

Keys to Successful Training: Linking learning through the senses

Learning happens when our senses are stimulated. We quickly learn when we are young that if we drink something that is very hot, we will experience the feeling of pain and the lingering effect of a burned tongue.

How did we learn this? Someone may have warned us that a beverage was hot, or there may have been a sign or label that told us to be careful, we may have felt the heat of the beverage through the cup that radiated onto our hands, and by the pain that the hot liquid left on our tongue as we took a drink. The next time we hear the words of warning, see the label, feel the heat from the cup, and proceed to take a drink we are more careful. We gathered the information through our senses, learning quickly that if we want to avoid a burned tongue, we should let the beverage cool and sip carefully.

This simple example is applicable to any type of successful training or learning, by linking learning through engaging the senses we are more likely to remember, retain, and use the information.

How many times have you attended a training class and the only mode of information was from the person standing at the front of the room, talking and telling you verbally what you need to know? As you sit there, carefully sipping your very hot coffee, as to not burn your tongue, you think to yourself... I wonder how I'll remember all this stuff and why is this important... will they will show an example...maybe there is a handout that I can read later... I wonder how many messages are on my voice mail? Time passes, the trainer is still talking. You watch the person pace back and forth, fiddle with their notes, wonder where they got the nice shoes they are wearing, and as time passes, your mind continues to wonder and the session is over.

So what did you learn? Probably not a lot. The trainer engaged only one sense, hearing. So to compensate for the fact that your brain was not fully utilized; it started to look for other stimuli and started using the senses that were being ignored. You probably lost focus, stopped listening, and stopped learning. The scenario is common, but it does not have to be, with a few minor modifications, training can evoke the senses and engage learners.

The goal of any training interaction should be make learning easy, effective, engaging, and productive. To do this, it is essential to understand how people learn. As we have discussed here, one mode is through the senses. Our senses are information superhighways, by taking in information through a variety of channels and processing the information at extremely high rates. Did you know that our brains process information taken in by sight faster than hearing? Our abilities to master knowledge, concepts and skills are directly linked to our senses. Research shows that the more our senses are stimulated, the more we learn.

Information presented through learning tools that invoke both words and pictures is seven times more likely to be retained than words alone. In addition to visual aids, adding materials that can be manipulated by the learner and incorporate taste/smell, the opportunity for learning and information that is retained and remembered increases to a rate ten times more than through words alone.

A word of caution, sensory overload - while our brains are efficient at processing information, too much at once can cause the system to shut down. It is a delicate balance and combination of conveying information through the senses that trainers must master. If you are new to training, start out slowly and ask your learners for feedback. As you become more comfortable with using different learning tools, you will be able to judge whether the variety is too much, too little or just right.

Consider a sample of learning tools available to evoke the sense:

Flip Charts / White Board / PowerPoint / Video / Films / Audio Recordings / Games / Simulators / Computer Based Training / Printed Materials / Podcasts / Blogs

With so many things to choose from, selecting the appropriate learning tools can be overwhelming. It is important to use a systematic approach to determine which learning tools to use to stimulate the senses.

1.) To make the selection process effective, select 5 to 6 different learning tools from the list above (or from your own).

2.) Ask the following questions about each tool, give one point to each YES answer:

- Is this tool right for the audience?
- Can this tool be used for other sessions?
- Is this tool easy to update?
- Is there time to develop this tool?
- Do we have the budget for this tool?
- Do we have the equipment/resources for this tool?
- Do we have someone on staff that can develop this tool?
- Is the training environment appropriate for this tool?
- Is this tool right for the learning objectives?

3.) Determine which tools have the highest scores; these you should consider.

Successful training experiences engage learners and create positive outcomes. Linking the senses to training through a variety of learning tools is one way to promote retention, foster learning, improve job performance, and make the process interesting for the learner and the trainer.