

*Managing By the Book...**

Got Ideas?***

Jean M. Holcomb***

In a setting with constant competition for scarce resources, libraries that fail to spot, refine, and apply innovative ideas face uncertain futures. When change becomes a driving operational constant, the role that idea generation plays in enterprise management takes on heightened importance.

¶1 In today's fast-paced work environment, a law library's ability to thrive depends on the capacity of the library staff to be innovative and nimble thinkers.

¶2 All libraries, regardless of their institutional structure, feel pressure to do more with less. In a setting with constant competition for scarce resources, libraries that fail to spot, refine, and apply innovative ideas face uncertain futures. When change becomes a driving operational constant, the role that idea generation plays in enterprise management takes on heightened importance.

¶3 Ideas drive change. Ideas provide the fuel to inspire staff, motivate program development, persuade funding sources, and woo users. Ideas underpin the library's ability to support its service mission.

¶4 If idea development plays such a critical role, the old model of idea generation as a "eureka moment" must be revisited. Busy library managers and their staffs don't have the luxury of waiting for a bright idea to fall from the sky à la Newton. Instead, commonly held myths about idea formulation must be acknowledged and set aside.

¶5 Bright idea development doesn't rest solely in the hands of a few unique, creative individuals.¹ It's not a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Rather, innovation most often begins as a "slow process of accretion," culminating over time in a concept based on multiple sources of information.² The aha! moment when all of

* *Editor's note:* "Managing by the Book" is a regular feature of *Law Library Journal*. In each article, author Jean Holcomb highlights a book outside the field of librarianship that has a message about management topics that will resonate with law librarians.

** © Jean M. Holcomb, 2008.

*** Retired Law Librarian and Director, King County Law Library, Seattle, Washington.

1. See Janet Rae-Dupree, *Eureka! It Really Takes Years of Hard Work*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 3, 2008, at BU4.
2. *Id.* For additional information about innovation, see SCOTT BERKUN, *THE MYTHS OF INNOVATION* (2007).

the threads for a bright idea come together doesn't signal the end of the idea process, but rather the beginning. After the core of the bright idea forms, its developers must frame the idea specifically to catch the attention of the intended target audience.

¶6 Still worried that you don't have the mindset to become a bright-idea generator? Don't feel that your job description reads "must pull brilliant ideas out of thin air"?

¶7 Even if you don't see yourself in a class with Archimedes and Newton, there's still hope. Two brothers, Chip and Dan Heath, have written a "how-to" manual for bright-idea generators in training.³ In *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, these authors detail a step-by-step process for developing a memorable, a.k.a sticky, idea.⁴ Using a conversational tone, humor, and examples from popular culture and academic research, the Heaths focus on techniques to turn the message you develop into the one among many competing ideas that bonds with your target audience.

¶8 *Born to Stick* defines a sticky idea as one that makes people listen and care. The text examines the anatomy of ideas that stick. A sticky idea has hooks like Velcro that attach the concept to the audience's memory.⁵ A sticky idea changes the opinions and behaviors of its audience.⁶

¶9 In their key assertion, the authors reassure all who worry about being able to create great ideas that just as important a skill to cultivate is that of spotting an already articulated idea and honing it to make a lasting impression.⁷

¶10 To support this key assertion, *Born to Stick* lays out a checklist for measuring the stickiness of an idea, regardless of the nature of the idea's inception. While no one formula exists for creating a sticky idea, the authors identified a common set of sticky idea traits after examining a class of ideas that included urban legends, conspiracy theories, and proverbs.⁸ These "naturally sticky" ideas pointed the way to the identification of the six key principles of a sticky idea.⁹

¶11 To qualify as sticky, an idea must tell a simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional story.¹⁰ While the identity of these principles may not in themselves be surprising, their ordering of the hierarchy of principles and the

3. CHIP HEATH & DAN HEATH, *MADE TO STICK: WHY SOME IDEAS SURVIVE AND OTHERS DIE* (2007).

4. *See id.* at 24. The authors acknowledge they have adopted the concept of "stickiness" from Malcolm Gladwell's 2000 work *The Tipping Point*, in which Gladwell argues that innovations are more likely to cause change when they possess the "stickiness factor." The Heaths state that their work complements Gladwell's by identifying the traits that make an idea sticky. *Id.* at 13 (citing MALCOLM GLADWELL, *THE TIPPING POINT: HOW LITTLE THINGS CAN MAKE A BIG DIFFERENCE* (2000)).

5. *Id.* at 110–11.

6. *Id.* at 8.

7. *See id.* at 15–16.

8. *See id.* at 11–13.

9. *See id.* at 14–18.

10. *Id.* (creating the acronym "SUCCESs").

explanations that support the inclusion of each demystifies the methodology of sticky-idea creation.

¶12 At each stage of the sticky-idea development process, *Born to Stick*'s authors caution idea creators to be wary of what they describe as the Curse of Knowledge.¹¹ They define this curse as the inability of idea generators who possess great knowledge about the idea they're presenting to remember and understand the state of mind of the audience that lacks their background and perspective. To combat this peril, idea generators must reformat their concept in terms of how their idea will benefit its intended audience rather than framing the sticky idea in terms of the underlying mechanics that support the idea's operation. As an example, this might mean telling the story of your law library's proposal to redesign its web page in terms of how the redesign will make locating key information faster for the user, rather than selling the update based on the technical specifics of the amazing software that drives the new show.

¶13 The first principle on the sticky-idea checklist, simplicity, might be the most difficult for idea crafters to achieve. Simple doesn't mean stripped down or a sound bite. For an idea to qualify as sticky, the idea must be distilled to its most critical essence, its core. The sticky idea must reflect what the authors call the Commander's Intent.¹² By using a battlefield analogy of how the military condenses the essence of a particular complex mission into a concept as concise as "clear the hill," *Born to Stick* urges idea generators to express the sticky idea's core premise in terms of a plain-talk goal.¹³

¶14 Once this essence has been identified, all other plans and projects can be easily measured against this core expression for conformity of message. A successfully distilled simple message should read like a one-sentence proverb. Think "a bird in the hand . . ."¹⁴

¶15 Because the authors recognize that not all ideas can be pared down to a single compact message, they provide a second part to the simplicity principle. They advise that complex messages can be created from simple concepts by tying the complex concept to something familiar.¹⁵ The authors illustrate how the use of analogies and metaphors facilitates the process of creating new perceptions by highlighting how the movie industry sells film concepts: for example, *13 Going on 30* was sold as "*Big for girls.*"¹⁶

¶16 After the sticky idea passes the simplicity review, the next step on the development checklist focuses on getting attention for the idea. Defined as the

11. *See id.* at 20.

12. *Id.* at 26–27. The Commander's Intent is a term originally adopted by the U.S. Army, a "crisp, plain-talk statement that appears at the top of every order, specifying the plan's goal, the desired end-state of an operation." *Id.* at 26.

13. *See id.* at 28.

14. *Id.* at 47.

15. *See id.* at 54.

16. *See id.* at 58.

unexpectedness principle, *Born to Stick* recommends that to get attention an idea must break the audience's expectation pattern.¹⁷ This element of surprise jolts the audience, triggers thinking, and holds their attention longer.

¶17 To accomplish this jolt, ask what's counterintuitive about the idea. Employ mystery. Encourage curiosity. Communicate the idea in a way that interrupts the audience's natural response patterns. Focus on the questions you want the audience to ask rather than on the details you want to convey. Make the audience wonder what will happen next. Then help them define this new reality.¹⁸

¶18 Use concrete language when defining this new reality. The third principle rests on the use of sensory information to clarify ideas. Concreteness allows memory to help translate ideas and fosters coordination.¹⁹

¶19 To be sticky, an idea must also be credible. Principle four calls attention to the importance of utilizing vivid details, effective statistics, and honest, trustworthy spokespersons in framing the idea. Employing these tools allows the idea's audience to provide their own context to support claims of authenticity.²⁰

¶20 Effective ideas also contain an emotional appeal. Principle five stresses that to make people care about an idea, the idea must trigger feelings. Feelings inspire actions. The authors believe that a basic way to make people care is to utilize a technique they define as piggybacking: using emotions that already exist in the audience to make the connection with the idea.²¹

¶21 Emotions such as empathy, security, self-interest, the desire for knowledge, and a wish to help others all act as powerful hooks. Get the audience to form an association between something they don't yet care about—your idea—and something they already do care about. To accomplish this, the idea's proponents must understand both the needs of the audience and why the audience should care about their idea.

¶22 Finally, the sixth principle outlines how to communicate the sticky idea through storytelling. The authors believe that storytelling provides the most effective vehicle to deliver an idea.²² Stories act as flight simulators for the brain.²³ They help the audience manage emotions, solve problems, develop knowledge about how to act, and build skills. Stories also inspire and motivate listeners to act. They let people see how existing situations or problems might change. They open

17. *See id.* at 64.

18. *See id.* at 72.

19. *See id.* at 116.

20. *See id.* at 157.

21. *See id.* at 171.

22. *See id.* at 206. For additional information about the value and process of storytelling, see Peter Gruber, *The Four Truths of the Storyteller*, HARV. BUS. REV., Dec. 2007, at 52; ANNETTE SIMMONS, *THE STORY FACTOR: SECRETS OF INFLUENCE FROM THE ART OF STORYTELLING* (2001).

23. *See* HEATH & HEATH, *supra* note 3, at 213.

doors to new possibilities, combat skepticism, create buy-in, and mobilize people.²⁴

¶23 To help readers practice the core principles, the authors include with each chapter practice exercises called “clinics.” The clinics function like mini-case studies. Each clinic guides readers through sample messages to test skills in recognizing and applying the principles. A checklist outlining the six core elements accompanies each case study. This SUCCEs checklist, an acronym of *Born to Stick*’s six core principles, could also serve as a model against which readers could evaluate the stickiness factors of their own ideas.²⁵

¶24 To apply the concepts detailed in *Born to Stick*, library staff might begin by institutionalizing the use of the SUCCEs framework checklist. Copies of this checklist could be made available to all staff on the library’s intranet. The framework could be applied to test both ideas for internal library operations and for ideas targeted toward the library’s users and larger parent organization.

¶25 Opportunities exist to use the *Born to Stick* approach to spot and to generate ideas in a variety of library settings. For example, new ideas generated in a staff brainstorming session could be measured against the book’s six key principles to determine their stickiness potential. At the times budgets are created, annual reports drafted, and new products and services reviewed for implementation, the project teams involved could test each activity against the sticky-idea framework to increase the odds of hooking the attention of the intended audience.

¶26 Beyond institutionalizing the use of the checklist, libraries could reframe other ordinary activities as checklist opportunities. Consider using staff training time to teach the skills needed for recognizing potential sticky ideas. If the library solicits user comments, think about recasting this activity as a bright-idea incubator.

¶27 Use focus groups and customer satisfaction polls or target user groups to identify ideas. Don’t overlook the potential for idea generation within the nonmanagement-level library staff, the library’s oversight body or parent organization, or other libraries in the community.

¶28 Encourage staff to troll for ideas in sources such as library literature, the business section of the local paper, and the professional literature read by the library’s user groups. Add subscriptions to publications like the *Harvard Business Review*, *The Legal Administrator*, or *The Judges Journal*, and make access available to all staff. Remind staff to check the regular public relations column in *AALL Spectrum*.²⁶

24. *Id.* at 233–34.

25. *See id.* at 21. In addition to the checklist clinics, the book contains end notes that reference supporting documentation, an easy reference guide that highlights the key messages in each chapter, and an index.

26. As an example, see Mark D. Engsborg, *On a Mission to Market: Law Librarians Can Find Marketing and Publicity Help with Books, Periodicals, and the Web*, *AALL SPECTRUM*, Sept.-Oct., 2005, at 8.

¶29 Encourage the program development committees for chapter and the AALL annual meetings to present programs that address idea generation and refinement. Support attendance at events held in your community that feature speakers who address marketing topics. Review marketing and public relations tool kits prepared by the American Library Association's *@ your library* campaign for suggestions about style.²⁷

¶30 Take advantage of resources that provide advice about the visual impact of the story you use to frame your idea.²⁸ Polish delivery techniques by listening to master storytellers. Remember that stories can be told in print, on the web, and in person, and practice the skills needed to be effective in each medium.

¶31 Above all, encourage a library mindset fueled by how the rush of spotting the glimmer of a bright idea feels. Reward divergent thinking. Celebrate the successful delivery of the bright ideas your new focus creates.

27. For more information about *@ your library*, see Am. Library Ass'n, *@ Your Library: The Campaign for America's Libraries*, <http://www.ala.org/ala/pio/campaign/campaignamericas.cfm> (last visited Apr. 16, 2008).

28. One such example is a web site that offers a test of what its authors, Andy Goodman and R. Christine Hershey, describe as your "Eye-Q." Take the quiz at *The Goodman/Hershey Eye-Q Test: How High Is Your Eye-Q?*, <http://www.agoodmanonline.com/EyeQ> (last visited Apr. 16, 2008).