The Challenge

Imagine that you’ve been asked by your local civic group to describe Extension’s mission and your role in it. What would you say to keep your audiences actively interested and engaged for 20 minutes?

This question may seem trivial, but it isn’t. More and more, we’re being called on to tell our story in a way that our clients, stakeholders, and policy makers will remember. Simply put, telling our story effectively is critical to our survival as an organization.

Increasingly, we find ourselves competing with other agencies for a slice of the dwindling funding pie. And we’re now competing in a knowledge-driven, global economy. New York Times columnist and author Thomas Friedman describes this new environment as the “flat world”—a level playing field on which all knowledge providers on the planet compete equally, whether located in Huntsville, Seattle, or Sydney, Australia.

This flat world requires us to be innovative. How? Partly by ensuring that our messages stick with our audiences.

The Response

Stickiness is the gold standard of effective communication, especially in this flat world. Chip and Dan Heath, brothers, educators, and world-renowned experts on stickiness, have spent years trying to determine why some messages stick and others don’t. They even wrote a New York Times best seller appropriately titled Made to Stick.

According to the Heaths, sticky messages are simple, center around a story, and evoke an emotional response in the reader.

Keep It Simple

No one understands the value of simplicity more than the U.S. Army. Military orders have to be simple. Yet, after more than two centuries of experience, military planners know that despite the best advanced planning, actual battlefield conditions can change dramatically in the course of a mission.

Planners have come to value simplicity, which now forms the basis for a military concept known as “commander’s intent,” a stripped down statement that appears at the top of every mission plan. The statement outlines what the planners expect to accomplish following the operation’s conclusion, regardless of what may happen along the way. The details of the plan may change, but the end goal does not.

The most critical of military messages—the mission plan—has been stripped down to its barest essentials. By sampling this message, planners better ensure that it sticks with the audience—in this case, soldiers in battlefield conditions.

If you think about it, simplicity is a time-honored Cooperative Extension concept.

For more than 100 years, we’ve adapted this basic concept to a wide variety of audiences and settings, especially individuals and families with limited resources.

Center It Around a Story

Dan Pink, author of another New York Times best seller, A Whole New Mind, credits storytelling as one of the most effective ways to distinguish one product from another in this increasingly crowded global marketplace. How? By sharpening audiences’ understanding of one thing by presenting it within the context of another.

“Stories are easier to remember because, in many ways, stories are how we remember,” Pink says.

Why is storytelling so valuable from our perspective? Partly because our history is replete with stories—stories that provide us a compelling way to illustrate Extension’s mission and our role in it.

Here’s an example: the pioneering Jesup Wagon concept. Its creators, Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver, understood that the farming advances generated at Tuskegee were valuable only if they could be effectively communicated to farmers. In one respect, they faced the same challenge we do today: packaging and communicating a message that will stick with clients.

Enter the Jesup wagon, a movable school on wheels dispatched to remote locations to provide farmers with a practical grasp of the latest agricultural research. This
story is invaluable for two reasons: 1) It helps us present our mission within a wider context; and 2) it allows us to present the mission in a compelling, sticky sort of way.

In equipping the first movable school, Washington and Carver included items of immediate practical benefit to farmers—a cream separator, a milk tester, a revolving hand churn, a cultivator, and a one-horse plow. If you think about it, the Jesup wagon concept embodies the basic idea that connects earlier generations of Extension educators with us: showing our clients how to understand and make practical use of knowledge—sometimes highly complex knowledge—to improve their lives.

Yes, we have just presented our basic organizational message—working knowledge—within the wider context of a compelling story. And in the process, we’ve made it sticky.

Evoke an Emotional Response

When you tell stories, don’t limit yourselves to basic historical facts. Weave in the emotional element—the human dimension. After all, the Jesup wagon concept was a response to a specific human struggle: farmers and their families surviving the grim conditions of the rural, post-Civil War South.

This emotional component can be found in other personal and historical accounts. Look for them and use them! Here are a couple of examples from recent Extension annual reports. These examples demonstrate how to tell Extension stories by combining the working knowledge theme with highly compelling—and sticky—human dimension components.

In Anniston, Urban Extension Agent Hayes Jackson uses his vast knowledge of plants to enrich the social and cultural life of his community and to broaden the scope and admirations of a group of disadvantaged teenage girls at the Coosa Valley Youth Attention Center. Working with Master Gardeners, Jackson operates a greenhouse as a living classroom, using horticultural instruction to provide the girls with a practical grasp of science-related principles. The plants propagated by Jackson and the girls are also used to instruct local gardeners and nursery operators in all facets of horticulture, from plant selection to drought-resistant landscaping.

Here’s another example: Many years ago, Debra Glenn, a young girl growing up in a Birmingham housing project, underwent a life-changing transformation while attending weekly 4-H DOT training. For the first time in her life, she was shown how to prepare simple, affordable recipes from scratch—recipes she could take home and prepare for her mother and brothers. This working knowledge—planning and preparing meals for her family—opened the door to a lifetime of self-mastery and empowerment. After completing high school and college, Debra went on to pursue a career in the medical industry, while spending part of her free time counseling delinquent youth.

Our Message: Working Knowledge

Working knowledge forms the bedrock of our mission. As Extension educators, we use working knowledge to empower the lives of Alabamians—a lesson reflected in the personal stories of Extension educators from the first decade of the 20th century to present day.

By sharing these stories, we enhance the effect—the stickiness—of our basic message. And by enhancing our message’s stickiness, we ensure that future generations of Alabamians will continue to benefit from our unique product—working knowledge.

To learn about other attributes of sticky messages, take a look at the Heaths’ book, Made to Stick.