

BY ANDREA DRIESSEN

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7 WAYS TO BOOST LEARNING

What if attendees remember nothing from your meetings? Make sure that doesn't happen.

MEETINGS ARE OFTEN SO OVERLOADED with material that learning may be hurt more than it's enhanced. If you recall only one element of this article, may it be this: Less is more.

As Jeff Hurt, EVP of education and engagement at conference consultancy Velvet Chainsaw, explains: "Forgetting is easy. Remembering is hard. The majority of conference education is counterproductive to learning. Lecture, panels of talking heads, debates, keynotes and verbatim note taking all create the illusion of learning. In reality, the gains attendees thought they had, disappear quickly."

What to do?

Be a tapas bar, not an all-you-can-eat buffet. No matter the length of an event, we must get exceptionally rigorous about the two to three most important issues attendees are wise to know and recall. And no more, says Hurt. Design every agenda element around these top takeaways.

Maybe the main segments are innovation, collaboration and 25 percent sales growth. Begin seeding these in opening keynotes, and intentionally review the three points as time unfolds during and in the days and weeks after.

Aim higher. According to education researcher Jay Cross, when we offer advanced content, we attract both higher-level and entry-level professionals. When content doesn't only cater to the lowest common denominator, everyone is challenged and we raise the bar on outcomes.

Build in more repetition and white space. No matter what level your content, provide enough time to reflect between info-rich segments. As Dr. John Medina explains in his book *Brain Rules*, "The way to make long-term memory more reliable is to

incorporate new information gradually and repeat it in timed intervals."

So when it comes to planning an agenda, this means more truly content-free break time, and revisiting key points throughout the meeting.

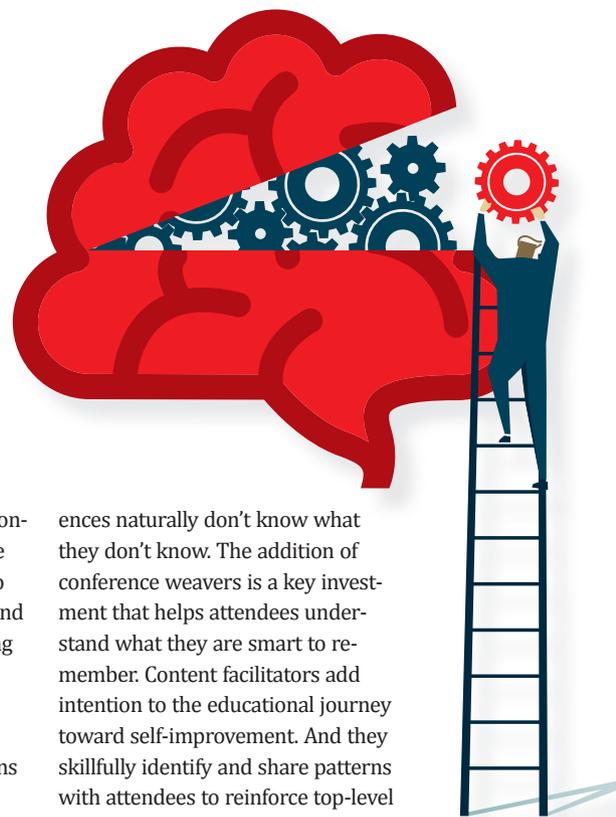
Move it—or literally lose it. Traditionally meetings have meant a sea of people with butts in their seats. Yet according to Medina and other scientists, exercise—and movement—ensure what we are learning actually sticks.

Exercise makes us smarter, and we learn less when we sit, more when we move. Body movement triggers our brains to move new information from short- to long-term memory, and we absorb more in less time (cool, huh?). The right room configurations and well-timed exercise breaks help turn sedentary meeting attendees into active participants.

See how the eyes do have it. Visuals are processed 60,000 times faster in the brain than text, according to Todd Clarke, who creates visual one-pagers of content for speakers and authors. While decks with visuals are the most common (and over-used!) way to make learning visual, additional visual learning tools include graphic illustration (someone drawing session content in real time) and 3-D conceptual models.

Avoid the vacuum. Learning never happens in a vacuum. So it's crucial to hire presenters who understand the importance of helping participants see how material fits into a larger context and make more meaning from it—during sessions and after. We must insist that presenters include reinforcement tools and frameworks for review and application.

When learning something new, audi-



ences naturally don't know what they don't know. The addition of conference weavers is a key investment that helps attendees understand what they are smart to remember. Content facilitators add intention to the educational journey toward self-improvement. And they skillfully identify and share patterns with attendees to reinforce top-level takeaways.

Get emotional. Presentation skills coach and author Nick Morgan explains, "The way we remember something influences our ability to recall it. If we remember something rich with sensory detail—what an item smells, tastes, looks, sounds and feels like—we retain it much more vividly than if we just go for the broad strokes."

The message here for speakers, says Morgan, is to tell stories full of vivid detail—not irrelevant, and not too much, but vivid—about the sensory aspects of the material. "When you won the gold medal, was the sky blue or threatening rain? Was it cold or hot? Did you smell pancakes on the way to a morning workout?"

So next time we're tempted to use a fire-hose approach to conference education, let's remember: Instead of relying on our brains to act like computers, we can depend on them to do what they do best—be the most curious, creative, conscious, meaning-making parts of ourselves. ■