

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.

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-

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.

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

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 SUCCEs. This is sheer coincidence, of course. (Okay, we admit, SUCCEs 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 sticklogists. Moreover, many of the principles have a commonsense ring to them: Didn’t most of us already have the intu-

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.

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