



**STANFORD**

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

**STANFORD** SOCIAL INNOVATION *review*

**Loud and Clear**  
**Crafting Messages That Stick – What Nonprofits**  
**Can Learn from Urban Legends**

By Chip Heath

Stanford Social Innovation Review  
Winter 2003

Copyright © 2004 by Leland Stanford Jr. University  
All Rights Reserved

**DO NOT COPY**



**STANFORD**

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF BUSINESS

Stanford Social Innovation Review

518 Memorial Way, Stanford, CA 94305-5015

Ph: 650-725-5399. Fax: 650-723-0516

Email: [info@ssireview.com](mailto:info@ssireview.com), [www.ssireview.com](http://www.ssireview.com)

# LOUD

*Crafting Messages That Stick – What Nonprofits*

# AND

*Can Learn from Urban Legend*

# CLEAR

by CHIP HEATH

*A Baltimore doctor was driving home from a country club dance late one night in the summer of 1945. As he slowed at an intersection near the city, he spotted a young girl dressed in a sheer evening gown, beckoning for a lift. He jammed the brakes and motioned for her to climb into the backseat.*

*“What on earth,” he said, “is a youngster like you doing out here all alone at this time of night?”*

*“It’s too long a story,” said the girl. “Please, please take me home. I’ll explain everything there.” She named an address close to where he lived.*

*Concerned, the doctor drove rapidly back into the city until he found the address. But when he arrived and turned around, the backseat was empty.*

*He leapt from the car and ran to the front door, ringing the bell. His mind raced. Could she have fallen from the car? The door opened, and a gray-haired man stared out at him.*

*“Sir,” the doctor began. “I know this sounds strange, but I picked up a young girl on Highway 1 about an hour ago. She gave me this address. She lives here. ...”*

*“That’s not possible,” the man said.*

*Confused, the doctor peered into the entranceway, where he spotted a framed photo on the desk – picturing the same young woman. “That’s her!” the doctor said, pointing. “That’s the girl!”*

*“That girl, sir, was my daughter,” the man said. “She was killed in an automobile accident on that highway almost twenty years ago. ...”*

The tale of the “vanishing hitchhiker” is one of the most enduring urban legends of all time.<sup>2</sup> The legend stems from European stories featuring travelers on horseback, says folklorist Jan Brunvand,<sup>3</sup> and from even earlier tales in China that involve two

people walking down a deserted road. It has persisted over decades, crossing and recrossing cultural boundaries.

About seven years ago, I began wondering about such legends. Why are they so enduring? What

PHOTOGRAPH BY MASTERFILE



makes them stick? Why do so many believe, for example, 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 why urban legends persisted, I reasoned, I might be able to uncover lessons for leaders of organizations, who also need to make ideas stick.

After all, urban legends succeed even though they lack many advantages enjoyed by organizational messages. They don't get a boost from top management. 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 1975 *Newsweek* article published before Halloween, 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."<sup>4</sup> An ABC News poll in 1985 showed that

60 percent of parents were worried that their children might become victims.<sup>5</sup>

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."<sup>6</sup> 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."

Over the last seven years, I've researched 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 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 endure: In general, urban legends are simple, unexpected, concrete, credentialed, emotional stories.

These six principles (which form the acronym SUCCES) help explain why *true* ideas also win out in the marketplace of ideas. Used effectively, these principles can help nonprofit leaders get their points across and make them stick.

### Simple: 'A Heart Attack on a Plate'

In a landmark 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 "band-

## The Secret to SUCCES

### MESSAGES THAT STICK ARE

### APPLICATION

**SIMPLE**, making use of analogies.

The Center for Science in the Public Interest referred to fettuccine alfredo as "a heart attack on a plate."

**UNEXPECTED**, producing a short circuit between two mental frames.

The Ad Council's "buckle up" commercial pretends to be an ad for a new family minivan, until the van is struck broadside by another car.

**CONCRETE**, using specific language and details.

The New York Transit Authority's plan to take back the subway system was dubbed "No Graffiti."

**CREDENTIALED**, relying on authorities or testable ideas.

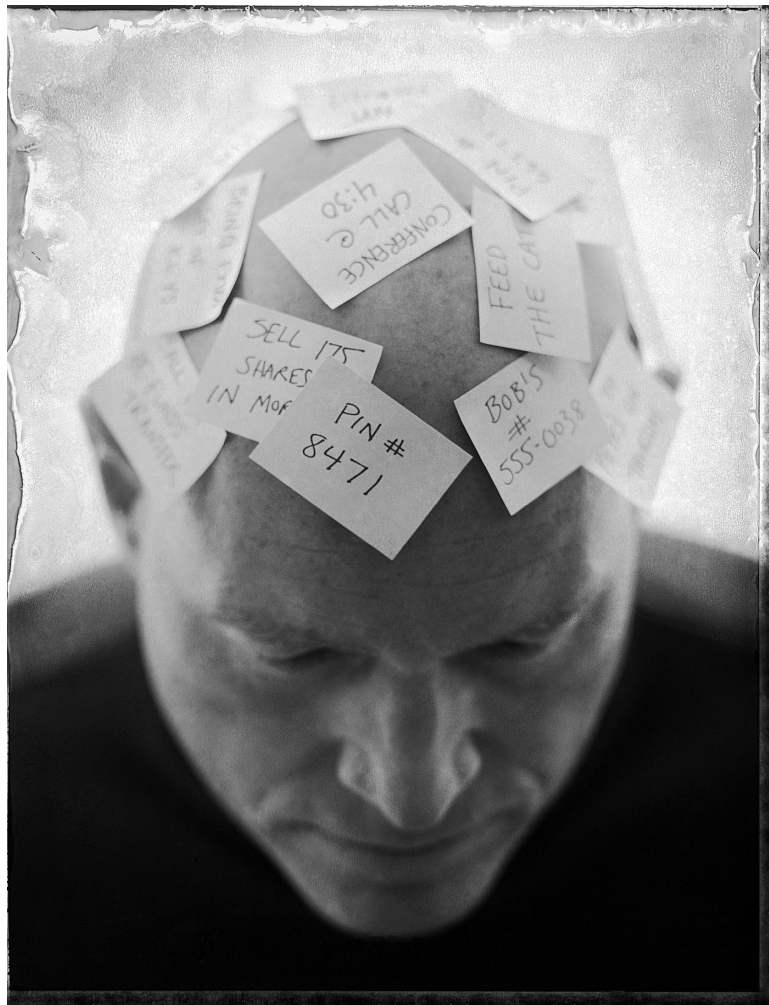
Bristol-Myers Squibb teamed with Lance Armstrong to promote cancer research by leading the Tour of Hope.

**EMOTIONAL**, tapping negative or positive feelings.

National Coalition Against Domestic Violence ad "She only got flowers once," picturing flowers above a woman's coffin.

**STORIES**, with real people.

The Massachusetts Department of Public Health antismoking campaign featuring Pam Laffin, a mother of two who got emphysema at 24 and died at 31 after a failed lung transplant.



**Urban legends stick even though they don't have the advantages of organizational messages. They don't get a boost from top management. They don't have advertising budgets. People don't like them. Web sites actively debunk them. But still they spread.**

with current information about nutrition. But that can pose a problem: How does one best convey complicated research to consumers?<sup>8</sup>

For starters, Michael Jacobson, the center'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 the center. "Everything was compared to Big Macs and Quarter Pounders."<sup>9</sup>

In 1995, while targeting Italian restaurant favorites, the center 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 center compared this to five Quarter Pounders. But what helped the message stick was a simple, shocking statement: After noting that fettuccine alfredo was the worst dish analyzed in 23 years, the center concluded: "It's a heart attack on a plate."<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps the center's best-known campaign was its crusade in the early '90s against movie popcorn. "A medium-sized 'butter' popcorn at a typical neighborhood movie theater," the center wrote, "contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon and eggs

---

*Chip Heath is an associate professor of organizational behavior in the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. Traditionally, he has done research in the areas of individual and organizational decision-making. Recently, he has been researching what makes ideas succeed in the social marketplace of ideas, and how people can craft ideas that are more likely to succeed. His research has appeared in the Journal of Organizational Behavior, Quarterly Journal of Economics, Cognitive Psychology, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, Journal of Consumer Behavior, Strategic Management Journal, and the Journal of Risk and Uncertainty. Heath has taught courses on organizational behavior, negotiation, power and politics in organizations, strategy, and international strategy. Prior to joining Stanford, Heath taught at the University of Chicago Graduate School of Business and the Fuqua School of Business at Duke University. He can be reached at [chip.heath@stanford.edu](mailto:chip.heath@stanford.edu).*

width," 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 would be sunk.

Our limited channel capacity means that sticky ideas have to be simple. Most urban legends fit this principle: A man picks up a hitchhiker on a country road. Likewise, "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 told 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 directors, actors, editors, set designers, and composers alike by focusing the crew on a clear, tangible idea.

How does this translate to the nonprofit world? Consider the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), a nonprofit consumer advocacy organization that conducts research on health and nutrition. One of CSPI's objectives is to provide consumers



*The New York Transit Authority was able to reclaim the subways with a concrete message: “No Graffiti.”*

breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings – combined!”<sup>11</sup> 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 minivan, the Enclave, opens with the van in 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 begins: “Introducing the all-new Enclave,” she begins, 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 the 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.”<sup>12</sup>

The spot 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 seat belt 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 seat belt 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.<sup>13</sup>

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, causing it to 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: a young woman on a deserted highway, 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 – the “Iliad” and the “Odyssey,” for instance – has noted that these tales are characterized by strongly concrete actions with little abstraction.<sup>14</sup> It was not 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 not concrete. From “best practices” and “outcome evaluations” to “capacity” and “empowerment” – nonprofit jargon is often so vague it’s meaningless.

Consider one 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



*Kennedy’s “man on the moon” goal was motivational – in part because it was so unexpected.*

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.”<sup>16</sup>

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 –

**People remember 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.**

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.”<sup>15</sup>

Tony Proscio, former associate editor of the *Miami Herald* and author of a book 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,

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. Here’s 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. On the contrary, 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.”<sup>17</sup> 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.”<sup>18</sup> When stories come with credentials like these, people believe them and pass them along.

Informational credentials such as credible authorities can be used to convey important messages. This fall, pharmaceutical company Bristol-Myers Squibb sponsored the Tour of Hope, a 3,000-mile bike ride across America, in a bid to promote awareness and

## **“No one ever talked about the government’s recommended daily allowance of fat. Everything was compared to Big Macs and Quarter Pounders.”**

raise money for cancer research. And to help get the message out, it 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.”<sup>19</sup>

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 Snaple 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, which was created by WNEW-TV in New York City, 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.<sup>20</sup>

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,” wrote 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.”<sup>21</sup>



He beat her 150 times.  
She only got flowers  
once.



Every 15 seconds, a woman is beaten in this country.  
For as many as four million women, this battering is so severe, they require medical or police attention.  
But for nearly 4,000 women each year, the abuse ends. They die.

**National Coalition Against Domestic Violence**  
If you need help or want to help, call 1-303-839-1852. Or write: NCADV, P.O. Box 18749, Denver, CO 80218-0749.

Some messages, like this ad from the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence (right), derive their power from negative emotions.

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 wrote that the ad works because it is “an emotionally powerful story evoked with few words and a single image.”<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup>

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.”<sup>24</sup> The 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.

How can nonprofits tap this principle? 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.”<sup>25</sup>

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, choirlike 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.”<sup>26</sup>

Finding positive emotions in nonprofits shouldn’t be hard. Most nonprofits don’t survive unless they’re doing something challenging or creative or bridging barriers. The trick is to recognize those situations and highlight them.

### Stories: ‘I Started Smoking to Look Older ...’

Many urban legends, like the vanishing hitchhiker, are stories. Stories succeed because they are simple and concrete. Often, they feature plot twists that render them unexpected. Stories also have characters that people might identify with. “We have difficulty remembering ... abstractions, but we can more easily remember a good story,” wrote 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.”<sup>27</sup>

My research supports Schank’s statement, while also showing that despite the power of stories, people often don’t use



Subway's "six sandwiches under six grams of fat" was good – but not nearly as compelling as Jared's story.

them when they could. In an exercise I have performed with more than 200 MBAs, 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 reached 190 pounds, and when Subway found out, it hired him 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."<sup>28</sup>

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 antismoking 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 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

# The ads showed the 29-year-old enduring an invasive bronchoscopy and revealed the scars across her back. In another ad, she talks about how her emphysema left her with a fat face and a lumpy neck.

“I started smoking to look older,” she says. “It worked.”

tapped out, listeners correctly guessed only 3 percent.<sup>29</sup>

How can this curse afflict nonprofits as they try to convey messages? An example arose in 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 the 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 anymore.*

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

*Because the world would never again know the experience of hav-*

*ing the sound of the orchestra but the intimacy of chamber music.*

By asking “why” long enough to overcome the curse of knowledge, nonprofit leaders can move closer to capturing ideas that stick and catch fire, urban legend-style. □

1 Adapted from a story on [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com). Retrieved September 2003 from <http://www.snopes.com/horrors/ghosts/vanish.htm>.

2 Brunvand, J.H. *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1981).

3 Brunvand, 1981.

4 Best, J. *Threatened Children: Rhetoric and Concern about Child-Victims* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

5 Best, 1990.

6 Glassner, B. *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans Are Afraid of the Wrong Things* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

7 Miller, G. “The Magical Number Seven, Plus or Minus Two: Some Limits on Our Capacity for Processing Information,” *Psychological Review* 63 (1956).

8 See the case study, “Center for Science in the Public Interest,” Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, case number M-296, September 2001.

9 Stanford case, September 2001.

10 CSPI Web site, [www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org), as quoted in Stanford case, September 2001.

11 CSPI Web site, [www.cspinet.org](http://www.cspinet.org), as quoted in Stanford case, September 2001.

12 Video can be viewed at [http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/Seat\\_Belt\\_Education/](http://www.adcouncil.org/campaigns/Seat_Belt_Education/).

13 McIntyre, A.; Lyons, A.; Clark, A.; and Kashima, Y. “The Microgenesis of Culture,” ed. M. Schaller and C.S. Crandall, *The Psychological Foundations of Culture* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003).

14 Havelock, E.A. *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963).

15 Proscio, T. “In Other Words: A Plea for Plain Speaking in Foundations,” the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation (2000).

16 Proscio, 2000.

17 Brunvand, 1981.

18 Koenig, F. *Rumor in the Marketplace* (Boston: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1985).

19 [http://www.bms.com/news/press/data/fg\\_press\\_release\\_3846.html](http://www.bms.com/news/press/data/fg_press_release_3846.html).

20 Heath, C.; Bell, C.; and Sternberg, E. “Emotional Selection in Memes: The Case of Urban Legends,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 81, no. 6 (2001)

21 Goodman, A. *Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes* (Denver: Cause Communications, 2002).

22 Goodman, 2002.

23 Fredrickson, B.L. “What Good Are Positive Emotions?” *Review of General Psychology Special Issue: New Directions in Research on Emotion* 2, no. 3 (September 1998).

24 Quoted in Goodman, 2002.

25 From “Celebrate Humanity: Global Promotional Programme – 2002.”

26 To view this video, see

[http://www.Olympic.org/uk/passion/humanity2000\\_uk.asp](http://www.Olympic.org/uk/passion/humanity2000_uk.asp).

27 Schank, R. *Tell Me a Story: Narrative & Intelligence* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1990), as quoted in Goodman.

28 From the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Web site (<http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/christy/myth1.htm>).

29 Newton, L. “Overconfidence in the Communication of Intent: Heard and Unheard Melodies.” Unpublished doctoral dissertation (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1990).