

How to Influence Your Prospect's Memory and Decisions

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A 2021 Bain & Co. survey found that 92% of global B2B buyers prefer virtual sales interactions – up 17 percentage points from its May 2020 survey. What's more, 79% of sellers espouse the effectiveness of virtual sales, compared with 54% in 2020.

The data isn't surprising. Virtual selling is often cost-efficient and allows for more meetings with prospects. However, flexibility or cost-efficiency doesn't necessarily mean virtual communication is effective.

What makes communication effective? As a cognitive neuroscientist, I propose looking at communication effectiveness from the angle of what your audience remembers after your interaction. After all, your audience will make decisions in your favor based on what they remember, not what they forget.

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Since memory influences decisions, you must ask yourself: What do I want my audience to remember? This question is more complex than it seems on the surface, because memory is multifaceted. There exist multiple pathways to making something memorable. In this article, you'll see one framework for creating memorable messages that influence decisions.

When you present something to an audience, such as your value

proposition, they can form two types of memories: verbatim and gist. Verbatim memories faithfully record surface details of an experience, while gist memories store the general themes or meaning of the content.

Think of verbatim and gist memories as part of a continuum delineated by specificity. This continuum helps you consider whether an audience should remember *exactly* what you said or *sort of* what you said. Here's how to use verbatim-gist memories to your advantage in your next business presentation, so you can better control what listeners remember:

1. Clarify the level of specificity

In a recent neuroscience study we conducted in our lab, we monitored the brain's reaction to a sales pitch about a software application that helps sellers track their quotas. We wanted participants to remember two phrases: "Align corporate goals with sellers' goals" and "Incent right to sell more."

Two days later, when asked what message they remembered, people said things such as: "How to align company goals with employees' goals by compensating employees the right way," "Ensure that your sales reps' goals are aligned with your own so you can motivate them to sell more," and "This software provides companies and their sales personnel a novel way to track compensation and boost sales."

Much of the original sentence structure was lost (that's normal), but some of the reported words matched our intent ("align," "goals," "sell more"). The gist was accurate, even though "sell more" became "boost sales," for example.

With your messages, clarify the specificity of the memories you want others to take away. Should people walk away with a message verbatim, or is gist sufficient? I recommend striving for higher specificity (close to verbatim) regarding your main message or key takeaway, especially if you operate in a highly

competitive space. Verbatim memories will serve your cause, because they are precise, and they will help you differentiate from competitors. Aim for accurate gist regarding your supporting points.

How do you achieve a balance between gist and verbatim? Ask yourself these two questions: “If I asked my audience what they remember 48 hours from now, what would satisfy me to hear?” and “With how much specificity should they remember my main message?” These questions will instill discipline in your thinking, because they’ll reveal whether you know the most important takeaways. It will also help you measure how well your audience’s reported memories match your ideal messages. As a result, you will know what to adjust in your content.

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2. Achieve verbatim through repetition

Repetition is an intuitive guideline when it comes to memory, because what’s reinforced is more likely to stick.

Despite that, business practitioners avoid repetition for several reasons: They believe that repetitive messages sound too remedial, or that their audiences can hear something once and remember it later. If you show or say something only once (unless it has shocking quality), it’s unlikely to stick. People forget quickly, so if you want them to remember your message verbatim, you must repeat it.

In a workshop I teach on the neuroscience of being memorable, for example, the message I want people to remember is “Control your 10 percent.” I remind participants frequently that I’d like them to remember this statement verbatim, and I also point out the reason: When you’re in control of what people

remember, you improve your persuasive power. In our research on sales presentations, we noted that coming back to the same message once per minute puts you in control of verbatim memory.

Once you find the verbatim you want others to remember, repeat it consistently without paraphrasing. Repetition works well when accompanied by consistency, because the brain tends to censor inconsistent information. In addition, repeated statements are more frequently judged to be true.

Although verbatim and gist are processed in parallel, gist is processed fast, while verbatim processing takes longer (especially with complex information). Complex visual content, for instance, requires multiple fixations to encode fully due to the small portion of the image that falls on the fovea (the center of the eye's field of vision) at any given time.

Further, the number of visual fixations is correlated with memory for visual scenes, and prolonged viewing leads to a more detailed representation of a scene. So, when you repeat your main messages, especially if they are complex, don't rush through them – give people enough time to process the information.

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3. Guard for accurate gist

The problem with forgettable content is not just in the way people encode, store and retrieve memories, but also with the accuracy of those memories. Why is it that memories are typically flawed and unreliable? Do humans fundamentally suffer from some dysfunctional cognitive processing?

Although this is true in some cases (e.g., frontal lobe damage, extreme stress, temporal lobe damage), most scientists agree that human memory distortions are not a sign of

deficient cognitive processing but rather of adaptive processing.

Memories are often distorted when people encounter items that are perceptually or conceptually related. If you see words such as “candy, sugar, taste, tooth,” then it’s easy to later think you also saw the word “sweet.” This is adaptive, because generating associations is important in conserving cognitive energy and is a critical part of convergent thinking and creativity.

People also distort memories because of social conformity. Sometimes people change their recollections when told what others remembered. Given that, how can you ensure that audiences retain not just gist, but *accurate* gist, especially when content is complex?

First, help audiences synthesize complex meanings frequently, and provide abstract interpretations. This enables your prospects to see things the way you see them. At regular intervals, check for understanding with questions such as, “What do you make of all of this?” Clarify again whether people did not understand correctly.

Second, consider the delay and amount of exposure. If you expect someone to make a decision weeks after you meet with them, and they were only exposed to your information once and briefly, refresh their memory. Do this through a proposal that matches the presentation you delivered weeks before, or schedule a new meeting. This helps reinforce the gist, remind audiences of your verbatim differentiator and improve accuracy.

4. Question experts’ expertise

As a business practitioner, you might prefer working with experts, because they understand the content better, have more interesting questions and can even help *you* see things

differently. However, as people develop and gain experience, they are more likely to make inferences that go beyond surface-level details – and are more likely to mistake inferences for memory.

Even higher intelligence has been linked with higher levels of gist-based but false memory! When it comes to processing information, remembering it and making decisions, experts rely on meaningful, qualitative distinctions between general content parts rather than precise details.

How do we counteract the danger of experts' inaccurate memories? Ask them to reflect on their judgments and decisions so they can notice similarities across materials or inconsistencies between answers. This is useful, because people generally try to maintain consistency across decisions by monitoring their responses and inhibiting those that appear inconsistent, regardless of their actual preferences.

One way to know if intuitions or gist-based reasoning is correct is by reflecting on whether a specific field has a lot of regularities, you have a lot of practice in it, and you typically receive immediate feedback on whether decisions are correct.

One last remark about the verbatim-gist continuum: Verbatim memories are more frequent for young adults, while gist is more typical for older people. Experimental manipulations that induce verbatim processing make adults behave as though they were younger. As you balance out verbatim and gist using these guidelines, you will not only enable others to remember what's important, but also give them a precious gift: feeling younger.

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