



## THE KEY TO SMARTER MEETINGS?

### LEARN HOW THE BRAIN WORKS

Understanding the brain's interaction with the nervous system can help you prevent brain lock and improve the overall event experience. **By Margo Pierce**

**S**tanding before a menu board or kiosk of materials, an event attendee's eyes glaze over. She stares at the words, then sighs and walks away, unable to choose what to eat or which brochure to take. This reaction is frequently attributed to fatigue or jokingly called "brain lock."

According to Peter M. Todd, provost professor of Cognitive Science, Psychology and Informatics at Indiana University, Bloomington, decision-making is a complicated process to study. But in general, "Simple is faster, which is often desirable; and simple strategies can generalize better from one situation to another."

#### YOUR BRAIN ON SCIENCE

Hundreds of years of evolution have hard-wired reactions developed over time, making our brains excellent at automatically identifying, lumping together, using/discarding and storing information. Combined, all of these processes work subconsciously and efficiently. A person makes thousands of decisions every day, and that takes a lot of energy. To ensure we have the energy to focus

when it really matters (e.g. solving a complex problem), our brain uses shortcuts for the mundane activities (e.g. choosing a coffee flavor). This automatic function—aptly referred to as autopilot—handles up to 95 percent of our decision-making. The conscious function, responsible for thoughtful responses that occur when we slow down and focus, manages only 5 percent of our decisions.

Knowing how the brain functions makes it possible to help and even guide participant choices at events. Some simple strategies will help remove unnecessary stress.

#### KEEP IT SUPER SIMPLE

Todd says the commonly held belief is that our short-term memory can only process five to seven pieces of information at a time, but quick decisions can be made with only a single piece of information. The challenge is choosing an approach that utilizes the brain's known preferences for processing information as guiding principles to develop user-friendly resources for participants.

**Pictures work faster than text.** The brain prefers pictures to

## Instincts rise without conscious effort. But how we act on those responses is under our control, so knowing some of those automatic reactions makes it possible to guide choices.

text. It prefers photos to graphic images. A picture of people eating, along with the words “Food Court,” is easiest for participants to comprehend. However, some common images, such as restroom signs, are so universally known that photos aren’t necessary.

**Limit choices.** This applies to menu items, lists of after-hours activities and other options. The assumption that more is better comes from our natural instinct to hoard against deprivation, but sometimes having lots of choices can force the conscious mind to perk up, using valuable energy. Todd says there is no consistent research that definitively proves having fewer choices (nine or fewer) makes a decision easier, but the default of eliminating excess can be cost-effective while reinforcing simplicity.

**Prioritize choices.** Here’s a trick retailers have been using for years. Items placed at the top are perceived as most valuable/expensive, the middle position is the moderate option and the bottom position is lesser/cheaper. Most people choose the middle range, so use this knowledge to organize your information. You can guide the choices people make and use the context to increase the perceived value of the middle option.

**Not too many words.** Fewer words are better for quick comprehension. Limit words on signage to essential information. Anything more is clutter. It might be tempting to use 15 words, but your audience won’t even bother with the last half.

**No fancy lettering.** Our brains are hard-wired to appreciate high contrast (easier to see/interpret). So don’t get fancy with font and lettering—it’s too difficult for the reader.

### FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS

Instincts rise without conscious effort (e.g. an adrenaline rush when our brain perceives danger). But how we act on those responses is under our control, so knowing some of those auto-

matic reactions makes it possible to guide choices.

**Value scarcity.** We perceive things as more valuable when they’re rare. If something might be unavailable in the future, our hoarding/survival instinct overrides rational thought and inspires us to pursue it. Our brains reward that pursuit with a jolt of dopamine, causing a rush of happiness. Judiciously applying this scarcity principle to specific event elements can heighten their attractiveness. But beware of losing this edge by doing it too often.

**Losses trump gains.** Humans’ fear of losing what they value is greater than their desire to gain something valuable. This is one reason why people love freebies—T-shirts, bags, mugs—because they get to keep valued cash. Remember this when trying to create buzz around a new product or important presentation.

**Curves, not sharp edges.** Sharp corners and straight lines can make it difficult to see what’s coming next. This triggers an instinctive fear response. Think about a curvy beach shoreline—it’s possible to see who is coming toward you. Using curved lines on signage and floor plans alleviates the unconscious fear response.

**Nature nurtures.** Natural settings are soothing and reduce stress, among other health benefits. Incorporating gardens, plants and photographs of forests or other natural settings can help people relax. The use of fragrances and the soundtrack of a stream to reinforce a sense of calm are useless in a room next to the noisy show floor, but just right for a break room or a quiet corner.

### FAMILIARITY BREEDS COMFORT

**Living social.** One way humans learn is by observing others. We rely on others to teach and guide, so we value their opinions, seeking reinforcement that a choice is good. This is a big reason why social media and event apps are wildly popular. Including ratings for speakers, presentations, booths and activities helps attendees feel good about their choices. Promoting the popular is helpful.

**First impressions linger.** It’s difficult to override a first impression. The brain clings to that initial experience. This is why a unified theme, tone and look for an event needs to reinforce a positive impression. The choice of color, images, graphics and words should “make sense” to present a cohesive message. Conflict—things that don’t appear to match or fit expectations—causes the brain to shift into thoughtful consideration, draining energy.

**Use the familiar.** The assumption that unique is appealing is the opposite of what the brain craves. A universally known shape—such as the outline of a Coke bottle—means the brain doesn’t have to think about what it’s seeing. The shape communicates “beverage.” Use the connotations of colors (e.g. green = environment) as well to give the brain easy points of reference. Save the radical for when you want someone to slow down and pay attention.

Todd also points out that, “people can have quick emotional reactions to situations that can lead to particular decisions. The emotional reactions can also be useful for making quick decisions.” Leveraging emotions to reinforce a message or motivate action is another means to influence participants.

Given the myriad details that go into planning and running any successful event, it’s easy to understand why planners keep doing the same things over and over. Their brains are just as tired of thinking about details. But leveraging findings from neuroscience can make it possible to reserve the thoughtful consideration for bigger issues. ■