

Making Your Message Stick

What gives urban legends their staying power? The answer can help you tell your organization's story more effectively.

By Chip Heath

Several years ago, I began wondering about the enduring power of urban legends. What makes them stick? Why, for example, do so many people believe that Mikey from the Life cereal commercial died after consuming Pop Rocks and soda? Or that drugged travelers have awakened in ice-filled bathtubs to discover their kidneys have been harvested? If I could understand what makes urban legends persist, I reasoned, I might be able to uncover lessons for leaders of organizations, who also need to make ideas stick.

After all, urban legends are circulated and remembered even though they lack many advantages enjoyed by organizational messages. They don't have advertising budgets, newsletters, or PR teams. People often don't like them and Web sites actively debunk them. But still they spread.

Consider the fears that surface every Halloween about the dangers of trick-or-treating. In a Newsweek article published before Halloween in 1975, a reporter warned, "If this year's Halloween follows form, a few children will return home with something more than an upset tummy: In recent years, several children have died and hundreds have narrowly escaped injury from razor blades, sewing needles, and shards of glass purposefully put into their goodies by adults." An ABC News poll in 1985 showed that 60 percent of parents were worried that their children might become victims.

However, when Joel Best, a sociology professor at the University of Delaware, studied every reported incident since 1958, he found "a few incidents where children received minor cuts from sharp objects in their candy bags, but the vast majority of reports turned out to be old-fashioned hoaxes, sometimes enacted by young pranksters, other times by parents hoping to make money in lawsuits or insurance scams." As far as social science research indicates, the mantra "Don't take candy from strangers" might well be reframed: "Take candy from strangers—not from your parents."

My own research has focused on why messages, including some false ones, succeed in the marketplace of ideas. I've spent hundreds of hours with my students at Stanford University collecting, coding, and analyzing urban legends, wartime rumors, conspiracy theories, and jokes. We've done

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experiments on sports myths, Nostradamus' prophecies, and "Chicken Soup for the Soul" stories to see which ones stick. In all, we've conducted more than 40 experiments with some 1,700 participants, seeking to understand why urban legends, rumors, and conspiracy theories succeed and spread in the social environment.

Over that time, I distilled six characteristics that are present in many urban legends and help them to endure: In general, urban legends are simple, unexpected, concrete, credentialed, emotional stories.

These six principles (which form the acronym SUCCES) helped explain why true ideas also win out in the marketplace of ideas. When applied to the ways nonprofits communicate—in public service announcements, grant proposals, or fundraising case statements, for example—these same principles can help hone the organization's message and make it stick.

Simple: “Heart Attack on a Plate”

In a benchmark 1956 cognitive psychology paper, researcher George Miller summarized a number of different experiments that investigated how many separate pieces of information people could notice, remember, or work with simultaneously. Today we might call this our "bandwidth," but at the time they referred to it as "channel capacity." In the paper, "The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two," Miller argued that people can remember about seven independent pieces of information. It's no accident, for example, that phone numbers have seven digits. As long as an area code is familiar, people only have to remember eight pieces of information to dial out-of-state. Two more numbers and most of us would be sunk.

Our limited channel capacity means that sticky ideas have to be simple. "The Great Wall of China is the only man-made object visible from outer space" is a simple idea; indeed, many people have heard or repeated this "factoid." Yet, while the Great Wall is long, it's also thin, and if it were visible from space, any eight-lane Los Angeles highway would be visible, too.

In the movie business, there's a phrase for the simple, sticky idea that summarizes a film's essence: high concept. The high concept for *Alien*, the 1979 science fiction thriller, was "Jaws on a spaceship"—a simple analogy that unified filmmakers and crew by focusing on a clear, tangible idea.

How does this translate to the work that nonprofits do? The Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI) is a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that conducts research on health and nutrition. One of CSPI's objectives is to provide consumers with current information about nutrition. But that can pose a problem: How does one best convey complicated research to consumers?

For starters, Michael Jacobson, CSPI's founder and executive director, believed in directness, and everything that the center produced was simple. "No one ever talked about the government's recommended daily allowance of fat," according to a Stanford Graduate School of Business case study on CSPI. "Everything was compared to Big Macs and Quarter Pounders."

In 1995, while targeting Italian restaurant favorites, CSPI discovered that the typical fettuccine Alfredo dish contained 97 grams of fat, and 47 grams of saturated fat, about twice the daily limit. In a newsletter, the group compared this to five Quarter Pounders. But what helped the message to stick was a simple, shocking statement: After noting that fettuccine Alfredo was the worst dish analyzed in 23 years, CSPI concluded: "It's a heart attack on a plate."

Perhaps CSPI's best-known campaign was its crusade against movie popcorn. "A medium-sized 'butter' popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theater," the group wrote, "contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon and eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings—combined!" In some ways, that's a complicated list of details, but the overall message is simple—a box of movie popcorn equals a whole day filled with classic fatty food. The campaign has been credited with helping to change eating habits: Popcorn sales dropped until theaters stopped popping with coconut oil, the source of much of the bad fat.

Unexpected: “No One Ever Does”

The television commercial for the new Enclave minivan opens with the van parked at a grassy park. A young boy holding a football helmet climbs into the van with his two young sisters. As upbeat music plays in the background, a soothing woman's voiceover is heard: "Introducing the all-new Enclave," she says as the van pulls away, Dad behind the wheel, Mom in the passenger seat. "It's a minivan to the max."

As the van wheels slowly through suburban streets, the voiceover continues: "With features like remote controlled sliding rear doors, 150 cable channels, a full sky-view roof, temperature-controlled cup holders, and a six-point navigation system, it's the minivan for families on the go."

The van pulls to a gentle stop at an intersection. The camera closes in on the boy, smiling through a window reflecting giant, leafy trees. The father pulls into the intersection.

That's when it happens.

A car speeding down the cross street slams into the van broadside, tires screeching, hood buckling in a shower of broken glass.

The screen fades to black, and a sentence appears: "Didn't see that coming?"

The question fades, and is followed by a statement: "No one ever does."

With the sound of a stuck horn blaring in the background, a few final words flash across the screen: "Buckle up! Always."

The ad was created by the Ad Council, a nonprofit organization that since 1942 has produced, distributed, and promoted thousands of public service campaigns on behalf of other nonprofits and government agencies (the seatbelt ad was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation). The council's many successful campaigns—from the World War II message "Loose Lips Sink Ships" to the more recent "Friends Don't Let Friends Drive Drunk"—are often simple and catchy. But the seatbelt commercial, like many other Ad Council productions, also capitalizes on the second principle of effective message marketing: It's totally unexpected.

People remember events and ideas that are unexpected—"My daughter died on that highway twenty years ago." Unexpected things catch our attention. We spend time thinking about them, mulling them over, and talking about them with others.

Research attests to this. To take just one example, researchers in Australia studying the transmission of cultural beliefs presented students with a story about "Gary," a football player who was arrested for drunk driving. The story contained some elements consistent with stereotypes: Gary drank beer and swore at the cops. Other elements were more surprising: Gary had been

listening to classical music in the car and had stopped to buy flowers. Afterwards, when given a chance to talk about the story, students spent more time discussing these unexpected bits of information, even though they were seemingly more mundane than the arrest.

The recipe for creating unexpected messages is to produce a short circuit between two mental frames. In the Ad Council spot, TV viewers think they are watching a commercial for a new minivan, when suddenly they are jarred by the image of a horrific crash. It is this twist that gives the ad punch, searing the message into the viewer's mind, making it stick.

President John F. Kennedy understood the power of unexpected ideas. Speaking in Houston in 1962, when many Americans were demoralized because the Soviet Union had taken the lead in the space race (citizens could look skyward and see Sputnik blinking along as it circled the earth), Kennedy made an incredible promise: America would put man on the moon—in this decade. Kennedy's vision created a huge disconnect—for most people at the time, moon landings were the stuff of science fiction.

"But why, some say, the moon? Why choose this as our goal?" Kennedy said. "We choose it not because it is easy, but because it is hard; because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills."

Concrete: “You’ll Never Believe What I Just Heard About Best Practices”

Urban legends are filled with concrete details: ice-filled bathtubs and stolen kidneys, razor blades in apples. Experiments on human memory have shown people are better at remembering concrete, easily visualized nouns ("bicycle" or "avocado") than more abstract ones ("justice" or "personality").

Indeed, when people convey information, abstractions usually drop out. Yale University researcher Eric Havelock, an expert on stories that have been passed down orally such as the Greek Iliad and Odyssey, has noted that these tales are characterized by strongly concrete actions with little abstraction. It wasn't that the Greeks disdained abstract thought (there's plenty of abstraction in the writings of Plato and Aristotle). Rather, Havelock concludes, it's that when stories are passed verbally from generation to generation, abstractions drop while concrete details survive.

Unfortunately, nonprofit language is seldom concrete. From "best practices" and "outcome evaluations" to "capacity" and "empowerment"—nonprofit jargon is often so vague it's meaningless.

Here's an example from a paper distributed by a foundation trade group: "Comprehensive community building naturally lends itself to a return-on-investment rationale that can be modeled, drawing on existing practice," it begins, going on to argue that "[a] factor constraining the flow of resources to CCIs is that funders must often resort to targeting or categorical requirements in grantmaking to ensure accountability."

Tony Proscio, former associate editor of the Miami Herald and author of several works on the perils of foundation jargon, points out why the above sentence is so toxic. "All these buzz words—return on investment, modeling, constraints, resources, targeting, accountability—are the borrowed cant of other fields," he wrote. "Each word carries so much professional freight that the reader ends up exhausted from hauling the load."

How can organizations use concrete ideas to get their messages to stick? That was a question that the New York Transit Authority (NYTA) grappled with in the mid-1980s.

The NYTA wanted to take back the city's subway system—which was typically littered, graffiti riddled, and dangerous. It needed a plan that would not only motivate its workers, but capture the public's imagination. The concrete theme that eventually galvanized thousands of Transit Authority employees: "No graffiti."

With that slogan as a mantra, the NYTA began "reclaiming" subway cars, train by train, by washing off graffiti. Once a train was reclaimed, it could never go into service again "dirty." This infuriated graffiti taggers, who would break into train yards and work all night on designs only to see "clean" trains roll into stations the next morning. For workers and riders, however, it was a major victory.

Why did it work? In part, it succeeded because it was neither esoteric nor abstract. Rather, it was highly relevant to the day-to-day experiences of the employees, customers, and politicians—all of whom could see the results for themselves.

Credentialed: "It's 10 p.m."

Urban legends are filled with informational credentials purportedly verifying their truth. Jan Brunvand, probably the most prolific writer on urban legends, notes that they "gain credibility from specific details of time and place or from references to authorities." In 1977, a rumor spread that McDonald's founder Ray Kroc donated 35 percent of his earnings to the Church of Satan. "The people asking about the rumor," wrote Frederick Koenig, professor of social psychology at Tulane University, "almost always knew a co-worker who had a daughter or a friend who had a mother-in-law, or a pastor who had a parishioner who had actually' seen Ray Kroc make the declaration on the Johnny Carson Show, 60 Minutes, Phil Donahue, Merv Griffin, Tom Snyder, or the Today show." When stories come with credentials like these, people believe them and pass them along.

That's why it's useful to invoke credible authorities when you want to convey an important message. Bristol-Myers Squibb sponsors the Tour of Hope, a 3,000-mile bike ride across America, in a bid to promote awareness and raise money for cancer research. And to help get the message out, it has partnered with Tour de France champion Lance Armstrong, who was slated to lead 26 cyclists, all cancer survivors, across the nation. Funds benefited cancer research through the Lance Armstrong Foundation.

Armstrong, who survived testicular cancer with the help of Bristol-Myers Squibb medicines, became a spokesman for the ride. "I owe my life to cancer research and all the patients before me," he said. "We want to let people know that cancer research is worth the ride."

But in addition to providing details or citing a credible authority, many urban legends have evolved another, more immediate source of credibility—"testable" credentials. These credentials encourage the listener to test the "evidence" for themselves.

In the early 1990s, for example, a rumor circulated that Snapple supported the Ku Klux Klan. The evidence was on every label—a picture of a slave ship and a capital "K" with a circle around it. Never mind that the company was founded by three Jewish men from Brooklyn, that the ship was from the Boston Tea Party, and that the circled K was a sign for kosher products. People who didn't know any better could "see for themselves" that the rumor was true.

What are the implications for nonprofits? A standard impulse in introducing ideas is to force them on listeners—hitting them over the head with facts and evidence. An alternative is to use testable credentials to allow listeners to test an idea for themselves.

Remember the line from the 1970s public service ad—"It's 10 p.m.—do you know where your children are?" Parents who heard the ad couldn't help but ask themselves that question, effectively becoming the credible authority. What more credible authority could there be?

Emotional: "He Beat Her 150 Times"

Urban legends specialize in creating emotion. In research conducted with Chris Bell and Emily Sternberg at Duke University, we studied a sample of more than 100 legends that we selected because they had emotional content. When we measured the emotional impact of the legends, it turned out people wanted to retell the stories that were more emotion provoking. When we altered the legends to make them more emotional, people became more willing to tell them. And when we measured the distribution of the legends on the Internet, legends that provoked more emotion were the most widely distributed. The emotional quotient is key to helping ideas propagate and survive.

Nonprofits often appeal to emotions to make their messages stick. "It's admirable to have the facts on your side, to be a purveyor of truth, and to occupy the moral high ground, but that's not enough to make your case," writes Andy Goodman in the book, *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes*. "In an age of information glut, people give their attention only to those things they care about. And caring is a far cry from information processing."

Urban legends usually provoke negative emotions: fear, anger, disgust. Nonprofits can tap these emotions as well. Consider the 1991 print ad produced by the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, a Denver-based advocacy group. The first thing that readers see is a large headline, "He beat her 150 times. She only got flowers once." Directly below this is a color photo of a coffin, with pink and white flowers on top. Goodman writes that the ad works because it is "an emotionally powerful story evoked with few words and a single image."

But what if a nonprofit wants to highlight positive emotions? The first way to

do this is by "broadening." People "broaden" their view of the world when they think more creatively or deeply, or when they accept difficult challenges. Broadening often spurs positive emotions.

What would this look like in practice? The World Wildlife Fund's "Amazing Grace" print ad campaign is an example. One ad features a photo of two penguins beak to beak, icebergs in the background, with the simple headline: "An amazing place—don't let it vanish without a trace."

"The way we're going to engage people is through inspiration," says Jo Lynn Dorrance, the director of marketing communications for the global conservation organization, "and then we're going to talk about things that are a little more difficult." The unstated challenge is clear: People have a responsibility to protect endangered species.

The other recipe for capturing positive emotions is "building"—building connections, especially across social or cultural barriers. People experience positive emotions when they build connections or see other people doing so. Most nonprofits don't survive unless they're bridging barriers or doing something challenging or creative. The trick is to recognize those situations and highlight them.

Consider the International Olympic Committee's campaign leading up to the 2000 and 2002 Olympic Games, a series of TV, radio, and print ads dubbed "Celebrate Humanity." Actor Robin Williams, who narrated one segment, recalled that his favorite Olympic memories were "inspiring moments of humanity that transcended borders, obstacles, and languages—and unified people around the world."

One TV spot promoting the 2000 games opens with four runners rejoicing at the end of a race—leaping into the air, smiling, hugging each other in a moving knot of joy. Soft, choir-like music plays in the background. After a few seconds, a voiceover begins. "Just a reminder," a man's voice says. "At the Olympic games, you don't have to come in first to win." The music crescendos as the runners look up at their times, and, overcome with elation, the knot breaks apart, the runners pumping their fists into the air. The following message appears at the bottom of the screen: "Niger—400 meter relay, Bronze Medalists—1992." The scene fades, and as the music swells, two words fade in: "Celebrate Humanity."

Stories: "I Started Smoking to Look Older"

Stories make an impression because they are simple and concrete, and because they have characters with whom we identify. We have difficulty remembering abstractions, but we can more easily remember a good story," writes Roger Schank in *Tell Me a Story: Narrative and Intelligence*. "Stories give life to past experience. Stories make the events in memory memorable to others and ourselves."

My research supports Schank's statement, while also showing that despite the power of stories, people often don't use them when they could. In an exercise I have performed with more than 200 MBA students, I randomly assign them to defend or rebut the idea that "Property crime is a major problem for the United States." Their assignment is to prepare a one-minute message supporting their assigned position. In the average one-minute message, people use 2.5 statistics; only one person in 10 tells a story. Later, after distracting the class for 10 minutes by watching a short videotape, I surprise them by asking them to recall the messages they just heard. Sixty-three percent of students remember the stories; only 5 percent can recall the statistics.

When fast-food giant Subway wanted to promote the healthy attributes of its sandwiches, it initially launched an ad campaign using a statistic: Six sandwiches under six grams of fat. That's not bad. Alliteration and repetition made it more memorable than typical statistics. But it didn't stick like Subway's next campaign—the story of Jared.

Jared Fogel was an Indiana University student who weighed 425 pounds. He decided to go on a diet, skipping breakfast, eating a six-inch Subway turkey sub for lunch, and a 12-inch veggie sub for dinner. Jared dropped down to 190 pounds, and when Subway found out about him, it hired Jared as a spokesperson. The story worked much better than the statistic—Jared soon attained celebrity status.

Several states have used stories effectively in their campaigns against cigarette smoking, by featuring real smokers. One of the most effective campaigns came out in the mid-1990s, when the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH) unveiled a series of TV commercials featuring Pam Laffin, then a 29-year-old mother of two, who had started smoking at 10, developed emphysema at 24, and suffered a failed lung transplant. The 30-second spots, broadcast during hip shows like "Ally McBeal" and "Dawson's

Creek," depicted Laffin battling to live while slowly suffocating. They showed her enduring an invasive bronchoscopy and revealed the scars across her back. In another spot, featuring photos of Laffin as a child and as an adult, she talks about how her emphysema left her with a "fat face" and "a lump on my neck." She adds: "I started smoking to look older and I'm sorry to say it worked."

Greg Connolly, director of tobacco control for MDPH, talked about the power of using stories to make a point. "We have no compunction at all about shocking smokers into waking up," Connolly told the Boston Globe in September 1998. "What we've learned from previous campaigns is that telling stories using real people is the most compelling way."

Laffin became a heroine of the anti-smoking movement. She was the subject of an MTV documentary. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention features her story in an anti-smoking Web campaign and a 20-minute educational video entitled "I Can't Breathe."

Laffin died at 31 in November 2000, three weeks before she was slated to get a second lung transplant. Her story, it seems clear, lives on.

The Curse of Knowledge

Research suggests at least one key barrier to crafting effective messages: the curse of knowledge. Once people know some piece of information, they find it hard to imagine what it was like before they knew it. Their own knowledge makes it harder for them to communicate, and thus it is a "curse."

A classic psychology experiment demonstrates the power of this curse. Elizabeth Newton, for her psychology dissertation at Stanford University, asked college students to participate in an experiment in one of two roles: "tappers" and "listeners." Tappers received a list of 25 well-known songs and were asked to tap out the rhythm of one song. Listeners tried to guess the song from the taps. The tappers reported that they could clearly "hear" the lyrics and complete musical accompaniment as they banged away. When they were asked to predict how many songs listeners would guess, they predicted 50 percent. However, listeners heard only a series of seemingly disconnected taps. Indeed, of all the songs tapped out, listeners correctly guessed only 3 percent of them.

How can this curse afflict nonprofits as they try to convey messages? One example arose during a strategy session I taught for arts organizations sponsored by Stanford University and National Arts Strategies, a Washington D.C.-based nonprofit supporting leaders in the arts. One group of participants came from the Murray Dranoff Foundation, a Miami-based nonprofit that promotes duo piano. Loretta Dranoff created the foundation in 1987 as a tribute to her late husband, with whom she performed as an internationally recognized two-piano team. When I asked the group from Murray Dranoff to describe the deep, emotional component of their mission statement, they said the following: "To protect, preserve, and promote the music of duo piano."

This didn't strike the other arts managers as emotionally engaging. Why, they wondered, is duo piano important?

"You know," a Murray Dranoff representative began, "duo piano music is just not as popular as it once was."

By now, some of the listeners were suspecting there might be a good reason for this.

"Let me be blunt," one participant said. "Why would the world be less rich if the music of duo piano completely disappeared?"

This startled the duo piano group, and for the first time, they tried to explain their inside perspective for outsiders. "The piano was created to put the entire tonal scale and quality of the entire orchestra under the control of one musician," they began. "There's no other instrument that allows for same range and subtlety of sound. When you put two of these magnificent instruments in the same room, the musicians can communicate with each other and build on each other in an astonishingly intimate way. Duo piano is like having the sound of the orchestra, but the intimacy of chamber music."

Now, the room was silent. Participants rocked back in their chairs as if shocked. The sound of the orchestra, but the intimacy of chamber music. That's highly emotional—broadening and building in the same phrase.

The solution to the curse of knowledge is to think like an outsider. Nonprofit leaders should ask themselves, "Why is what we do important?" And they should not stop asking until they hit on something core: simple and concrete, unexpected and emotional.

We exist to protect, preserve, and promote the music of duo piano sounds like a mission statement, with all the jargon mission statements embody.

Why is that important?

There's not much duo piano music any more.

Why would the world be less rich if duo piano music disappeared?

Because the world would never again know the experience of having the sound of the orchestra but the intimacy of chamber music.

By asking *why* long enough to overcome the curse of knowledge, we move closer to capturing ideas that stick and take hold, urban legend-style.

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