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Train Your Brain

By Sharon Aschaiek

A pig climbs a tree full of money carrying a suitcase stuffed to bursting with ripe, red tomatoes that blow away and land on a dressed-up cactus that is swinging a golf club.

It sounds like a deleted scene from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, but to Brian Thwait's, it represents much more: part of a simple but powerful way to memorize information and boost your brain power. A brain trainer who speaks to companies and organizations, Thwait's gets his audience to remember a list of random words by connecting them into tale, like the one above. Why? Because information that's rich in imagery and emotional appeal sticks.

It's one of many techniques that comprise *Train Your Brain*, Thwait's formula for getting more out of your grey matter. Based on the latest research from neuroscience, learning theory and communication, his straightforward concepts are resonating with busy executives suffering from information overload. "The rate of change is becoming faster and faster, and neuroscience says we've learned more in last 15 years than anything we knew before 1990. Managers are so besieged by information that they don't know how to handle it," says Thwait's (www.brainspeaker.com).

He says the top three reasons we fail to learn and retain information are:

- Lack of interest
- Lack of attention
- Lack of effort

Fortunately, he says, using your brain correctly requires little more than understanding and applying seven basic principles.

Motivation:

Simply put, if we're not motivated to learn something, it just won't happen. The guy at a networking event who manages to remember everyone's name, or the supervisor who flawlessly delivers long presentations without any notes, aren't smarter than us, they're just more driven to work at learning and remembering things. "If a person doesn't want to know something, it won't stick," Thwait's says. "You have to try, you have to convince yourself you want to know something."

Practice:

It's probably the least effective of the principles, admits Thwait's, because it tends to be boring and time-consuming -- but it can nonetheless be useful. Rereading reports, rehearsing speeches and otherwise repeating pertinent information to ourselves over and over again will eventually help you remember things. But if the information is uninteresting, Thwait's says, it won't make the leap to your long-term memory. That's why practice should really be used in conjunction with one of the other techniques.

Association:

The human mind has been found to remember two things stuck together better than it does single items. Association connects random information together to make information more memorable. When trying to remember the name of someone you've just met at a business conference, connect their name to a physical characteristic of their face, Thwait's says. If the person's name is Cathy, and she looks like a cat, think of her as Cathy the Cat. The more bizarre the association, the better you'll remember the information.

Meaning:

When things make sense to us, we're more likely to remember them. The trick is to take the information presented to us in reports or presentations and find a way to make it meaningful. Writing the information down in our own words is one useful way of better processing and understanding information, Thwaites says. Another is asking lots of questions. "Kids are learning sponges, but adults don't ask because they don't want to look stupid," he says. "But once you understand something, it's easier to remember."

Visualization:

When it comes to learning, a picture really is worth a thousand words. It's why we're far more likely to remember people's faces than their names. The most successful business presentations are ones that feature graphs, photos, comics and other visual stimulation. Likewise, quarterly reports can be brought to life with graphics, a variety of fonts, different colours of paper, etc. Such initiatives make a stronger impression on audiences and make you a stronger business communicator.

Chunking:

In our information-rich times, the most effective way to prevent being overwhelmed is to break data down into manageable chunks. When reviewing a business document, Thwaites says, first extract the most salient points, and then assign relevant keywords to each point. Finally, break things down even further by the first letter of each keyword; if doable, organize the letters into a meaningful order. Creating mnemonic devices out of the first letters is another way to recall the information.

Emotion:

Our brains are far more receptive to colourful, meaningful information with emotional hooks. Emotional hooks appeal to the right side of the brain -- the side that deals with imagination and creativity -- and therefore make much more of an impact. Thwaites advises injecting flair into your communication style with lively language, varied sentence lengths and structures, highlighted sections, bulleted lists and colour. "Emotional hooks open the doors to the brain -- we remember things that make us sad angry or happy," Thwaites says. "Your brain likes to enjoy life and have a nice time, and it works best when it's happy and entertained."