

August 2007

The Desired Outcome

This Month: Communications that really break through

In this issue:

Your Business: [Read this book: Made to Stick, by Chip and Dan Heath >>](#)

Your People: [Give your people a reason to care >>](#)

Your Publicity: [Fight the Bull >>](#)

Your Life: [The low-carb Margarita >>](#)



Patty Azzarello
CEO Azzarello Group

YOUR BUSINESS

Made to Stick

Read this book!

***Made to Stick*, by Chip and Dan Heath. Why some ideas Survive and Others Die**

More information is coming at us than ever before. Customers and employees all have their minds on what is important to them, with very little room or motivation for new information to "go in".

As a business leader you need to make sure that your ideas and communications are breaking through. You need your customers to understand what you are talking about to act on it, and your employees to understand what they should be doing.

And neither have much inclination to listen.

Typical communications like "provide best customer service in the industry" or "increase shareholder value" are not Sticky. And not effective.

Help is on the way...

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die

This book does an excellent job dissecting what makes some ideas "sticky", and gives very specific tools to help you transform your ideas into sticky communications.

The authors comment ... "*The Bird in the Hand* proverb is an astoundingly sticky idea. It has survived more than 2500 years. It has spread across continents, cultures and languages. Keep in mind that nobody funded a *Bird in the Hand* advertising campaign. The idea sells itself." That's sticky.

You get hit right up from with the challenge that:

A sticky communication is one that the listener should be able to re-tell to someone else -- after hearing it for the FIRST time!

OK, check out your website, your marketing materials, or your last employee communication. Ask someone to read it one time, "close the book", pick up the phone and tell someone else about it.

Did your communication pass the test? It's a tall order.

OK, so here's my dilemma. I love this book and want to review it. One of the things that makes it great is that it is loaded with concrete examples. But, if I cite the examples I'd be re-writing the book.

And If *explain* the examples, I am doing exactly what the book advocates not doing - being abstract! So here is my somewhat un-sticky review of *Made to Stick*.

Since big part of my business is communication, I am always looking for ways to improve it. I will confess that not all my communications pass this sticky test, but this book has inspired me to focus on making key communications extra sticky.

Not only does this book do a good job of dissecting what makes an idea sticky, it also gives very, specific and concrete ideas for how to do it.

The authors use this acronym of "SUCCESS" (which they admit is a bit cheesy) to create a framework for what makes ideas sticky.

- ✦ Simplicity.
- ✦ Unexpected
- ✦ Concrete
- ✦ Credible
- ✦ Emotional
- ✦ Story

Simplicity:

Simplicity is not about sound bytes or dumbing down of information. The authors state: "it is about ideas that are both simple AND profound". The way to get there is to focus your idea on its real core, and then describe it in a compact way.

The techniques to get to a core + compact idea:

- ✦ Using visual Proverbs
- ✦ Find the single most important thing and communicate only that
- ✦ Don't bury the lead
- ✦ How Complexity causes Decision Paralysis
- ✦ Tapping into existing schemas
- ✦ Using Generative analogies

One example I found particularly relevant to business and tech communications is about using existing schemas, to get around what I describe of the "curse of being accurate".

Use something that is known to describe something new. An example:

"A pomelo is the largest citrus fruit. The rind is very thick, but soft and easy to peel away. The resulting fruit is light yellow to coral pink", accurate, yes. But Sticky: "the pomelo is basically a super size grapefruit".

In business, and particularly in high tech, there is so much focus on explaining and differentiating what we offer, that we often create very long (and very accurate) descriptions of our things.

Instead we could give our listener something simple that they already know and can relate to, and then share our important differences only after they understand what we are talking about.

Accurate descriptions are not sticky. Check your website again.

Unexpected:

"The most basic way to get someone's attention is to break a pattern. Surprise gets our attention, interest keeps it."

The techniques the authors further develop and discuss in this area are:

- ✦ Break peoples' guessing machines
- ✦ Create a mystery
- ✦ Highlight a knowledge gap
- ✦ Priming the gap

We often fail to get messages across in our business speak, because we create highly accurate descriptions which create no thirst for needing to know more.

Creating a mystery creates a need for it to be resolved. It's why we watch bad movies till the end.

There is also a great discussion about "priming the gap" where if your audience doesn't know anything about what you are telling them, it's important to give them enough back story so that they can begin to appreciate what they are missing, so that you can then create the gap.

This is described as "preceding the aha experience, with a huh? experience".

Again, in technology and in business, we tend to jump right in to describing our offer before we give people enough back story or context to understand why they should care about it.

Concrete

Communications which contain concrete elements are by far the most sticky.

Fables like "the bird in the hand" and "sour grapes" are sticky because they express thoughts with concrete elements. The authors comment that Aesop's "sour grapes" fable would not have survived for thousands of years if it were communicated as: "Aesop's helpful suggestions: Don't be such a bitter jerk when you fail".

The authors provide specific examples to use concreteness in each of these areas:

- ✦ Make abstractions concrete
- ✦ Put people into the story
- ✦ The Velcro theory of memory
- ✦ Simulations
- ✦ Create a turf where people can bring their knowledge to bear

An excellent example they share on making an important concept concrete was when the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CPSI) (a non profit organization that educates the public about nutrition) realized that a medium size serving of movie popcorn contained 37 grams of saturated fat, and needed to communicate this to the movie going public.

Think of all the non-sticky ways they could have communicated this:

"Movie popcorn has 27 grams of saturated fat which is 17 grams more fat than is recommend for a whole day"

"Movie popcorn is fatty, and excess fat is bad for you"

I could go on writing more equally accurate and non-sticky versions of this information.

Instead what the CSPI did was held a press conference where it presented "A medium sized butter popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theater contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon-and-eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and Fries, and a steak dinner combined".

And they laid out the full spread of food for the cameras.

That's concrete. That's something people indeed told others after hearing (and seeing) it for the first time. That sticks.

(That was in 1992, if you missed it, movie popcorn has cleaned up its act)

Credible

This section of the book, making your message credible, I believe that the business and tech communities understand and do pretty well. Even so, there are some examples in the book which are worth considering when you don't have "external credibility" (a respected expert saying your stuff is great) to rely on. They fall into the following categories:

- ✦ Help people believe
- ✦ Internal Credibility
- ✦ The Sinatra Test
- ✦ Testable credentials

Emotional

Don't assume that others care as much as you. And remember people won't take action unless they care.

There is discussion and examples in the book around the following topics to use language and examples in specific ways to increase the emotional content of your message.

- ✦ Use the power of association
- ✦ Semantic Stretch
- ✦ Appeal to self-interest
- ✦ Appeal to identity
- ✦ Maslow's basement

One of the examples in the book was to describe three different scenarios of teachers who were answering the perpetual student question "why do we have to learn algebra? When are we ever going to use this?"

The stickiest response was: (I'm paraphrasing)

"Never. You will never use this." (simple and unexpected)

"You don't lift weights to be prepared for someone to put barbells across your chest and make you bench press. You lift weights so you can knock over a defensive lineman, carry your groceries, or lift your grandchildren. (concrete)

You do math so that you can improve your ability to think logically, so that you can be a better doctor, lawyer, parent.... (emotional)

Stories

Finally the last section is about stories. Stories are the stickiest of all forms of communication. Use every chance you can to give real examples with real people and concrete elements.

Summary:

Made to Stick is insightful, entertaining and useful. Few books in my mind achieve all three.

In an explanation of a particular theory of memory it asks you to recall from your memory different types of things, one of which is the opening lyrics to "hey Jude". It later goes on to say. "If the phrase 'hey Jude' drew a blank, please exchange this book for a Beatles album. You'll be much happier".

Add a comment

[Back to top >>](#)

Give your people a reason to care

OK, so not all of our ideas in business will qualify for the "stickiness hall of fame". Do your best, but at some time you will need to deliver a strategy, a change of plan, or some other direction to your organization, which is not an inherently sticky message.

Getting your people to care should be your top priority.

Follow as many of the sticky rules as you can, but don't expect everyone to internalize it and act upon it the first time they hear it. In fact, expect them to be skeptical. Typical responses to a new communication from above are (if people listen at all):

- ✦ Whatever they are saying is going to change again soon, so there's no reason to really invest any energy in this.
- ✦ I guess everything I have been working on before now is out the window.
- ✦ Sounds interesting, but we'll never execute it, things always stay the same.

You need to meet them where they are, and provide lots of context, the motivation for the decision, and clear measures for what the new desired outcomes will be.

But the fastest way to get employees to notice and to care is to speak in their vocabulary, literally.

This is not for the faint of heart:

Poll your organization for questions and then read them and answer them without paraphrasing.

You will likely get questions like:

- ✦ How can the management team be so clueless as to not see X.
- ✦ Competitor Z is destroying us, why are we so slow to act?
- ✦ Why have we not fired our sales manager?

If you have the guts to read these questions without re-wording them, even if you don't have great answers, you will win big credibility for just reading them. (Though you'll need a really good answer for the one about the sales manager!)

You are using the vocabulary of your audience. Your employees will care about what you say because you are acknowledging what they really think. They will be much more open to listen to what you need them to hear.

Add a comment

[Back to top >>](#)

Fight the Bull:

Why do some business people substitute "sounding smart" for actually doing things?

You have been in meetings with these people.
You probably get emails from them too - long ones.

How you communicate is one of biggest measures of how you are perceived and what you are known for. I can tell you that being straightforward increases both your effectiveness and your credibility.

Because straightforward and effective communication is very important to me, I have insisted upon in all of the environments that I have managed.

But I have always found it interesting that some people seem to fiercely resist this because they think "sounding smart" presents as more business-like, experienced, or professional. There is sometimes even a kind of arrogance. "Well I understand this perfectly, so should they."

These people use words with lots of syllables, and long sentences, provide way too much background, and create lots of abstractions.

Never confuse being clear, for not sounding smart.

Clarity drives action. Sounding smart only drives more talking.

Again, help is on the way.

Bullfighter

Bullfighter is a free utility available for download from a website called "Fight the Bull".

It embeds itself into PowerPoint and Word and analyzes your writing for, well, Bull.

It first picks out all the big, pretentious words that you shouldn't use, and gives quite pointed feedback.

Examples:

World class: "A tired expression that has lost its meaning. Give it a rest. Whenever someone says something is world-class, it isn't."

Paradigm: "Congratulations. You sound very expensive."

Bullfighter also has a utility to analyze your writing as a whole and gives it a score on a scale of 1-10; 1 being completely impenetrable, and 10 being a bit too simple. Here are some examples:

Example #1:

"See spot run"

Bull Index Score: 10.

Example #2:

From a legal document (an easy target): "The General Partner shall execute and cause to be filed the original or amended Certificates evidencing the formation and operation of the Partnership whenever required under the laws of any other states in which the Partnership determines to do business"

Bull Index Score: 2.7

Example #3:

I went to 4 enterprise software websites and processed the lead paragraph of their primary offer.

Bull Index Scores: 4.3-4.5.

Check your website.

I make sure that all my writing scores at least 7.5.

Before including the bull-examples, this document scored 8.5. Adding the big words and legal example lowered my score overall score on this document from to 8.1!

One thing I really like is that the comments from Bullfighter are written to match the level of obscurity of the

writing it is analyzing, which in the ~4.4 range is:

"You like to hear yourself write. Despairing of the thought of bringing a sentence to a close with something as demeaningly ordinary as a simple period, you shower readers with gratuitous, interminable and often weighty if not impossibly labyrinthine prose. Meaning lingers, albeit awash in a thick tide of metaphor and exposition that threatens to drown the writer's message. Seek help."

By the way, I do use words that Bullfighter hates: Stakeholder, Alignment, and Value Proposition - sometimes it's what I want to say. So I have to make up for it by being even more straightforward otherwise.

I have seen managers change cultures of their organization by requiring Bull Fighter.

If you make it part of your standard process that Bullfighter is to be used on both internal and external communications, and require a certain score, (like 7) you will see the communication in your organization become more straightforward and compelling.

You will get known for clear and effective communications which will build value in your career and business.

Add a comment

[Back to top >>](#)

YOUR LIFE

The low-carb Margarita

OK. Now we're talking!

This part of the column, the "Your Life" part, is always about the things that make life more enjoyable, and offers ideas for coping with being over-busy and overwhelmed.

Yes, it's the low-carb margarita....

I am a big time margarita fan, and I make a killer "real" margarita with only the finest tequila and other ingredients.... But alas, margaritas are full of sugar which I generally avoid.

So my quest was how to incorporate the margarita back into life, but without the sugar.

Here is my invention which in my opinion gets you 75% there. I apologize to my readers outside the US that this recipe is US centric in that the main ingredient I haven't found outside the US.

Here you go:

- ✦ Get a pint glass and fill it 1/3 with ice.
- ✦ Pour in as much tequila as you think should be in a margarita.
- ✦ Squeeze in the juice of 1/2 a fresh lime.
- ✦ Add a can of Fresca
- ✦ Stir.

The result tastes remarkably like a margarita and....

- ✦ An ounce of tequila has < 1 carb
- ✦ The juice of half a lime has < 1 carb.
- ✦ A can of Fresca has 0 carbs.

Enjoy!

Add a comment

[Back to top >>](#)

I hope you have found a few useful ideas that you can apply right away to start building value in your career and business. Contact me if you have feedback, or if I can help create your breakthrough.

Contact me:

**If you were sent this issue of
The Desired Outcome by a friend,
Sign up now,
to get your own copy each month.**

About Patty

Patty Azzarello was the youngest general manager at HP ever at the age of 33. She ran a \$1B software business at the age of 35 and was a CEO for the first time at the age of 38. Patty is known for her personal leadership qualities, her straightforward and practical manner, and her genuine interest in making a real connection with people to help them to advance their career and business, and to find ways to enjoy their life more.

[More About Patty](#)

Patty Azzarello is the CEO of Azzarello Group, www.AzzarelloGroup.com a unique services organization focused on helping business leaders actually get done what they want to do, and get a bigger payoff from their hard work. Azzarello Group delivers practical, experience-based tools to business leaders, through products and services including articles, e-books, mentoring programs, executive coaching, public speaking, small business retreats, and business execution workshops.

[Back to top >>](#)