

Made to Stick for Social Enterprise: The 6 Traits of a Sticky Idea

1. **It's SIMPLE.** How do you find the core of your idea? A famous trial lawyer says, "If you argue ten points, even if each is a good point, when jurors get back to the jury room they won't remember any." To find your core idea, you've got to be a master of exclusion. You've got to relentlessly prioritize: As Carville said in 1992, "It's the economy, stupid"—which meant that nothing else could be the #1 issue, not the deficit or health care or foreign policy. Sound bites are not the ideal. Proverbs are the ideal, because they're simple and profound. The Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one-sentence statement so profound that you could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.

2. **It's UNEXPECTED.** How do you get your audience to pay attention to your ideas? You've got to violate expectations. Think of the Atkins diet—"You can lose weight by eating bunless bacon cheeseburgers." Communications that sound like common sense don't stick. Why would you struggle to remember something that sounds like what you already know? Social enterprise language can be incredibly bland—"intervention outcomes" and "economic development" and "systemic poverty." The tragedy is that the bland language often wallpapers over underlying ideas that are fresh, provocative, fascinating. Use your communications to highlight the *uncommon sense* in what you're doing.

3. **It's CONCRETE.** How do you make your ideas clear? Create a mental picture using concrete language. JFK's speech is the Holy Grail: We will put a man on the moon and return him safely within the decade. Was there anyone in American who misunderstood? The nonprofit City Year says: One day, the most common question asked of a 17 year-old in this country will be: "Where are you going to do your year of national service?" Avoid abstract descriptions of what you do; for instance, Big Brothers Big Sisters might say it provides "quality mentoring to American youth." But one Big Brothers leader found a way to be more concrete. He said, "You know it's mentoring when

thousands of boys with no dads learn to throw a baseball and to treat every girl with respect. You know it's mentoring when, 20 years later, you're the maid of honor at your Little Sister's wedding."

4. **It's CREDIBLE.** How do you get people to believe your 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 — to "try before they buy," so to speak. It's easier for people to believe something when they experience it than when they're told secondhand. How can you let your donors *experience* your work?

5. **It's EMOTIONAL.** How do you get people to care about your ideas? You make them feel something. 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 making them fear the health consequences, because teens think they'll live forever. But The Truth campaign tried a different approach, tapping into teens' resentment of the duplicity of Big Tobacco. It worked—the campaign has been proven to reduce teen smoking rates.

6. **It's a STORY.** How do you get people to embrace your ideas? Tell stories. Look at Subway's Jared campaign—rather than describe the company's new line of low-fat sandwiches, the ads just told the story of Jared's dramatic weight loss, and millions of people responded. A good story is worth pages of explanation. Here's a test: If someone asks you at a cocktail party what your organization does, make sure you're telling a story within 30 seconds of opening your mouth!

Adapted from:

