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The Value of Sticky Articles

In *Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die: Made to Stick*, Heath and Heath (2007) identify six key qualities of successful ideas that make them "sticky." Within their framework, sticky ideas are simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional, and delivered in story form. Although their research is primarily focused on the effectiveness of myths, advertisements, and slogans, these qualities apply remarkably well to successful articles that might appear in *Journal of Marketing Research* (*JMR*).

Why sticky articles? Juxtaposing "sticky" and "articles" sounds wrong, evoking a spilled chocolate shake or ketchup on an otherwise pristine paper. However, given that an article passes the substantial contribution hurdle, I propose that *JMR* publications need stickiness. A sticky publication is one whose message is recalled; whose method, theory, and substantive results are repeated; and whose story is elaborated on, resulting in an article that is cited both within and beyond marketing. In simple terms, a sticky publication is an influential one.

In this editorial, I explore how to write sticky publications, shamelessly borrowing from the concepts and ideas in Heath and Heath's (2007) book. As I characterize the appropriate strategies that build on their six criteria, I provide examples of stickiness from this issue of *JMR*. Although there are strong parallels in the ways stickiness improves both ideas and articles, there are differences. For example, stories may be useful for ideas, but they are critical for articles. In contrast, emotion is useful to ideas but less so for articles. Thus, I begin with the importance of stories and spend relatively little time on emotions.

IT'S THE STORY, STUPID

James Carville provided important focus for Bill Clinton's presidential campaign with the slogan, "The economy, stupid." Although the referent defining who is "stupid" is unclear, it most appropriately characterized the efforts of an intelligent staff developing rationales for Clinton's presidential run against the elder George Bush. This staff, trained in depth and nuance, ran the risk of letting the story become complex. Carville's warning kept them focused on the simple message. My analogous purpose is to try to focus on the story aspect of *JMR* articles and to argue that the writer, not the reader, is to be faulted if the message is missed.

How is an article like a story? A story typically develops interest and personal relevance through a conflict between characters. The tension in this conflict sustains interest, and its resolution typically ends the story and makes it memorable. There are at least three kinds of stories in the typical *JMR* article—those that improve methodology, those that develop theory, and those that illuminate practice. For methodology stories, the characters are typically two or more forms of analysis that vie for the best predictive or logical characterization of data. For the theoretical stories, the characters are either contrasting theories or conflicting versions of the same theory, and the winner is the theory that best accounts for behavior. For stories about practice, the characters embody competing visions of how individual consumers or markets behave in response to firms' actions.

First, consider the research methodology story. Methodology articles were strongly featured in the initial days of *JMR* nearly 50 years ago. That was the era of great discoveries for researching markets. These *JMR* articles provided guidance on how to survey customers, on ways to assess their reactions to marketing actions, and on how to use the new multivariate methods to reveal market insights. Recently, there has been a blooming of research methods, particularly those that account for market equilibriums with Bayesian or simulated likelihood method for estimation. These new methods are particularly exciting in that they have facilitated a simultaneous increase in theoretical coherence and the practical applicability of quantitative models.

Methodology stories can illuminate the way individuals or markets are sampled, the kinds of question that are asked, the constructs that are measured, or the analysis that is used to generate the market insight. There are two fine examples of methodological innovation in this issue. Rindfleish and colleagues (2008) provide a thoughtful and thorough assessment of longitudinal versus cross-sectional methods. The tension in their article is between researchers who are tied emotionally to the cross-sectional or the longitudinal camps. The article provides clarity with respect to when each method should be used and the kinds of problems that arise from each perspective. A second methodology article is DeSarbo, Grewal, and Scott's (2008) scaling technique, which helps resolve the conflict between compactness and richness in market maps. Multidimensional scaling is often used in marketing practice, but it has been used less frequently in academic research. The authors present a new mapping program that can represent the complex interplay among competitors, attributes, and consumer segments in one compact space.

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Second, articles can present theoretical stories. In its weaker form, such a story may offer a novel marketing replication of a well-known theory. In its stronger form, it justifies the pruning or refining of a major theoretical tree. Journals appropriately require results to be related to frameworks that are known to the journal's readers. In this issue, Lee and colleagues (2008) illuminate the well-known disposition effect from behavioral finance and demonstrate that people are more likely to sell stocks with ascending than descending prices. Although there is little conflict about the existence and magnitude of the disposition effect, there has been substantial disagreement about whether the theoretical explanation lies in the valuation of outcomes or in the perceptions of their probabilities. The authors show that manipulating subjective probabilities of subsequent gains or losses has little impact on the disposition effect. This result suggests that disposition follows from the S-shaped value function of prospect theory but offers little support to a probability weighting effect.

Third, consider consumer or market stories. These stories reflect how the results of research alter the way we think about the behavior of individual consumers or particular markets. Slotegraaf and Pauwels (2008) motivate their article by noting that research demonstrating the minimal long-term impact of promotions has focused primarily on high-market-share brands. Building a new story that includes more than 100 brands in seven categories over seven years, they demonstrate that small-share brands often have positive long-term persistence. In a different domain, Shang, Reed, and Croson (2008) create a coherent story about the likelihood of donation to charitable organizations. They show that donors give more when they are told that a person with a similar identity has made a substantial donation and that the effect is greater for those with high collective-identity esteem, particularly when their attention is focused on others.

Note that there is a story that is conspicuous in its absence, one that may seem deceptively important to the authors. It is the author's story—the history around the discovery of the idea, parenthetical personal reflections, frustration with false starts, and documentation of indeterminate studies or analyses. Articles in *JMR* are about knowledge and market actions. In simple terms, the personal journey the authors took to get there has no place in a major publication.

It is important to focus the contribution by leading with the methodological, the theoretical, or the market story while relegating the other two stories to supportive roles. The reason focus is needed is because most readers have a focused interest in one but rarely more than one of these three areas. Web appendixes can help in the focusing process by making the empirical and the analytic detail available for replication and validation without cluttering the main thrust of the article.

WHO IS THE STORY FOR?

It is useful to distinguish between two kinds of important readers for any article: "core" and "incremental" readers. The core reader knows the topic and appreciates both nuance and refinement. The incremental reader is not an expert or perhaps only an expert with respect to one or more of the supportive stories. The need for and benefit from stickiness differs across these readers.

Core Readers

Core readers are the experts—those who are often referenced in the article. Core readers expect research to explore boundary conditions, are comfortable with more complex models, and are excited about analyses that may reflect extensions of their own work. The most salient element from the author's perspective about the core readers is that they are more likely to be the reviewers of the work. In this capacity, their job is to give advice on how to make the article better and to certify its technical correctness. Following from their expertise and their multiple views of the article through the review process, the story per se may be less critical to core readers, implying that the issues of simplicity, surprise, concreteness, and emotionality may have less impact on them.

Incremental Readers

In contrast to core readers, incremental readers need assistance. They will read the article only if it catches their attention. Worse, even if they read or browse the article, if it is not sticky, they will not recall the message and will not use it in their teaching or research. Thus, stickiness is particularly critical for the incremental reader.

Incremental readers are also important because, in general, there are many more of them than core readers, suggesting that articles need to consider this broader audience. However, because the core readers are the gatekeepers, the articles need to pass their muster before the incremental readers even get a shot at them. Although the better reviewers consider how the impact of an article can be improved, their major focus remains appropriately on certification.

In the review process, authors need to be careful that the reviewers do not hijack the coherence of their story. Reviewers appropriately ask for additional research requiring the measurement of new variables, studies with novel manipulations, and more statistical or econometric analyses. These efforts are important to assure the review team that the research reflects the cutting edge of thinking. However, when the authors' analysis has been certified, it is both sufficient and appropriate to summarize those efforts briefly. Details can be provided in an appendix or by contacting the author; however, it is critical that the flow of the story be interrupted as little as possible.

KEEP THE STORY SIMPLE

Many good articles focus on one story with support from the other two. Good articles have a limited number of core propositions. It takes work to express these in short sentences that succinctly summarize the major contribution. Successful authors often focus their writing by first building an outline or PowerPoint display that forces major points to be summarized in short lines or phrases.

Part of keeping an article simple involves shorthand methods to tell the story. Acronyms referring to a certain model or method are often part of that shorthand, but these should be avoided because they can be difficult for the casual reader to understand. Another mistake authors often make is the use of synonyms for key constructs. Although multiple labels add variety to the writing, they can confuse the reader who perceives differences rather than similarities across synonyms. Authors need to develop and reinforce key words and phrases carefully. To help focus the terminology, it is helpful to build a background glossary that defines the words and phrases used in the article. Although the reader may never see such a glossary, its presence makes for a stickier paper because it facilitates coherence, ensures consistency, and encourages repetition in phrase use.

It is sometimes possible to coin a unique and memorable term for a phenomenon. Such a term can then serve as a mental marker for the key idea in the article. A really big idea can sometimes be named after the inventor (e.g., Doppler effect or Bayes' theorem). For less momentous contributions, consider a name or phrase that evokes the concept in a memorable way. In this issue, DeSarbo, Grewal, and Scott (2008) descriptively name their multidimensional scaling methodology "clusterwise bilinear," and Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008) label the influence of fine art on paintings "art infusion." Providing an intuitive label for the central construct can increase the likelihood that the reader will remember and use it.

MAKE THE STORY UNEXPECTED

Generating surprise in an academic publication is a challenge. After all, if the abstract summarizes what to expect, where is the suspense? As the movie *Titanic* illustrates, stories can have the same problem. To overcome that difficulty, the movie focused on how characters adapted and survived in the face of disaster. In the same way, authors can create surprise by initially demonstrating that the main issues are *not* what are expected. Furthermore, a sense of the unexpected can emerge through creative and novel ways to measure and assess the effects found. This technique is similar to the way mystery stories create surprise. The suspense revolves more around how the detective cleverly identifies the killer and less on showing that the murder took place.

Note that it is important to foreshadow surprising results in the theory section, so that the solution is understood as a resolution to a neat puzzle and not a deus ex machina that leaves the reader confused. In other words, having too much surprise can be as harmful as having none. For example, an unexpected third-order interaction should not be emphasized unless the theoretical groundwork has been laid so that the reader understands what is behind this surprising event.

MAKE THE STORY CONCRETE

The best theories are highly abstract, and the most admired thinkers are fluent in abstract thinking. Abstraction is important because the purpose of theory is to generalize across specific events. However, memory is grounded in highly concrete phenomena. The solution is to build abstract theories and then to illustrate them through particular examples.

Many effective articles begin with a particular instance of the phenomenon they are exploring. This permits the reader to understand the issues through the lens of a specific problem. Furthermore, if the introduction is well developed, it will raise a question that can be resolved throughout the article. In this issue, many articles begin with a puzzling idea. For example, Alexander, Lynch, and Wang (2008) begin with a discussion of the difficulty of predicting demand for Segway; similarly, Castaño and colleagues (2008) begin with the story of Michelin's experimental nonpneumatic tire, the Tweel. Both concrete examples raise questions that the articles subsequently illuminate.

MAKE THE STORY EMOTIONAL

In general, expression of emotion is not encouraged in major research publications. A logical tone increases the credibility of the writer's assertions. That said, *JMR* readers are emotional about intellectual findings, particularly when their revolutionary qualities are emphasized. Furthermore, properties of concreteness and playing up the unexpected nature of the results also help foster an emotional response to what appears from the outside to be a cool, logical development.

MAKE THE STORY CREDIBLE

Credibility is a critical aspect of the review process and the ultimate influence of the article. Typically, credibility is achieved through careful adherence to accepted methodology. Thus, samples need to be representative and appropriate; variables should be reliable and discriminating, and the analysis must be current and statistically significant.

Apart from process credibility, an important way to increase credibility is to demonstrate the same effect from different perspectives. This credibility enhancement can arise by showing that the effects occur across different categories and markets and with different data and analysis. There are some good examples in this issue. For example, Hagtvedt and Patrick (2008) show that known art infuses quality perceptions in different contexts—for silverware in a restaurant, followed by laboratory replications that use bathroom fixtures and soap dispensers. The lab studies permit more thorough control for alternative accounts, whereas the demonstration across artworks and product categories provides generalizability and credibility for the concept of art infusion. Similarly, Shang, Reed, and Croson (2008) demonstrate the applicability of the impact of gender identification through a demonstration experiment on public radio. This demonstration lends credibility and relevance to subsequent laboratory studies that replicate the effect and establish its theoretical boundaries.

Credibility can also be augmented by presenting results in multiple formats. Because memory is better when the message is communicated in multiple ways, consider ways to communicate the message through words, figures, and tables. While avoiding simple redundancy, authors might, for example, provide the means in the text, the interactions in a table, and the residuals in a graph. To the extent that such exhibits reinforce the points made in the text, they can increase the level of understanding of the story and add to its credibility.

ENCOURAGE A SEQUEL TO THE STORY

It is tempting to believe that the goal of an article is to write the perfect story, one that raises a question and answers it once and for all. However, journalistic perfection in that sense is vastly overrated. Indeed, a far more productive vision views *JMR* not as a set of closed accounts but rather as an extended conversation, in which each article builds on prior articles and then passes the conversation to others. In line with this logic, the ideal response to an article is to have others write sequels to it, extending its method, theory, or market story.

A way to ensure that a paper continues rather than stops the conversation is by framing the issue broadly. Both the beginning and the end of a paper should expand the reader's perspective. For example, Ahluwalia's (2008) article focuses on the impact of interdependence on the acceptance of brand extensions, but it begins and ends with the general issue of how far a brand can stretch. Similarly, Shang, Reed, and Croson (2008) explore people's willingness to donate, given gendered information about the gifts of others. However, it generalizes to the impact of identity salience across many market contexts.

Authors' suggestions for further research too often resemble a personal research agenda. The goal instead should be to make the work relevant to a broad group of researchers so that the story can be appropriated by people with different orientations and goals. Because a big idea is one that applies across a broad range of situations, it is to authors' advantage to extend the domain of the findings as much as possible.

IS STICKINESS SUFFICIENT?

In a word, no. The purpose of this editorial is not to encourage the victory of style over substance. The major criterion for a successful publication will always be new knowledge for the field. My attempt here is to encourage authors to consider ways such knowledge can be more effectively and more memorably communicated. The framework for sticky ideas that Heath and Heath (2007) present provides an insightful way to think about how to market an idea better so that others can recall, use, and elaborate on it. Generalized to journal articles, thinking about an article as a story and playing up its simplicity, surprise, and credibility can serve both the authors and the field by increasing the impact of the published articles.

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