Science proves it: pictures are more persuasive than words.

Visual aids convince people; words, not so much. That’s the conclusion of a recent Dartmouth University study.

Cognitive researchers found that people were far more persuaded by graphical representations of data than by reading texts containing the same info.

For trainers, that means if you want trainees to buy into what you are saying, you’ll have better results if you use charts, pictures, tables, and other visual aids than relying just on words and numbers.

Words are ‘debatable’

The Dartmouth study involved testing something called disconfirmation bias – our tendency to resist information that contradicts pre-existing beliefs.

The researchers took contentious subjects where people were likely have strong feelings, then presented them with counter-evidence. Specifically, they attempted to persuade liberals that the Iraqi surge had succeeded, and to convince conservatives that jobs grew under the first year of President Obama’s first term.

Partisans were relatively unpersuaded when they were presented with the facts in text form. Indeed, using words seemed to provoke people into responding with more words. People tended to see verbal information as, literally, “debatable,” and formed verbal counter-arguments.

The researchers then presented the same information graphically – via line charts. In both cases, clear trend lines were visible.

When presented with info this way, the partisans were more likely to accept

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information that “disconfirmed” their political beliefs. And they were less likely to come up with counter-arguments.

The brain’s native language

A classic study from the University of Minnesota perhaps explains why the visuals were more effective: because images are the brain’s “native language.”

The amount of our brain devoted to processing visual data is much larger than the part used for processing words.

The study also found that information presented visually is not only more credible, but also more likely to be remembered.

How can a trainer apply this research? Here are some suggestions:

1. Use visuals when people resist need for training

If you’re getting resistance from trainees on a point, take a look at your materials and see if they’re word-heavy. Presenting the same information visually may break the deadlock.

Say, for example, that HR must conduct annual training on discrimination and sexual harassment. Perhaps you can open a presentation with a chart showing, for example, the cost per employee for such claims as a percentage of their paycheck, or a graphic representation of the rise in such claims.

Adding images to presentations helps too. Don’t just say the company was found liable. Show a judge banging a gavel.

2. Use them to lock in learning

If there’s something you really want people to remember, show it visually.

For example, suppose you’re trying to get bank tellers to avoid accepting checks with missing or bad information (e.g., no signature, a stale date, etc.)

Don’t just give them a checklist. Show them checks and have them look for what’s missing.

3. Use a variety of visuals

Visuals mean more than just charts or graphics.

For example, we know a manager who asked a worker to view himself in a full-length mirror. It turned out his pants cuffs were worn out and he looked much more slovenly than he’d thought. The mirror was more convincing than the manager’s verbal feedback.

Similarly, a role play in a session offers lots of visual cues. So it helps not only the participants but the observers. They see the techniques in action, and they’re more likely to believe what they see.

Source

Training strategies to help people deliver when it matters most

When training fails, it’s easy to assume that it was because the learner never “got” the lesson.

In fact, it’s often the case that the learner did acquire the knowledge but can’t access it under pressure.

Consider offering learners two “emotional-regulation” strategies that will help them use what they learn when it matters most, such as during application in the real world.

The research

A growing body of research suggests emotional-regulation training can improve pressure performance. The key is for people to be aware of the effect of pressure on them, and choose a strategy to combat it. That might make the difference between a sales rep keeping a cool head during a high-pressure negotiation and backing off just to end the pressure sooner.

To learn more about what keeps performance high under pressure, researchers studied the “choking” phenomenon in sports and tried to replicate it under controlled conditions.

Then they looked at different ways to overcome the effect.

The test

Researchers had inexperienced golfers hit a golf ball into a hole on a putting mat. After establishing baselines, they added some pressure:

- They stopped the informal and friendly feel of the process and started again with new rules: namely, that each new putt would now count for something. Basically, they started keeping score.
- They turned on a video camera. Studies have shown that people feel pressure when they know they are being filmed.
- They added incentives and penalties: The golfers earned a token sum if they made the putt, but had to pay if they missed.

As expected, performance dipped when the pressure was on.

The results

Next, subjects were given various types of emotional-regulation training. Two helped restore performance to previous levels:

1. Positive reframing. People often see pressure events as negatives. They feel anxiety, and want the event to be over quickly to relieve their anxiety. When they get in a hurry, performance declines. Performance was better when researchers framed the events as positive opportunities – for example, when they told the subjects: “Here’s an opportunity to earn money; here’s an opportunity to show what you can do on video.” The positive framing helped reduce the anxiety and performance improved.

2. Distraction. Under pressure, people tend to focus on the task at hand. Good, up to a point. But too much pressure can make people overfocus. So subjects were asked to distract themselves during the activity itself. The researchers had them sing a song while putting, which got their putting performance back up to par.

Both techniques worked. Even better, they could be used in tandem.

Source

Watching recordings of simulations hits home

Sure, we all accept performance feedback. But seeing ourselves in action can give us a more realistic idea that hits us much harder.

That was the idea behind an obstetrics simulation, where a doctor and his team were simulating a life-threatening medical condition. The doctor said he quickly forgot it was a simulation and responded as trained.

When viewing the video afterward, he realized that while his medical decisions were correct all the way through, his communication skills needed help.

The mistakes that the review highlighted included:

- issuing directions “to the air,” addressed to no one in particular
- assuming what others were doing but not confirming it, and
- not communicating what tasks he was performing.

Video reviews had much more impact than other forms of review, researchers concluded.

Bottom line: Use videos as a form of feedback. A taped role play viewed later will save 1,000 words of review.


Smart people held on to biases even harder

When smart people are faced with challenges to their beliefs, they may use their smarts to defend their biases instead of overcoming them, a recent study found.

Groups of people were given a set of numbers to analyze. They were told the data was related to a study of a skin-rash treatment, and were asked to draw inferences based on the data. Not surprisingly, people with better math skills did a better job analyzing the data.

But there’s more to the story: A second group was presented with a similar set of numbers and also asked to draw inferences. It was basically the same problem, with one difference: This time they were told the study was about gun control.

The polarization was immediate. In fact, the people with the strongest math skills were the most polarized: They were more likely to twist the data to conform to their political beliefs.

Trainers’ take home: Don’t assume that learners with a lot of knowledge in a particular field will be more objective. You may have to work even harder with them to change their thinking.


Practice doesn’t always make perfect

Practice can only take you so far. That’s the upshot of a study of soccer coaching that has implications for trainers.

Coaches normally advise players to pick a spot in the goal and aim for it, without regard to the goalie’s location.

By and large, players in the study executed correctly when the goalie wasn’t there. But put a goalie in, and the kicks inevitably got closer to the goalie.

Lesson for trainers: There really is no substitute for real-world application. As part of your training, try to find ways to have people apply their knowledge in the field and report back.