Velcro strips".

We all have had shared experiences – although many experiences are culturally dependent and so forth; but, within an organization, there are those things that we see and do every day that are common. These are the experiences that we try to leverage in our message, such that the message itself sticks to one of our shared Velcro hooks.

The idea is that we learn within context. The context can be tying a message to an event that others have suffered through (e.g. the last time you called a customer help line and were put on hold F – O – R – E – V – E – R). If the message is about creating a positive customer experience, we can all associate with this prior experience of perceived poor customer service. We only need to trigger the experience and the meaning is clear.

Another approach is bringing the message to the forefront by going from the abstract to the real. Simulations have become very effective for this very reason. Typical simulations create an artificial environment into which the "players" are placed. An effective simulation requires the participants to work within the simulated environment and to apply real world principles or work practices. It is possible to train for the real world within the abstract setting of a simulation. Thus, we are able to try out the new or



tangible way of working in an environment that is challenging, without fear of “breaking” the organization.

How do you apply this principle to your project communications? One effective technique is to put people mentally in a situation and ask them to envision how they handle it. An effective use of this approach was demonstrated in a driver education program. The facilitator had the group close their eyes and imagine their drive in that morning. The sun was shining, the birds were singing, the music was playing – and then a tire on the car in front of you flies off – what do you do, Linda? Linda was placed in a setting that she had recently experienced, and had to react to the challenge posed by the facilitator.

Another approach is to challenge project groups to describe what the future will be like for the organization when the project is complete and everyone has gone back to their day jobs. The activity is to describe “what will a day in the life of the typical IT associate be like when ITIL is fully implemented”? Or, “can you describe what you would do differently if you weren’t spending so much time on change-related incidents”? The team must craft the description, maybe as a magazine article five years in the future describing what it will feel like to work in the new process-based world.

3.4 Credible

Although the messenger is important, credibility is not just about who gives the message; but, that the message itself resonates with what we believe to be true. There have been situations when a message is delivered by someone in an organization who doesn’t have the political clout. Although the veracity of the message is unquestioned, the message is not considered believable or worthy of attention. Also, consider the impact of a consultant in your organization. It seems true that the word of an external source is needed to validate the same thing you have been telling the CIO for some time.

The source of the message is important. Take for instance the story of Paul Revere’s ride. On the evening of April 18, 1775 Boston silversmith Paul Revere and William Dawes set out on separate journeys to convey the message “The British are coming”. They personally took this message to the villages in and around Boston, especially those on the way to Lexington. Interesting that the message was the same; but, the results of each of the messengers were completely different.

After two hours Paul Revere had traveled the 13 miles from Boston to Lexington, MA banging on doors in the middle of the night, alerting militias and town leaders to the approaching danger. In the days before radio, telegraph or other modern means, the message spread rapidly, by word of mouth and on the strength of Revere’s say-so, more than 40 miles northwest of Boston to Andover within five hours. On the strength of this communication, the militias were rallied and the British soundly thumped at Lexington later that day.



Contrast that success with the failed attempt by William Dawes. Dawes traveled a different path to Lexington; but, he conveyed the same message and had little success in raising the alarm. Dawes arrived in Lexington shortly after Revere but many of the citizens of the towns he visited did not find out about the potential march of the British until the next day. Interesting that on the surface the actions of the two men were identical but the results were drastically different!

Why the difference? The answer lies in the fact that Revere was considered a credible messenger, whereas Dawes wasn't. Revere was widely known through the area due to his active involvement in community affairs and the resistance movement. Dawes' word was taken at face value and the message's credibility was questioned enough for townspeople to not raise the alarm and send men and arms to meet the British. Thus, credibility requires that we find sources for our message that are considered experts or would be considered credible by the audience.

Another source of credibility is the message itself. One way of doing that is using the listener's personal experience or background as a litmus test for the credibility of the message.

An example of this approach is a Wendy's commercial in the early 80s. The message was that Wendy's hamburgers had more beef (or were bigger) than those of Burger King. The ad effectively used consumer experience to get the message across.

One approach might have been to use cold, hard facts stating the obvious – Wendy's burgers are XX% bigger. Instead, Wendy's employed the customer experience advertising gambit to make the same point.

You may recall Clara Peller, a wonderfully short elderly woman, who stares over the top of the Burger King counter, lifts the bun, looks at the burger and shouts "where's the beef?" The point was made – Wendy's burgers were bigger. The audience could put themselves in Clara's shoes by suggesting that they may have thought the same thing.

The ad was very successful. Wendy's sales shot up 47 percent in the two months after the ad aired. Perception was reality for the target audience – they believed that in their experience (the audience was its own judge of credibility) that Wendy's burgers were in fact bigger and the switch was on.

For project communications, the key is to ask a question of a message: "If I was sitting on the receiving end of this message, would I believe it?" Can the message deliver what is most important to the audience – does it answer the "what's in it for me" (or WIIFM), which every credible message must answer? Whose opinion would the target audience accept as a credible source? Is more credibility attached to an outside expert, an internal leader or one of the audience's peers? The answer, of course, is it depends on the nature of the audience, the critical issue of the message, the context, etc.



Never sell short the power of outside experts, especially those who have “earned the scars” of similar experiences. There is also the value of case studies or reference sources from other organizations. At conferences, what are the best cases you’ve heard that apply to your situation? Can you get that speaker on the phone to talk to your project team and share insights?

Credibility must be earned in the eyes and mind of the audience.

3.5 Emotional

If you want an audience to remember the message, they must feel it – deep down or “within their gut”. In other words, when an audience feels a message emotionally, they can be “attached” to it. When people feel an emotional attachment to a message, they will care about it – the message has become personal.

People feel emotions about events or messages that impact others – the effect must be tangible to someone. What the listener won’t form an attachment to are abstractions. Messages must relate to what others are sensing and experiencing in order to be considered important and impactful to an audience. The emotional experience will cause the audience to take off its analytical spectacles and take action. That’s the objective of the sticky message – to take action! The best part of this principle is that you, the messenger, do not have to create an emotion – it already exists.

As an example, one of the major targets of anti-smoking campaigns has been, for some time, teenagers. Of course, there have been many attempts at communicating the harm of smoking to the all-knowing and all-seeing teenager.

Two anti-smoking campaigns were tested earlier this decade. One, as a fact-based approach sponsored by a major tobacco company entitled “Think. Don’t Smoke”. The message was statistically clear that smoking can harm you and impact your long-term health. The facts were evident, but the message didn’t hit an emotional tone.

The other campaign was called a Truth ad. The Truth ad begins with a picture of a building and a caption below that reads “Outside the headquarters of a major tobacco company”. The ad continues as a semi-truck stops in front of the building and teens begin unloading and stacking white sacks marked “Body Bag” in front of the building. The stack gets higher and higher. At the end of the ad, one teen grabs a megaphone and angrily shouts at the building “Do you know how many people tobacco kills every day?” The number is the pile of body bags – 1800. The emotion was obvious and the fact that it was coming from a member of the teenage peer group was powerful.

When the ads were tested with teens, the number of teens who remembered the Truth ad was 22% compared to 3% for the Think ad. The anger of the demonstrator left a meaningful and lasting emotional impression on the teenage audience^v.



Another emotional tug is appealing to self-interest. This is the concept of WIIFM. There is a principle of advertising that suggests that an ad must detail the “benefit of the benefit” of a product for the ad to be successful.

An example of this principle can be found in the ITIL V3 books. At the top of page 31 in the *Service Strategy* book is a quote from Professor Emeritus Theodore Levitt, Harvard Business School – “People do not want quarter inch drills. They want quarter inch holes”. This message is poignant because people don’t buy drills just to make holes. Instead, they make holes for a purpose, such as hanging their daughter’s picture – the benefit of the benefit.

The last example from *Made To Stick* stuck because the audience “lived” through the “eyes of the message”. The authors cited the case of a design firm that a hospital hired to make improvements to their workflow. The design firm expected significant resistance to suggesting any change to the tried and true processes in the hospital, something similar to IT process projects. The design firm had to motivate the staff to change, and used a very simple but powerful and emotionally-based approach.

The design firm shot a video of a patient who had just been admitted to the emergency room with a broken leg; but, the perspective of the video is through the eyes of the patient. The scenes were shot to show what the patient saw and experienced lying on the gurney (staring at the ceiling) being wheeled in from the ambulance and into the examining room. The impact was startling – the staff didn’t realize the patient experience until they “felt it” through the sights and sounds of the video. They lived inside the frame of reference of that patient. They felt the WIIFM.

The importance of self-interest is undervalued and potentially underused. We believe that in many cases the importance and emotion of self-interest is lost in lofty project goals or mission statements. Instead, what does the audience really want to hear – “what can this project do for me? Is this a process project for the sake of process?” or “will I or my department benefit in an appreciable way from the effort and project deliverables – WIIFM”?

How can you apply the principle of emotion to your project communications? The principle suggests you ask and answer several questions with respect to your project communications.

- How well do you know your audience? Do you know what their work experiences are like? What are their pain points? What do they take pride in?
- What does your audience care strongly enough about that they would be willing to change how they work?
- What will the audience say is the answer to the WIIFM question? What is the benefit of the benefit to them? Can you describe the end result such that each



- person feels the importance of the benefit? The benefit must be tangible to every member of the audience.
- Everyone wants to be better or do better – what is the “better” for your audience?
 - Where are the heart strings of the audience? You can’t touch them all, but is there a compelling issue or benefit that makes your message memorable to the group?

3.6 Stories

This last principle is one that many of our consultants and educators use on a regular basis – the telling of stories.

Historical record has been passed from generation to generation through stories. Stories are told to teach a lesson, to entertain, or to provide a basis for others to see the future through the words of the story-teller. Stories are rich tapestries that, if used well, can provide a way for others to share common experiences or live vicariously through the words as if “hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.”^{vi}

Stories serve two principle purposes – the first is a simulation or instruction in how to act. Think about typical lunch room conversations at work. Many of those conversations are stories of what “just happened” to me, or Bob or Mary. What do you get from those discussions – other than possibly a good laugh or mutual commiserating on the challenges of the day? When someone shares their experience through a story, they are sharing their personal learning “event”. The story is a very informal means to help others solve future similar problems using the joint shared experience of the story.

The other purpose of a story is to serve as an inspiration to others and to give them the energy to act. Inspiring stories will address one of three key plots – challenges (overcoming obstacles), connections (the trials of relationships) or creativity (finding new ways to think).

An example that touches on all three of the plots is the tale of Jared Fogle – the Subway store icon.

Jared, an Indiana University student in the late 90s, weighed 425 pounds and he wore a 60-inch pair of pants. Reacting to a medical scare, Jared decided to do something about his diet. Jared had seen a Subway ad and decided to try their sandwiches as his approach to a diet. His idea, which probably isn’t one everyone would try, was a crash diet of Subway sandwiches – one for lunch and one for dinner.

Within three months, Jared’s weight dropped to 330 pounds. He lost another 100 pounds in another three months. Then, coupling his new diet with exercise, Jared continued to drop a pound a day to finish at 180 pounds.



The story of Jared's "Subway diet" was captured by Subway's Chicago ad agency. An ad featuring Jared's story ran January 1, 2000. The "Jared story" was subsequently picked up by the media and talk shows. The story was an instant and profitable success – the message or benefit of the healthy effect from eating Subway sandwiches was heard. Case in point, in 1999 Subway sales had been flat. In 2000, revenues jumped 18 percent and in 2001 jumped another 16 percent. This growth occurred while other sandwich chains were experiencing growth of around seven percent. The public had heard the story and felt motivated to try it – much to the benefit of the Subway franchisees.

Jared is a great story, but how does this help your projects? Very simply, stories are the way to establish the legacy of and about your projects and project success. Every project has stories of quick wins, opportunities met or challenges overcome. It is up to the project team to find those stories and retell them. This is the opportunity to teach from the shared experience and to motivate others to act – because we have the story of someone else to point to.

We encourage project teams to find the "project storyteller". Find the message that is critical to the project and find the anecdotes which support those messages and repeat them. Just like any skill, story-telling gets better with exercise. For tips on how to create or collect stories, see Chapter 5 in Daniel Pink's *A Whole New Mind*^{vii}.



4 SPUTNIK: 'MADE TO STICK' IN THE REAL WORLD

The principles of *Made To Stick* (SUCCES) work because the audience gets a vote. In other words, *Made To Stick* is important as an approach because it recognizes that the audience (the receiver) is not passive in the communications. Instead, messages stick because the sender is concerned that not only the message is transmitted but that the recipient acts differently as a result. If you don't like the message (it doesn't stick), you, the receiver, get to vote by not doing a thing.

One last example to bring this all together is in order. In recent memory there was a marvelous use, by a national leader, of most, if not all of the principles of *Made To Stick*, which helped to create a Tipping Point. This example also helps to illustrate one of the six principles – a story.

The space race began on October 4, 1957 when the Soviet Union launched Sputnik 1. This single event shot a tremor through many in the United States (US) and elsewhere. Up until the launch of Sputnik, the US considered itself to be superior in technology and technological advancements; but, with the launch of a single satellite, the Soviets demonstrated they could launch a satellite into space and the unanswered question was whether or not the Soviets could do the same with a nuclear weapon – a very unsettling thought.

The US launched its own satellite four months later; but, the US space agency – NASA – seemed to be one step behind.

Then, on May 25, 1961 John F. Kennedy delivered a “sticky” message that galvanized a nation. Before a joint session of congress, at the end of a speech on “Urgent National Needs” Kennedy said, “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”^{viii}

The message met the six principles of a sticky message.

Simple – The message was very simple and direct – the US was committed to a successful manned mission to the moon before the end of the decade. Decisions, by many people, could easily be made on the basis of the message because its essence or core was easily understood.

Unexpected – No one anticipated a goal so far beyond than simply competing measure for measure with the Soviets in space. Nor did anyone expect this goal to be part of Kennedy's speech.

Concrete – The goal was clear and success measureable.



Credible – There is no spokesman more credible than the leader of a country, delivering the message to the assembled body of lawmakers.

Emotional – The message struck a chord with a nation that was struggling with its identity in the midst of the Cold War. This message provided the hope that the US would regain its lead as a leader in the world – at least the technology world. Kennedy extended the message in a speech he gave at Rice University in September, 1962. It is informative to compare the texts of the Message to Congress and the Rice speech to see how Kennedy met the WIIFM and set the emotional ties for his audiences.

Story – Although Kennedy did not tell a story to emphasize his point, moments before he referenced a story that everyone understood – the launch of Sputnik 1. He then described how he and the Vice President (Lyndon Johnson) had been working to “take longer strides--time for a great new American enterprise--time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievement, which in many ways may hold the key to our future on earth.” It was his intention to set his own ending to the story that began in October, 1957.

The message stuck and that is the story I frequently tell about how a vision, offered by President Kennedy, motivated a nation (or culture) to accept a huge challenge and to accomplish many extraordinary things. Sacrifices were made, advances achieved and technological resources were applied to fulfill the message (or the challenge of the message). The stickiness of that message was fully realized on July 21, 1969 as Neil Armstrong stepped on the face of the moon. “That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind”.

In closing, a word or two of caution is in order. There are two major pitfalls of sticky messages – analysis paralysis and the curse of knowledge.

I think we are all familiar with analysis paralysis – overanalyzing because we have to get the message perfect. There is the principle of 80% is enough or as an old boss once told me – focus on “satisficing”. “Satisficing” was his way of avoiding analysis paralysis. His thought was to do what was satisfactory to get sufficient results. He believed that you could always improve on initial efforts – the key was to get moving. When designing your messages, take into account that you won’t or can’t be successful in impacting or affecting everyone. Design your message to motivate or enable as many as possible to behave differently – don’t shoot for 100% – that is too high a bar to clear.

The curse of knowledge is a bit different, yet it is a challenge that stands in the way of all communications. The curse is that you already are well-versed in what you want to communicate – you know your topic inside and out. Unfortunately, many communications begin from that premise – the messenger assumes that everyone has the same knowledge and experience he or she has. The result is that the messenger may take short cuts in his/her communications, thinking that others “get it” as well, or they can make the necessary intuitive leaps. A good example of the curse of knowledge is our



reliance on acronyms in our every day communications. We all find ourselves caught in the same bind of acronyms – doesn't everyone know what ITSM stands for?

To avoid the curse of knowledge, put yourself in the "receivers shoes". Base your message on the premise that you may be communicating with someone who knows little or nothing about your topic – in other words, don't assume prior knowledge about what you know so well!

So, that's it. What are you waiting for – go forth, communicate and make it stick!



5 REFERENCES

ⁱ Gladwell, Malcolm. *The Tipping Point – How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*. Little, Brown and Company, 2002. 18-19

ⁱⁱ Heath, Dan and Heath, Chip. *Made To Stick – Why Some Ideas Survive And Others Die*. Random House, New York, 2007. 45

ⁱⁱⁱ Kotter, John. *Leading Change*. Harvard Business School Press, Boston, MA 1996. 68

^{iv} Heath and Heath. 64

^v Heath and Heath 169-170

^{vi} Heath and Heath 18

^{vii} Pink, Daniel. *A Whole New Mind*. Penguin Books, 2006. 115-128

^{viii} Kennedy, John F. – *Special Message to Congress on Urgent National Needs – page 4*
– John F Kennedy Library