

from **Outlook Magazine** (CGA of BC) • Summer 2011

Train Your Brain

By Brian Thwaites

Brains are sure trendy these days, aren't they?

Not a day goes by without a variety of media references to that three-pound organ inside our heads. We see the word 'brain' in newspaper articles and online every single day. It's all over magazine covers as well. And bookstores are creating stand-alone displays for the ever-growing proliferation of books about it.

Brains for business. Brains for school. Brains for home. How to use our brains to succeed. How to use our brains to learn better. How to use our brains to improve our relationships.

Advertisers have jumped on board, too. Not only do we see plenty of brain imagery used to sell everything from financial services to beer to cars, but a whole new category of research called neuromarketing has been created, using sophisticated brain imaging technology with focus groups to test consumer response and help clients develop strategies to increase awareness and sales.

Ever since George H. Bush signed Presidential Proclamation 6158 back on January 1st, 1990 to announce the Decade of the Brain, the scientific community has devoted a tremendous amount of time and energy exploring all things brain-related. The latest technology used in neuroscience labs today is enough to make our heads spin. (Quite literally.)

The good news, of course, is that so many recent discoveries from the world of neuroscience are suggesting tremendous possibilities that can impact our lives, both personally and professionally, in very positive ways.

For one thing, we now know that our brains can change over time. They're plastic, meaning they're malleable and capable of growing fresh neural pathways as we gain knowledge and learn new skills. Obviously, this is exciting news, as we live in a modern world where dealing with constant change is a tremendous challenge.

And it's not just that brains are simply capable of change. In fact, they *thrive on* change! Indeed, it's the process of being engaged in, even being frustrated by, complex tasks that most often leads to the phenomenon of plasticity. So, while most of us would much prefer to be excited and inspired when working, the fact is that our brains are functioning just as well, maybe even better, when we're plugging away at tasks that are difficult and challenging.

Another revelation that can help us use our brains a whole lot better is that *active learning works better than passive learning*. Given the general consensus that knowing how to learn is crucial to achieving success in the 21st century, this is something that demands our close attention.

Many of us live in a world that's heavy on words, numbers, facts, figures and statistics — and our brains need help acquiring and managing all that data. To do so, we spend much of our time engaged in passive activities like reading and listening. And a major problem with those methods of learning is that we read and listen at a much slower pace than the very fast speeds our brains are capable of processing information.

We can help our brains (and the brains of those we're interacting with) by adding active features that will help us deal with the slow, passive acts of reading and listening. For instance, when we create written material, including visual imagery with words and numbers is helpful. In reports, for example, it's often the tables, charts and graphs that stick in our heads rather than text buried in dense paragraphs.

Adding both pictures and sound to verbal material is even more useful. Presentations that incorporate media elements, if well designed, can add immeasurably to their success.

While thinking and learning independently certainly has its place in our lives, the fact is that sharing information with others verbally — even better, participating in a discussion with others — adds a powerful active component that can boost understanding (for us and for others) considerably. Actually becoming engaged in an activity can enhance our experience significantly. (All of us who have learned a new skill that's computer-related are well aware that, while reading a manual ahead of time might prepare us for the task, genuine comprehension will only take place once we actually engage in the activity.)

One reason that active learning works so much better than passive learning is that the former requires more mental effort. But an even more important factor is that it engages both sides of the brain.

The simple version of the two-sides-of-the-brain story is that logic is looked after by the left side and creativity by the right. However, it's a bit more complicated than that. The left side controls those school/work tasks such as reading, writing and arithmetic, and it also manages speech, reason and analysis, too. Meanwhile, the right side looks after the more sensual parts of our lives: space, touch and vision — as well as symbols, rhythm and emotions.

And what neuroscientists are telling us is that, while it's absolutely important to develop strong left-brain skills in order to be successful, it's the potency of the right side that will make our brains work even better. It's not a coincidence that the greatest thinkers and learners in history have been strong on both sides of their brains.

Decades ago, Alvin Toffler wrote in *Future Shock* that “the illiterate of the future won't be those who cannot read and write — but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.” Given the knowledge-laden and technology-driven world we're now living in, it's safe to say he was definitely on the mark with that prediction!

In a modern world that demands that we not just keep up with — but learn and assimilate — an ever-increasing amount of new information, we'd be foolish not to take heed of those very wise words.

Brian Thwaites is a 'brain trainer' who has shown thousands of people from all walks of life how to supercharge their brains. He is the author of *The Big Learn: Smart Ways To Use Your Brain*. For more information, please visit www.brainspeaker.com .