



How to Make Your Words More Memorable By Creating Mental Images

"A good picture is equivalent to a good deed" - Vincent Van Gogh

The saying, "A picture's worth 1,000 words" is an old one that's been around a long time. And there's a reason for that . . . it's because it's true. Neuroscientists have known for over a century that the more visual a message is, the more memorable it becomes. This 'rule' even has its own name - PSE (Pictorial Superiority Effect).



Tests have shown that about 10% of oral presentations is remembered 72 hours later, but this figure rockets to 65% if you add pictures.

President Obama's campaign speeches may have been effective without slides (even if you're a political opponent of his you can't argue with that; he did win the election), but how much of what he said did you remember 3 days later? Your memory was probably more of an emotional state in which you felt moved and motivated with a 'Yes, we can!' kind of spirit. But you probably didn't remember much of the actual content.

Why is this? We spend our entire lives talking, listening and engaging in conversation, so you'd think the spoken word would be the most powerful form of communication.

But we've been paying attention to images for hundreds of thousands of years. We're evolutionarily programmed to do it. Ten thousand years ago on the plains of the Serengeti we paid a lot of attention to size, and colour, and above all, motion! Because most of the things that threatened us moved, and the brain developed to recognise things that were big, that stood out from the background because of their colour, and that were moving (if it wasn't a threat, we might be able to eat it!).

Sight trumps all the other senses. If there is a disconnect between your body language and the message you're delivering, the audience will believe the body language (i.e. what they can see, not hear). Wine experts given white wine 'doctored' with an odourless, tasteless red dye immediately and unanimously declared the wines to be red (i.e. they believed what they saw, not what they tasted/smelled).

Which is all fine when you're using visual aids like PowerPoint. But what about situations where you can't use slides? How do we make our message stick then?

Well, one way is to deliberately use words that create mental images inside the audience's brains. This is why Metaphors, Similes and Analogies are so powerful: they create mental images. When the political journalist Simon Hoggart wanted to make the point that John Major (the former UK Prime Minister) wasn't doing a very good job at running the country, he could have wrote just that: "John Major isn't doing a very good job at running the country."

Instead, he wrote, "Watching John Major govern the country is like watching Edward Scissorhands try to make balloon animals." TEN TIMES more effective. The first comment is simply words, and instantly forgettable. The second conjures up a powerful mental image. So much so that over 20 years later it's still remembered.

President Obama is a master of doing this. On the campaign trail, he could have said, "We need to invest in education" (that's probably what John McCain did say). Instead, he said, "We believe that when she goes to school for the first time, it should be in a place where the rats don't outnumber the computers . . ."

That instantly creates an image of a little girl in a run-down school in a poor area with rats running round the floor. Ask yourself which is the most powerful? Obviously, the statement that created the mental image. Because we use the right-hand side of our brains to process images, and when that side is engaged, it creates the chemical dopamine, which enhances memory retention. So every time our brain creates an image, it's the equivalent of sticking a mental post-it note on the brain saying 'Remember this . . .'

Doing this is especially important when you're using really big numbers. Often the numbers that are bandied about by politicians, economists or boffins are so big they just go right over our heads. We can't process them. They're just too abstract.

So put them into context by creating a visual image with the words you use. The late Steve Jobs once said during a presentation, "This is the first 12 GB memory card for cell phones." Now to techies, that's fine. But to most non-techies, it's pretty meaningless. So he went on to say, "It has 50 billion transistors. Think of each transistor as an ant. If you put them end-to-end, they would circle the globe twice! What does that mean to you? Enough memory to store 6 hours of movies. Enough memory to listen to music while travelling to the moon . . . and back!" Now THAT I can understand.

In trying to explain just how powerful a supercomputer called Roadrunner IBM could have just said it had a performance speed of over one petaflop. Again . . . fine for techies, but what about the rest of us? So . . . "That's roughly equivalent to the computing power of 100,000 laptops. You would need a stack of laptops 1.5 miles high to equal Roadrunner's performance . . . It would take the entire population of the earth (about 6 billion people) each working a calculator at a rate of 1 second per calculation more than 46 years to do what Roadrunner can do in one day."

So if you're giving a 'numbers' presentation, don't just say, "Sales were up 5%" Add . . . "To put that into context, a 5% increase in sales equates to an extra 43,000 cases of product, which if placed one on top of another would make a pile more than four and a half times the height of Mount Everest."

OR . . . "That equates to x million widgets, which if placed end to end would wrap around the equator twice/ reach the moon and back."

So there you have it. Follow these words of advice and you will create memorable messages that stick in people's minds.

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