

Back British Farming:  
Sticky Campaign with a Sticky Future  
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### Introduction

Back British Farming is a public relations campaign, launched in 2013 by the National Farmers Union (NFU), a member-based organization that represents farmers and growers in England and Wales. The campaign was designed to increase public awareness about Britain's agricultural self-sufficiency — or lack thereof. NFU named August 13, 2013 as “Back British Farming Day,” to represent the day that the UK's domestic food supply would run out if the country was self-sufficient (“Why back,” 2018). It is an example of a “sticky” campaign and utilizes the SUCCEs principles outlined by brothers Chip and Dan Heath in their book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die* (2007). In 2017, the NFU won two awards for Back British Farming in the “Best Event” and “Not-for-Profit Campaign” categories in the 2016 Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) PRide Awards (“Double awards,” 2016). In 2019, NFU is continuing the campaign, promoting the importance of agriculture to the UK economy but with a new focus on agricultural policies in the midst of the Brexit negotiations.

### SUCCEs Model Analysis of Back British Farming

In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers (2007) outline a model for “stickiness.” They said there are two steps to make an idea sticky, first, to find the core, and second, to translate the core using the SUCCEs checklist (p. 28). The six principles on that checklist are: simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, emotional and stories. The Back British Farming campaign is a good example of the SUCCEs model. The very name of the campaign is the core message and it does a great job of following the other five principles.

#### Simple

The first principle of the SUCCEs model is that the campaign be simple. The Heath brothers stress the importance of getting to the core message and focusing on that above all things. “Psychologists have found that people can be driven to irrational decisions by too

much complexity and uncertainty,” the authors said (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 34). The simplicity of the message, “Back British Farming,” gives consumers, the media, and lawmakers something to focus on: above all things, back British farmers — buy local, support the economy. NFU president, Meurig Raymond said, “Seeing that more and more members of the public are thinking positive things about farming is fantastic. We were particularly pleased to see that 90 percent of people think that farming is important to the economy. Agriculture’s contribution to the economy increased by 67 percent between 2007 and 2013 and it’s great that the public have noticed this.” (“Public opinion,” 2014). However, in the wake of Brexit, the NFU’s message has become more complex and focused on lobbying efforts in London. Still, the 2016 Back British Farming campaign was successful. Eighty five percent of Members of Parliament signed NFU’s Back British Farming pledge on the Back British Farming Day in 2016 (“Back British,” n.d.). The campaign trended at number three on Twitter and surveys showed that public awareness increased, with 83 percent of people agreeing that it was important for Britain to increase its self-sufficiency in home-grown food (“Back British,” n.d.). As Brexit continues to drag out, the Back British Farming campaign will continue to be important for NFU but they will need to work harder to keep the message simple and not complicate it with political messages.

### **Unexpected**

In *Made to Stick*, the Heath brothers (2007) said, “We can’t succeed if our messages don’t break through the clutter and get people’s attention. Furthermore, our messages are unusually complex enough that we won’t succeed if we can’t keep people’s attention,” (p. 65). The second principle of the SUCCEs model is that the message be unexpected. Surprise gets attention, interest keeps attention (Heath & Heath, 2007). One of the ways to create surprise is to open knowledge gaps and then close them. A 2012 University of Cambridge survey showed that people in Britain generally had a positive perception of agriculture but that they were lacking in knowledge about the actual industry. In the survey, nearly three quarters of people felt that they did not know much or knew nothing about agriculture (University of Cambridge,

2012). Agriculture takes up 75 percent of the land in the UK, a fact that only 10 percent of survey respondents answered correctly (University of Cambridge, 2012). Further, the mean contribution of agriculture to the economy was estimated to be 24 percent by survey participants when in fact it is closer to 1.5 percent of GDP (University of Cambridge, 2012). Taking advantage of this knowledge gap, the NFU was able to create an unexpected message — people knew agriculture was important but they didn't know how important it was.

The date of the original Back British Farming campaign was a very unexpected element. When it was launched, NFU promoted that the UK would run out of food on August 13, 2013 if it was entirely self-sufficient as of January 1. In a highly developed country like the UK, food scarcity is hardly an issue many people think of — there is always food available, you just need to go to the grocery store and get it. The NFU needed to shift the public's perception in order to call attention to the UK's declining self-sufficiency in agriculture. In 2013, the UK's self-sufficiency was 62 percent, a decrease from 75 percent in 1991 ("Why back," 2018). Brexit has only created a greater sense of urgency for the situation in the public eye. Similar to President Kennedy's call to put a "man on the moon," the Back British Farming campaign gives people a glimpse into the future for how things might be. The "man on the moon" speech allowed people to imagine ways to solve the problem and so does the Back British Farming campaign. It's a sticky idea because it is unexpected but not so unexpected that it's unachievable.

### **Concrete**

The Heath brothers said concrete language helps people understand new concepts. "Concreteness boils down to specific people doing specific things," (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 104). Back British Farming is a clear call to action. The simplicity of the three words tell you exactly what to do: back (support) British farming — buy locally grown foods. In campaign materials, consumers were told to buy British food. Countryside, the NFU's consumer engagement partner, developed a variety of materials including infographics that show the seasonal availability of British produce, cookbooks with recipes for using British ingredients, and "Open Farm Sunday," a campaign to get people on farms. The Back British Farming logo

is the Union Jack, the UK's national flag, with the message "Back British Farming" through the center. Images used for the Back British Farming campaign show farmers and their families on farms so people can connect with the humans behind agriculture. For legislators, the campaign was even more concrete. In 2016, the NFU evolved the campaign to target legislators during the Brexit negotiations and encourage them to consider agricultural policy in the UK. The call to "back British farmers" took shape in the form of a bespoke wheat lapel pin and actual signing of a pledge to back British farmers ("Back British," n.d.). As the NFU looks to evolve this campaign and maintain its momentum, it may be effective to have consumers also "take a pledge." Another important evolution would be to incorporate more video along with farmer stories to connect the public and legislators with the faces behind agriculture in the UK.

### **Credible**

Statistics are an important tool in building credibility. The NFU had data on its side, drawing on survey results that illustrated consumers knowledge gaps and sentiment for agriculture. The public already believed that farming was important to the economy — the NFU Back British Farming campaign just needed to solidify that message. Reports showed that people thought half of food in the UK was imported when the reality was actually 80 percent (or higher when you count ingredients for processed foods) (Edwards, 2019). The fact that the UK is 60 percent self-sufficient or imports 80 percent of its food is meaningful data but difficult for the average person to understand. To illustrate these statistics, the NFU picked a specific date when the UK would run out of food if it was self-sufficient. Knowing that the country could only feed itself for a little more than eight months was powerful, surprising information. Instead of being an abstract number, it was a concrete date that build credibility for the campaign.

### **Emotional**

"We make people care by appealing to the things that matter to them," (Heath & Heath, 2007, p. 177). Looking at Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Back British Farming campaign touches on the four foundational needs: physical, security, belonging and esteem. At the core, Back British Farming was intended to increase public awareness about the UK's self-

sufficiency. The idea of food shortages strikes fear in people, a fear that has only been exasperated by Brexit. Back British Farming promotes self-sufficiency and sustainability. The message is that Britains need to support British farmers if they want to ensure a safe, healthy, and reliable food supply. The campaign also draws on a sense of national pride, appealing to people's need for belonging and achievement. Despite figures that show declining patriotism in the UK, national pride is still quite high. Social anthropologist Kate Fox said, "When you look at the big European surveys, the English rate their degree of patriotism...lowest of all European nations. But...if you ask the question a different way, you find that 83 percent of us feel...proud to be English," (Flannagan, 2014). Fear and love are two powerful emotional motivators and the Back British Farming campaign balances both.

### **Stories**

The final principle in the SUCCEs model is stories. The NFU uses stories throughout its Back British Farming campaign to create a challenge plot and inspire people to act. The NFU paints a cautionary tale of a country that runs out of food. They also tell the tale of a hero, everyone living in the UK, who can overcome the challenge by simply supporting agriculture — buying local products and crafting favorable policies. As Brexit continues and the campaign evolves, the NFU needs to be cautious about how politics influence the narrative. Britains are divided on the Brexit issue. The initial support for Back British Farming is at risk for losing its stickiness if it becomes too greatly associated with the Brexit negotiations.

### **Conclusion**

Back British Farming is an excellent example of the SUCCEs model in action. It achieves all six principles and excels in being a simple idea. However, its simplicity is at risk though, as the UK moves through Brexit negotiations. Agriculture is an important piece of future UK policy agendas. Tying Back British Farming to the Brexit campaign could cause a decline in public support as Britains are divided on how they feel about the move to leave the European Union.

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