SOFTWARE & TECH

Chip Heath Made To Stick

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795582291552443

Unlocking the Power of Sticky Ideas: The Core Principles of Chip Heath's Made to Stick

In a world overflowing with information, why do some ideas thrive while others fade into obscurity? Why do certain urban legends persist for generations, while meticulously crafted corporate mission statements are forgotten in minutes? This is the fundamental question that brothers Chip and Dan Heath set out to answer in their landmark book, **Chip Heath Made To Stick**. The book, a masterclass in communication, provides a simple yet profound framework for crafting messages that are not just heard, but remembered and acted upon. Understanding the principles behind **Chip Heath Made To Stick** is not just an academic exercise; it is a practical necessity for educators, marketers, leaders, and anyone who needs their ideas to have a lasting impact.

The central thesis of **Chip Heath Made To Stick** is that sticky ideas share common traits. The Heaths, drawing on a wealth of research in psychology and communication, identified six key principles that make an idea "sticky." They encapsulated these principles in the acronym **SUCCESs** (a deliberate misspelling to include the final 's'). This framework is the heart of the book and the key to transforming a dull, forgettable message into one that captures attention and endures.

This article will explore each of these six principles in depth, drawing on examples from the book and from real-world contexts to illustrate how you can apply the lessons from **Chip Heath Made To Stick** to your own communication challenges. By the end, you will have a practical toolkit for making your next presentation, marketing campaign, or lesson plan undeniably sticky.

The SUCCESs Framework: A Deep Dive into Each Principle

Principle 1: Simple – Finding the Core of the Idea

The first principle, and arguably the most critical, is Simplicity. This does not mean dumbing down your message. Instead, it means ruthlessly prioritizing to find the single most important thing you need to say. In the world of **Chip Heath Made To Stick**, a simple idea is not a simplistic one; it's a core idea that is profound and compact. Think of a commander's intent in the military: a simple, clear statement of the desired end state that allows for flexibility in execution. It's not a detailed battle plan, but a guiding star.

The Heaths use the example of Southwest Airlines. Their core idea is not "we are a low-cost, high-value, customer-friendly airline." That is a list of features. Their simple, sticky core idea is: "THE LOW-COST AIRLINE." Every decision, from not assigning seats to flying only one type of aircraft, stems from this one simple, powerful idea. When crafting your message, ask yourself: if I could get people to remember just one thing, what would it be? That is your simple core.

Principle 2: Unexpected – Breaking Patterns to Grab Attention

The second principle is about grabbing and holding your audience's attention. Your message must be Unexpected. Our brains are wired to pay attention to changes in our environment. If everything is Chip Heath Made To Stick, it to be. The key, as you can do this by violating a schema—a mental model of how things work.

The classic example from the book is a flight attendant's safety announcement at a Southwest Airlines gate. Instead of the dull, rote script, the attendant says, "There may be 50 ways to leave your lover, but there are only 6 ways to leave this plane." This unexpected moment—a pop culture reference in a safety briefing—creates surprise and makes people listen. The trick, however, is to sustain that attention. You do this by creating a mystery or a knowledge gap. You tell the audience enough to get them curious, but not enough to satisfy their curiosity. The classic "guess the headline" technique is a perfect example. Your job is to pique curiosity and then fill the gap with your core message.

Principle 3: Concrete – Making Ideas Tangible

Abstract concepts are hard to remember and even harder to act on. The third principle, Concreteness, is the antidote. A concrete idea is one that can be described in terms of human actions and sensory information. In **Chip Heath Made To Stick**, the Heaths stress that concrete language helps people understand and coordinate on a shared vision.

The famous "Chinese proverb" example from the book is a powerful illustration: "A man with a full stomach doesn't know the pain of a hungry man." The Heaths pit this against a more academic, abstract version: "The state of satiation can inhibit the empathetic understanding of the plight of those in a state of deprivation." The first is memorable, visual, and sticky. The second is forgettable. Think about the difference between saying "our product improves efficiency" and "our product lets you get home in time for dinner." The second is concrete. It uses specific, sensory details. The success of the "Don't Mess with Texas" anti-littering campaign is another stellar example of concreteness. The abstract goal of "keeping the state clean" was replaced with the concrete, tough-guy image of a Texan who doesn't tolerate litter.

Principle 4: Credible – Building Trust in Your Idea

For an idea to stick, people must believe it. Credibility is the fourth principle. The most obvious way to lend credibility is through statistics and data. However, as **Chip Heath Made To Stick** points out, statistics are often abstract and can be used to obscure reality. A better approach is often to use internal or external credibility.

Internal credibility comes from the idea itself. The "Sinatra Test" is a great example: "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere." This is a powerful, self-contained source of credibility. External credibility comes from a trusted source, like an authority or a celebrity. But the most powerful form of credibility in the book might be the "human-scale" statistic or the example. Instead of saying "our pill helps millions of people," you tell the story of one person, Jane, whose life was transformed. This "testable credential" allows people to see the truth of your claim for themselves. Another powerful technique is the "anti-authority" – someone who, despite not being an expert, has a compelling story (like a former smoker who got lung cancer). Their testimony can be more powerful than any doctor's lecture.

Principle 5: Emotional – Making People Care

People are not calculating machines. They make decisions based on emotion. The fifth principle, Emotional, is about making people care about your idea. The Heaths argue that the best way to make people care is to focus not on the abstract " masses," but on the individual. This is the power of the "identifiable victim." A statistic about a million people dying is abstract and numbing. A story about one specific child, with a name and a face, is gut-wrenching and motivating.

The lesson from **Chip Heath Made To Stick** is to tap into the "what's in it for me?" question, but also to appeal to people's self-image. You can also use the power of association. The "Don't Mess with Texas" campaign

worked because it appealed to Texans' pride in their state's rugged image. Littering was framed as an act of disrespect, not just a failure to be tidy. By associating the desired behavior (not littering) with a desirable identity (a tough, proud Texan), the campaign created a powerful emotional hook. To make people care, remind them of who they want to be.

Principle 6: Stories – The Engine of Action

The final principle is Stories. Stories are not just an entertaining add-on; they are a powerful cognitive tool. They serve as flight simulators for the brain, allowing us to rehearse scenarios and learn lessons without having to live through them. The Heaths, summarizing **Chip Heath Made To Stick**, identify several "story plots" that are particularly effective: the Challenge Plot, the Connection Plot, and the Creativity Plot.

The Challenge Plot is the classic underdog story (e.g., David and Goliath). It inspires us by showing that seemingly insurmountable obstacles can be overcome. The Connection Plot is about a relationship that bridges a gap (e.g., a teacher who reaches a troubled student). It makes us feel more connected to others. The Creativity Plot is about a breakthrough or a clever solution that solves a difficult problem. A good story is not just a sequence of events; it has a protagonist, a goal, a conflict, and a resolution. The best sticky stories are those that are not just interesting but **simulating**—they prompt the listener to think, "What would I do in that situation?"

Applying the SUCCESs Framework in the Real World

The beauty of the **Chip Heath Made To Stick** framework is its universal applicability. Let's look at a few concrete scenarios.

In Marketing and Advertising

Instead of a dry list of features for a new software product, a sticky ad would: **Simple**: It's the tool that saves you 5 hours a week. **Unexpected**: It compares your old workflow to being a medieval scribe. **Concrete**: It shows a specific before-and-after of a cluttered inbox versus a clean, automated one. **Credible**: It includes a testimonial from a real user, not just a company executive. **Emotional**: It focuses on the feeling of relief, not the technical specifications. **Story**: It tells the story of a single harried project manager who used the tool to finally leave work on time for her daughter's ballet recital.

In Education and Teaching

A history teacher trying to teach about the Cold War could use the principles. **Simple**: The core idea is a "global game of chess." **Unexpected**: Start the lesson by asking, "What if your neighbor could decide what you watch on TV?" **Concrete**: Don't just talk about "ideological conflict." Show a picture of one family in East Berlin and one in West Berlin. **Credible**: Use audio recordings from individuals who lived through it. **Emotional**: Focus on a single person's story of escape, not just the geopolitical statistics. **Story**: The entire lesson is structured as a story of a family divided by the Berlin Wall. This makes the abstract concept of the Cold War tangible and memorable.

In Leadership and Internal Communication

A CEO trying to launch a new strategic initiative should avoid a dry PowerPoint deck. Instead, she could: **Simple** : Frame the strategy in one sentence: "We will become the most trusted provider in our space." **Unexpected**: Start by acknowledging the "elephant in the room"—a past failure—and then pivot to the new approach. **Concrete**: Use a specific, small-scale example of a team that is already embodying the new strategy. **Credible**: Cite a specific customer's positive response to this new approach. **Emotional**: Link the strategy to the employees' own sense of purpose and pride. **Story**: Tell the story of a customer whose life was improved by a small, dedicated team going the extra mile. This story, not the strategic plan, will be what employees remember and retell.

Common Misconceptions About "Made to Stick"

Understanding what the framework is not is as important as knowing what it is. A frequent misunderstanding of **Chip Heath Made To Stick** is that it is a formula for manipulation or "spin." This is incorrect. The principles are built on a foundation of truth. The Heaths argue that a sticky idea must be true to be effective in the long run. The framework helps you communicate your true idea more effectively, not to create a false one.

Another misconception is that applying all six principles is always necessary. While powerful together, the principles are a toolkit, not a rigid checklist. Sometimes, a single powerful story can carry an idea. In other cases, concreteness and simplicity are the only tools needed. The best communicators use the principles intuitively and selectively, based on the context and the nature of their idea. The value of **Chip Heath Made To Stick** is that it makes this intuitive process explicit, allowing anyone to consciously improve their communication.

Conclusion: Your Ideas Deserve to Stick

The world is noisy. Every day, thousands of messages compete for our limited attention. **Chip Heath Made To Stick** provides a clear, research-backed roadmap for cutting through that noise. The SUCCESs framework—Simple, Unexpected, Concrete, Credible, Emotional, and Stories—is not just a theory; it is a practical, actionable guide for anyone who needs their ideas to matter.

Whether you are trying to sell a product, teach a lesson, lead a team, or inspire a movement, the principles from **Chip Heath Made To Stick** can help you design a

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