

The Neuroscience of Memorable Events

5 MIN READ



The best event is a memorable event. But how do we make something memorable?

One way is to look at the field of neuroscience, which studies the function and structure of the brain, and teaches us what our audiences' brains need to retain an event and want to experience it again and again. The advantage of using neuroscience-based techniques in crafting and promoting events is that everyone in your audience has a brain. Understanding how the brain processes information and decides what to do next will help you create and deliver events that get audiences to remember and return.

In this Q&A Dr. Carmen Simon, a cognitive scientist and author of the book *Impossible to Ignore*, will give us a sneak peek into how to make events memorable and influence decision making.

Q. Why is memory so important to business owners in the live event industry?

Memory is important because it is at the root of all decision making. Think of all the decisions you've made in the past few days. All of them have been based on what you remember, not what you forget.

However, impacting *other* people's memory can be challenging, since some things are out of our control. Sleep, for example: sometimes our audiences don't get enough of it.

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This is a problem because memory is not formed instantly, it needs consolidation time and sleep helps with that consolidation time. With that said, there are things we can control.

Q. Why do people forget?

One of the reasons people forget is because they don't pay attention. So how do we get people to pay attention?

The first step is to understand why the brain stops paying attention in the first place. Typically, during an event, the brain stops paying attention when it has habituated a stimulus. This means that when a stimulus does not change much and it becomes predictable, the brain pays less and less attention to it.

This means that the variety added to a stimulus is one way to combat habituation. If we were to transfer this to events, the key lesson is to allow the brain to detect a pattern first, and then break it. Imagine a Cirque du Soleil show. One of the reasons they are so popular is because in many of their performances, there is a lot of variety: we see a constant switch from acrobats who perform in the air, on the ground, on vertical surfaces, or in the water. There is also a constant switch between something serious and something humorous. They make it very hard for the brain to habituate.

Q. What makes something unforgettable?

There are 15 variables that I have identified in my research, which we can use to influence other people's memory. Here are three you can consider.

1. **Context** Context is composed of both the time and the place where you provide information to someone else. Going back to the Cirque du Soleil example, they always present their information in context, such as by a body of water or inside a Curiosities box. What physical context can you create or get the brain to imagine in order to present information?
2. **Cues**
Cues are reminders that help with recall. For example, if you associate your content with a dog, next time the audience sees a dog, they may be reminded of that content. *"One of the reasons people forget is because they don't pay attention."* Cues only work well if there is a strong connection with the content and if they stand out in a busy environment. In other words, if people see lots of dogs in their environment and if a dog is related to many other concepts, a dog will not provide a strong cue. However, let's say you may associate your content with a toothbrush, and audience members only see one toothbrush, which is not associated with many other concepts, and that's a strong cue.
3. **Distinctiveness**
A stimulus that deviates from a pattern will be perceived as distinct.
For example, if you have cereal for breakfast every morning and one day you have pizza for breakfast, you will remember that moment with a lot more detail. The technique to keep in mind is that we must allow the brain to detect similarity first before it can detect distinctiveness

Q. What makes an effective story?

To be memorable, an effective story must include perceptive, cognitive and affective elements. Perceptive elements mean sensory impressions in context and actions across a timeline. Cognitive elements imply abstract concepts, facts, and meaning. And affective means the inclusion of emotion. Let's consider a short example from Etro, the Italian fashion house that also produces perfume.

One of their perfumes is called Raving, and when advertising it, Etro marketers could have easily said, "Buy this new line of perfume called Raving, it smells amazing." This would have been straight to the point but forgettable. Instead, they list the ingredients, using perceptive elements, to ignite the senses.

We learn that the perfume contains cinnamon from Ceylon, ginger, peach, lemon, rose petals, sandalwood, amber and vanilla. And they tie the perfume to a story called "Bottle Imp", by the Scottish author Robert Louis Stevenson.

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This is the story of Keawe, a poor native Hawaiian who buys a bottle from an elderly gentleman — not just any kind of bottle, but one that comes with an imp who grants any desire. There are some conditions for this purchase: if re-selling the bottle later, it must be sold for cheaper than it was purchased or it will simply return to the seller; the bottle must be sold for coins, not paper money or check; and it must never be thrown

or given away. If an owner of the bottle dies without selling it, that person's soul goes to hell. The rest of the story follows Keawe's trials and tribulations, and climaxes when the price of the bottle has dropped to 1 cent.

Etro teases us in relation to the story and asks if we would "resist the temptation, barely restrained by the cap, that whispers promises of desire fulfilled..." They also remind us that we don't risk losing our soul, like in Stevenson's story, but rather find a new one, a more audacious one, "rich in intense feelings and spicy fragrances that spark the flames of passion."

An ad like this contains a good combination of perceptive, cognitive, and affective elements needed to make a story memorable. This combination is memorable because with it, we activate more parts of the brain, versus a business message, filled mainly with facts and abstracts, which activates just the language processing and comprehension areas of the brain.

Q. What are some of the biggest myths about content and memory?

Many people believe images are more memorable than text, which is simply not true. Words can be just as memorable if they help an audience build mental pictures. For example, if I used the word "love," it may be forgotten because it is abstract and may not necessarily and immediately build a mental picture. But if I said to you, "love is a battlefield," this is more memorable because it paints a mental picture.