

# Why the “**curse of knowledge**” can screw up your marketing communications

Ever sit down to read about a company's services and come away with, “huh?” Especially in B2B marketing, many communications are often difficult to actually understand. You might blame it on the jargon and acronyms, but the culprit is much more substantial.



You didn't understand what you read because the communicator was suffering from a common problem. For years, we at Pepper Group have called it “being too close to the subject matter.” But in their great book, *Made to Stick*, Chip Heath and Dan Heath have identified a better name for it: The Curse of Knowledge. In short, it's the fact that once you know something, it's impossible to go back mentally to a point before you had that knowledge. It seems obvious to you. As a result, your communications are often a lot less clear to your audience than you think.

Want some proof? Tap out a song by knocking on the desk. I'm not suggesting you go for a Lady Gaga melody; just try the alphabet song or the *Star-Spangled Banner*. Then, ask someone to guess what you're tapping. Sounds easy, right? Try it. You'll get very frustrated. While you're tapping, you'll be hearing the tune in your head and the answer will seem perfectly obvious. At the same time, your listener is just hearing meaningless knocking. That tune in your head is the equivalent of The Curse of Knowledge.

You may have heard about our award-winning Follett eBooks campaign a few years ago. It's a solid example of overcoming this curse. eBooks were still fairly new at the time, and at the campaign's core was the basic insight that the audience didn't truly understand what eBooks were or how their school could benefit from them. By focusing on ensuring understanding among our various audiences, the campaign tripled monthly sales over a period of only six months.

Even if you're aware of it, the curse is very difficult to overcome. It's one reason that it usually pays to hire outside help. Regardless of how you address The Curse of Knowledge, though, the next time you are about to communicate something, pause for a moment and consider if there's maybe a tune playing in your head that your audience is just not going to hear. It may save you a lot of unproductive tapping.