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Training your brain to make the most of your life

by *Catherine Thompson*

KEMPTVILLE – It's often been said that most people use only a function of their brain. As a result, most people rarely achieve all that they would like to in life, and many end up failing in areas where they could otherwise succeed.

Keynote speaker at the Eastern Ontario Crop Conference on February 19, 2009, Brian Thwaites believes we can utilize our brains with better efficiency by understanding a little about how the brain functions and using a few simple techniques.

As a former community college teacher with over 20 years experience and the author of *The Big Learn: Smart Ways to Use Your Brain*, Thwaites has thoroughly researched effective use of mental powers and communication.

Scientists have learned more about the brain in the past 10 years than in all of history, Thwaites said. Much of the research occurred following U.S. President George Bush Senior's 1990 declaration of "The Decade of the Brain".

"The way we use our brain affects everything we do in our lives. It affects us personally, socially, academically in learning something new, and it certainly affects the way we interact with people and do our jobs," he told the luncheon crowd.

Recent theory suggests the brain has two sections, with the left area dealing with functions of logic, reason, math, language and analysis. The right side of the brain deals with creativity, rhythm, imagery, dreams, emotions, symbols and synthesis.

Thwaites spoke of the difficulty he had trying to get college students to pay attention to a subject like business report writing during 20+ years of post-secondary teaching.

In an amusing illustration, Thwaites compared the left side of the brain to a "boring meeting" and the right side being full of "brain party people." There's like a party going on inside your brain. When the guy on the left side tries to bring a cold dry fact to the attention of the right side, the party side sees this really boring person that's trying to sneak in this really dull dry fact. So they get together and say: 'Whatever happens, don't let him in to spoil the party!' That's why you have to dress information up. You have to try to intrigue these people enough to open the door so you can stick your foot in there and sneak in information."

"Something people mention to me that they really have memory problems," Thwaites said, citing statistics that suggest 83 percent of people forget names and 60 percent forget where they put things. Fifty-seven percent forget telephone numbers they just checked, 53 percent forget "words on the tip of the tongue" and 38 percent forget whether they locked the door.

Thwaites shared anecdotes about the numerous times he asks for directions, which he promptly forgets and has to drive around the corner to ask another person the same question. Or when he rushes upstairs to find something and can't remember what it was. "It must have been important or I wouldn't have run here!" he said.

These are experiences that almost everyone has, especially after middle age, but they're nothing to worry about. "Forgetting where your car keys are once in a while is not a big deal. If you forget what your car keys are for, though, that's certainly something to worry about," he said.

Information doesn't stay in the brain because of lack of interest, attention and effort, Thwait's explained. But advertising people know the secret of getting information into your brain through the use of pictures, images, shapes, colours and designs — where words, numbers, facts and figures won't stick so easily.

People who want to retain information or have it retained know about the "magical" number seven, which figures in book titles like *The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People*. For some reason, our memories have a hard time holding more than seven items, which results in brain overload. That's why it's easier to remember the "Seven Deadly Sins" than all of "The Ten Commandments".

Thwait's explained one problem in paying attention is that the brain goes so fast; it has a hard time slowing down to the rate that information is trying to come in. Scientists think the brain takes in information anywhere from 1,000 words to 25,000 words a minute.

"The problem is you can slow your brain to about 1,000 words a minute (by meditation, relaxation techniques), but you can instantly go up to 25,000 words a minute."

He then described how his own rate jumped the day he got a phone call from "Canada Revenue. He hadn't even said 'Agency' when I hit 25,000 words per minute. Then I heard the word 'auditors' and I thought my brain was going to blow up". Thwait's only slowed his brain rate when the agent invited him to do a *Train Your Brain* presentation at Mont Tremblant in Quebec. "I was so grateful I cut the price in half!"

The problems of attention appear when we try to read at about 250 words per minute and the brain's slowest speed of absorption is 1,000 words per minute. "That suggests that, in most passive reading situations, more than 75 per cent of your brain is not reading at all. In fact, it's having a party, thinking about more interesting things," he said.

But an even bigger problem is listening. "Every person in this room, including myself as I'm speaking to you, is thinking about all sorts of things that have absolutely nothing to do with what I'm talking about," he said.

The third problem is the 30-second short-term memory span. If information isn't transferred quickly into the long-term memory, it will disappear.

Popular products like smart energy drinks with ginseng and ginkgo biloba are rumoured to boost brainpower. Nevertheless, there are a few tried and true ways to improve mental powers throughout life.

"Don't stop working, ever. Stay physically healthy. Take courses, do jigsaw or crossword puzzles. Skip bingo. Instead, play bridge. Learn a new language. Socialize. Stock your life with rich experiences of all kinds. Become an expert in anything; you'll do your brain a favour. No matter how old you get, there's an interesting side to the brain. Get both sides working together as much as possible."