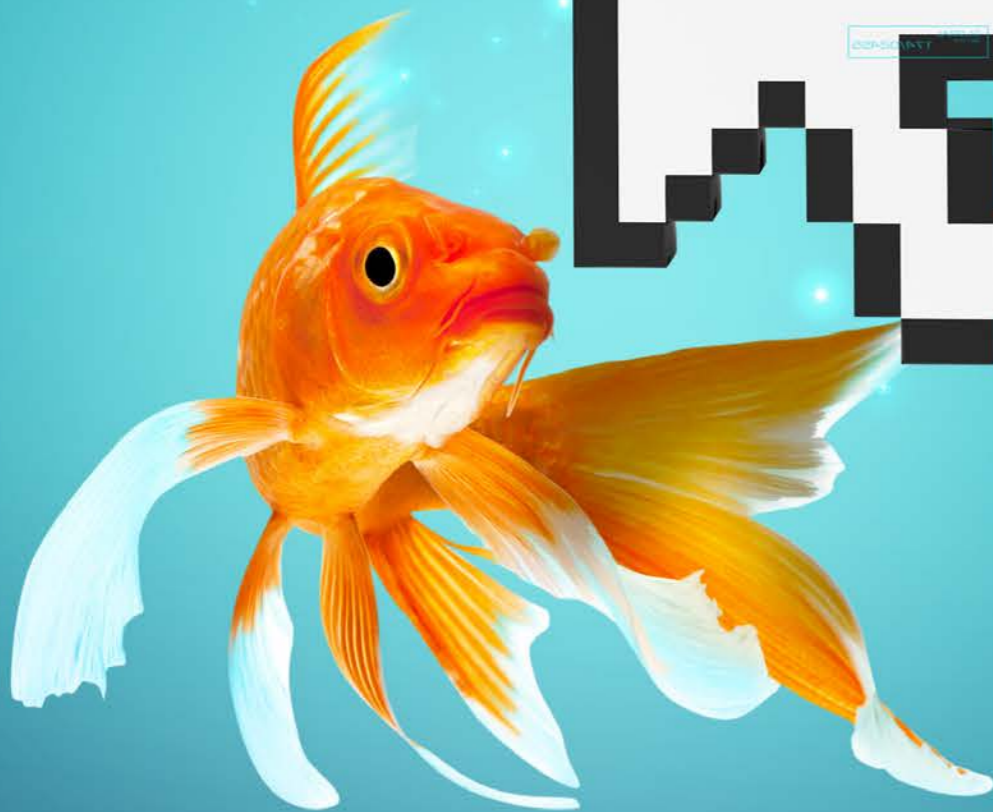


inside the buyer's brain

the neuroscience of

# persuasive sales presentations

▶ how to capture attention and influence decisions on virtual sales calls



# the goldfish fallacy

Poor goldfish. After all this time, they're still the subject of a popular yet misleading quip about attention.

Though the idea has no scientific bearing, people have continued to use the supposed five-second attention span of a goldfish as the yardstick for human attention. More recently, many have proclaimed that human attention has been afflicted by the "goldfish effect"—that due to smartphone apps and social media, people now have an attention span that's *less* than a goldfish.

The problem is that the goldfish effect has no research to support it. If you've done even the slightest bit of investigation, you already know it's just a myth.

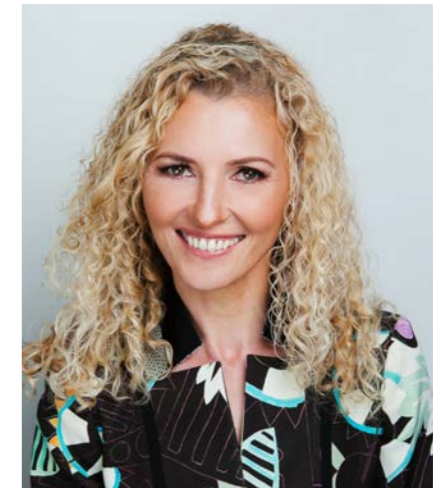
People can (and will) pay prolonged attention to stimuli they find rewarding—just ask anyone who's binge-watched their favorite TV show.

Consider, too, how stimulating the typical business presentation is. Given the choice between watching a bland sales presentation or an exciting or funny video, which do you think your audience would prefer?

That's why, when trying to win attention from a business audience, your presentation needs to be stimulating and engaging. But that's not all.

Your goal is not just to get people's attention. You also need to hold their focus, help them process and remember the information, and ultimately persuade them to take action.

In this research report, you'll learn how to create persuasive virtual sales presentations by influencing those three factors. You'll get practical guidance backed by the latest neuroscience research for holding your audience's attention, building precise memories, and influencing their decisions in your favor.



**Dr. Carmen Simon**  
Chief Science Officer  
Corporate Visions and  
B2B DecisionLabs



# memory fuels *decisions*

Every time you communicate to your prospects or customers, your goal is to influence their decisions in some way—to change, to choose you, or to stay with you instead of switching to a competitor.

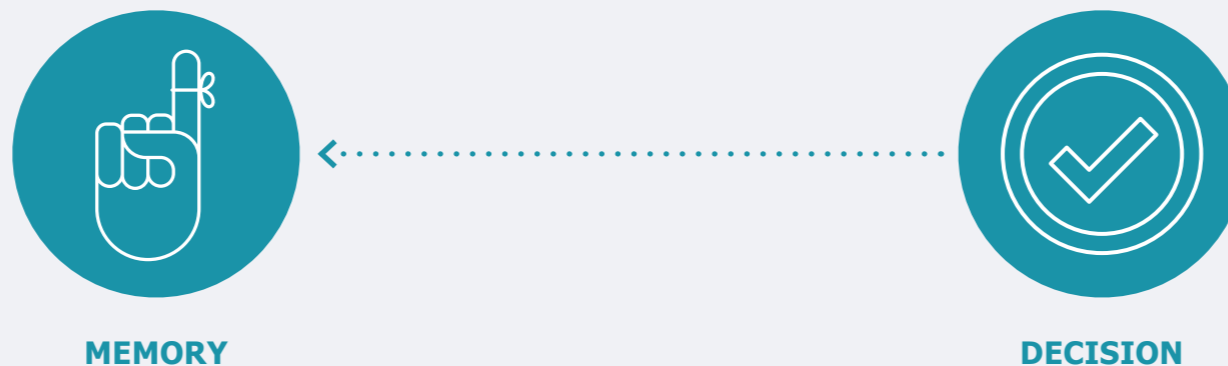
From a neuroscience perspective, people make these decisions based on what they remember. In the process of making a decision, the brain predicts the rewards of a choice based on its memories, and then uses that information to make the most favorable decision.

The brain is a prediction engine. And memories are the fuel that helps it make better decisions.

How does this apply to your sales presentations?

Imagine you deliver a presentation today, at point A. Your buyer won't purchase immediately—they make a decision later, at point B. If you want to influence that future decision during your sales presentation, you need to make sure your buyer remembers your message.

Memory fuels decision making. But attention paves the way for memory. After all, your audience won't remember anything if they don't pay attention to begin with.



attention  
*paves the way*  
to memory

The goldfish effect isn't the only popular myth about human attention. In fact, the entire concept of "attention span" is misleading.

Attention doesn't last for a finite period before it expires. Even if you feel like you can't focus, you're still directing your attention somewhere—somewhere you probably don't want it to go.

Attention is defined as focusing on and processing information from your surroundings. There are multiple kinds of attention. For example, people can focus on one thing, or multiple things, for either a long or short period of time.

When someone watches your sales presentation, they have the capacity to shut out distractions and stay focused. But if your presentation isn't stimulating enough to continually draw their attention, they won't pay attention for very long.

It sounds simple enough. But remember that attention alone doesn't influence decisions.



**ATTENTION**



**MEMORY**



**DECISION**



persuade your audience to  
*remember and act*

Attention alone doesn't motivate buying decisions. To influence your buyers' choices, you need to present your message in a persuasive and memorable way.

▶ **FOCUS ATTENTION**

.....

▶ **BUILD PRECISE MEMORIES**

.....

▶ **INFLUENCE DECISIONS**



# why study the *brain?*

The first step in understanding how people react to and remember a sales presentation is to examine what's going on in their brain when they view it.

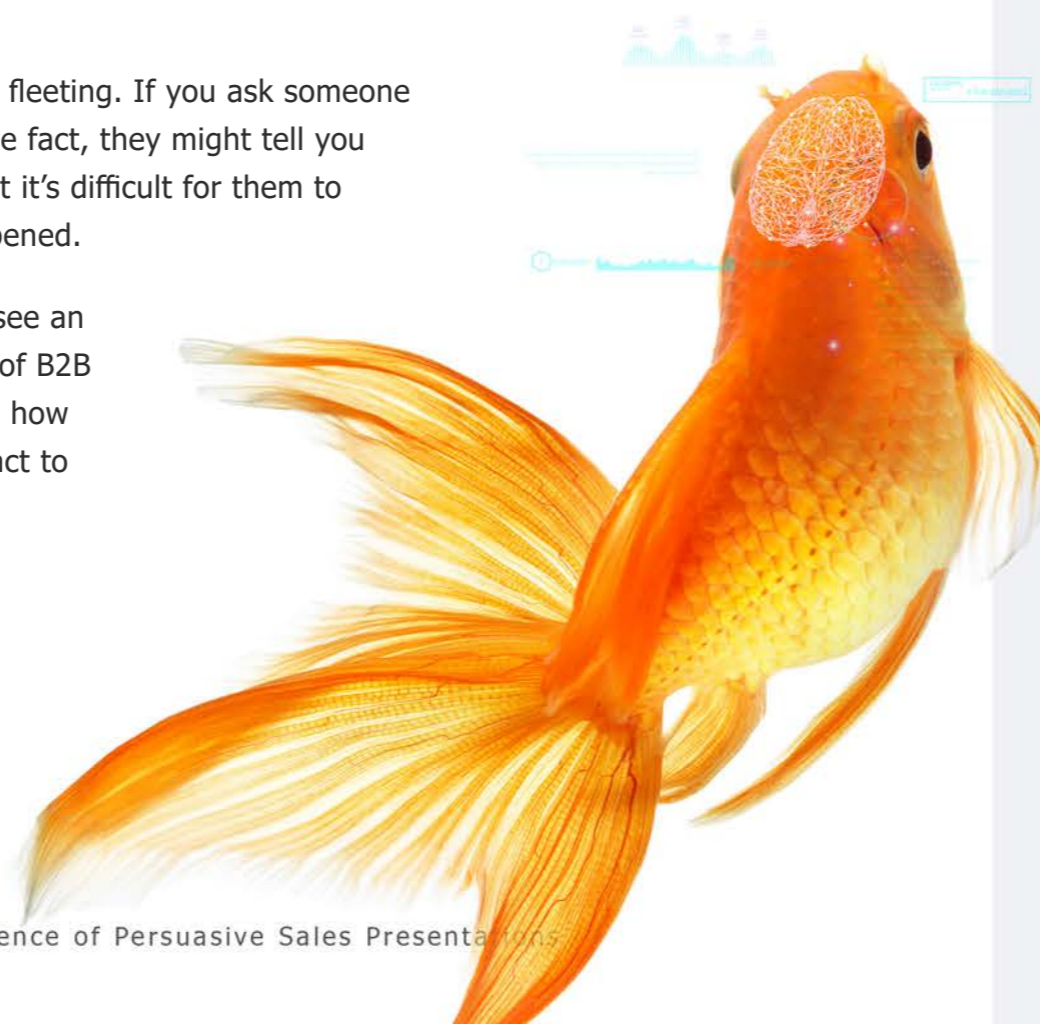
That's where brain studies come in.

Unlike traditional surveys, focus groups, or voice of the customer research, neuroscience studies examine people's subconscious reactions and emotions in real time (down to the millisecond) as they experience a presentation.

Studying the brain in this way is beneficial, because **what people say they think and feel is often different than what they actually think and feel.**

People's emotions are fast and fleeting. If you ask someone about their experience after the fact, they might tell you how they thought they felt, but it's difficult for them to remember precisely what happened.

Throughout this report, you'll see an unfiltered view into the minds of B2B decision makers to understand how buyers truly feel about and react to virtual sales presentations.



## beyond "anecdotal"



**Tim Riesterer**  
Chief Visionary  
B2B DecisionLabs

Companies spend millions of dollars on voice of the customer research and large-scale industry surveys to inform their marketing and sales strategies.

But for all its good intentions, these traditional means of gathering data can't provide you with the insights you really need to understand how buyers frame value and make decisions.

That's because surveys of how people *think* they'll act most often don't match their *actual* behaviors. When someone answers your survey, they make an educated guess—they either tell you what they think or what they believe the right answer is.

The scientific studies in this report, on the other hand, go beyond "anecdotal" to reveal people's subconscious reactions at the source.

# inside your buyer's brain

Every B2B DecisionLabs neuroscience study is conducted with actual B2B professionals and real B2B content. Each participant is fitted with the following equipment while they view a presentation:

- **EEG** (electroencephalogram) cap for recording brain waves.
- **ECG** (electrocardiogram) for recording heart rate.
- **Eye tracking** for recording the gaze and where the eyes fixate.
- **GSR** (galvanic skin response) for measuring peaks in arousal.

This combination of neuroscience tools provides a comprehensive and undiluted view into people's physiological and psychological reactions in real time.



# what we *measure*

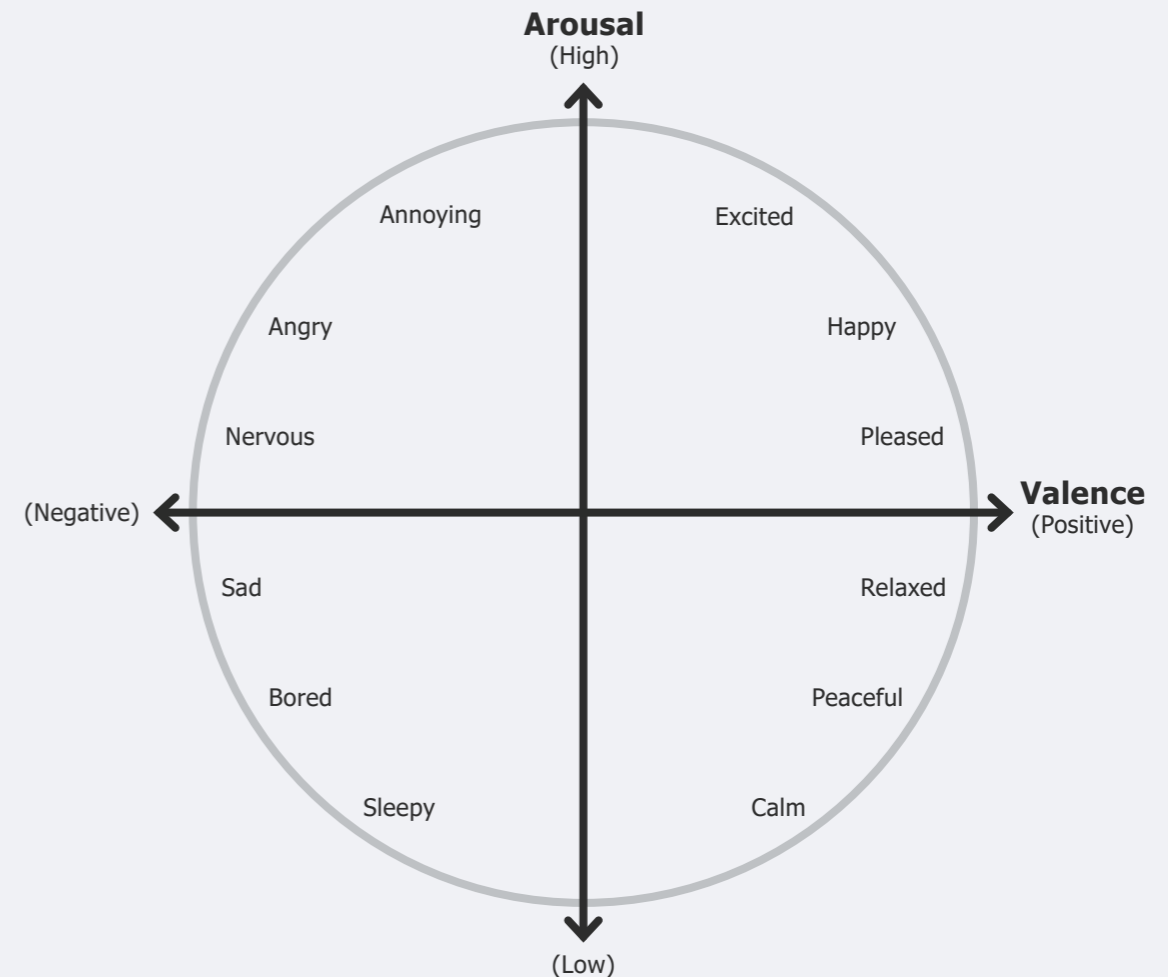
After participants view the presentation, researchers analyze subsets of data from the to study the following variables:

## ▶ Cognitive variables:

- **Attention** – a state of focused processing, concentration, or persistent focus across time.
- **Motivation** – the desire to approach a stimulus to obtain something.
- **Working memory** (cognitive workload) – the storing and manipulation of information in short-term memory until completion of a cognitive task.
- **Fatigue** – a decrease in alertness that can impair efficiency, performance, and memory retrieval.
- **Approach/Withdrawal** – the emotional response to positive or negative stimuli.
- **Memory** – the process of encoding, storing, and retrieving information.

## ▶ Affective variables:

- **Valence** – an emotional state within a pleasure-displeasure continuum that ranges from positive to negative.
- **Arousal** – the general level of alertness and wakefulness of a person, ranging from calm to very intense.



Valence and Arousal are considered two independent neurophysiological systems at the foundation of all other affective states. Varying degrees of valence and arousal impact emotions, which are essential to memory and decisions.



persuade your audience  
to remember and act



focus

*attention*

# choose the right background

As soon as you turn on your camera during a virtual call, you're inviting your audience into your home or office.

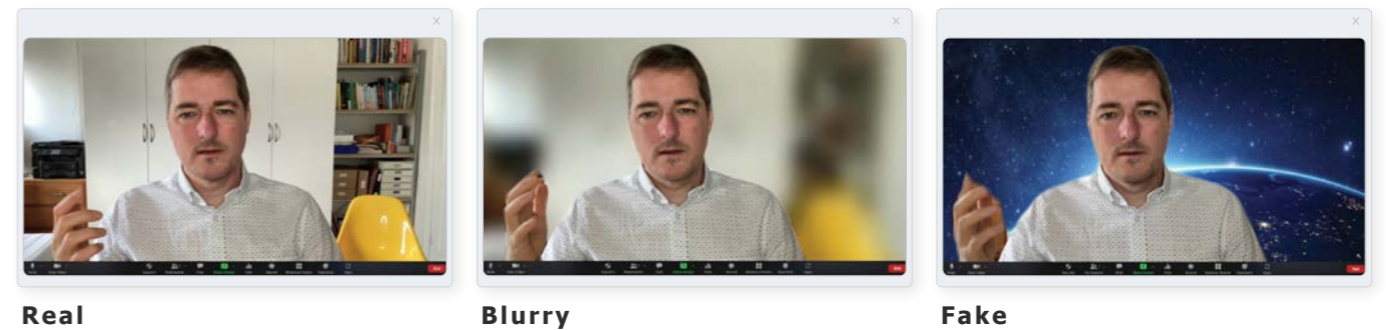
Some sellers reason that it's better to let others see their real background. Others use blurry or fake backgrounds. Which is most effective?

A neuroscience study revealed that **people are less attentive when you use a fake background** on virtual calls. And because attention paves the way to memory, they're also less likely to remember important information.

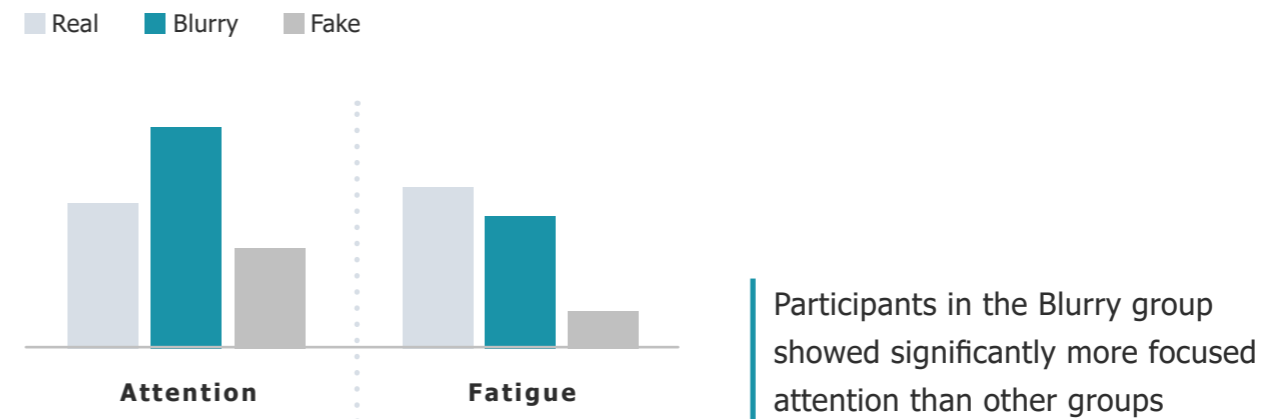
On the other hand, a **blurry background leads to more focused attention, less fatigue, and more motivation than the real background**. The blurring effect doesn't seem to make the viewer feel suspicious or bothered, as some people might believe.

Real backgrounds can still be useful for specific situations, however. If your audience is knowledgeable about the subject matter, using a real background can lead to stronger memories. You might also consider placing items in the background as conversation starters, to "break the ice" with your audience.

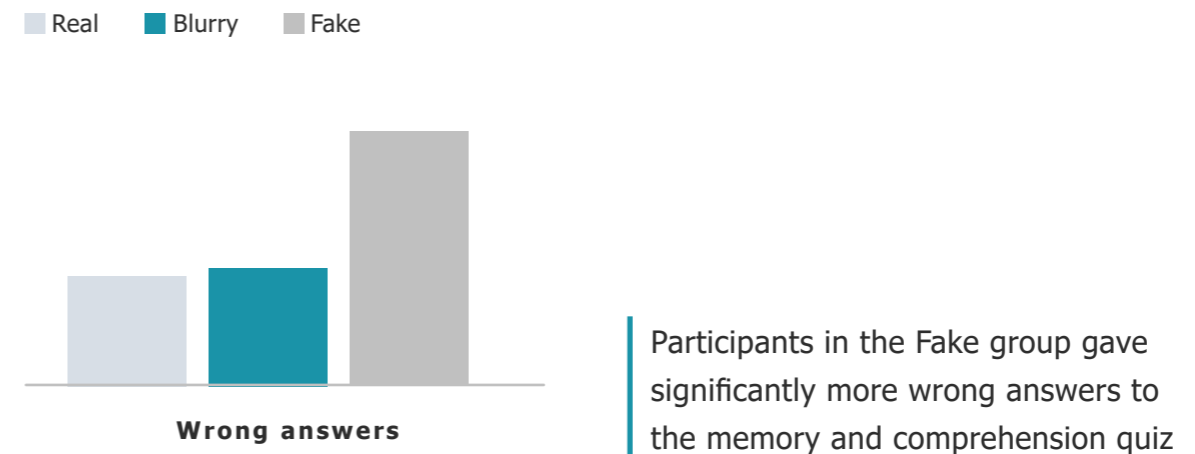
▶ [Read the Zoom background research study](#) 🔍



## EEG signals associated with the three Zoom backgrounds



## Wrong answers to memory and comprehension quiz



# add *animation and annotation*

If you don't add any movement to slides, your audience won't know where to focus—especially if they have no prior knowledge of the subject.

Even if you're presenting the information to a primarily expert audience, you might still need to persuade key stakeholders who don't have any subject matter knowledge—decision makers from legal or financial departments, for example.

Eye tracking results from one neuroscience study suggest that both experts' and non-experts' attention was scattered when there was no movement to draw their eyes.

**Adding animation and annotation makes it easy for everyone to understand and process the information you share**, regardless of their level of expertise.

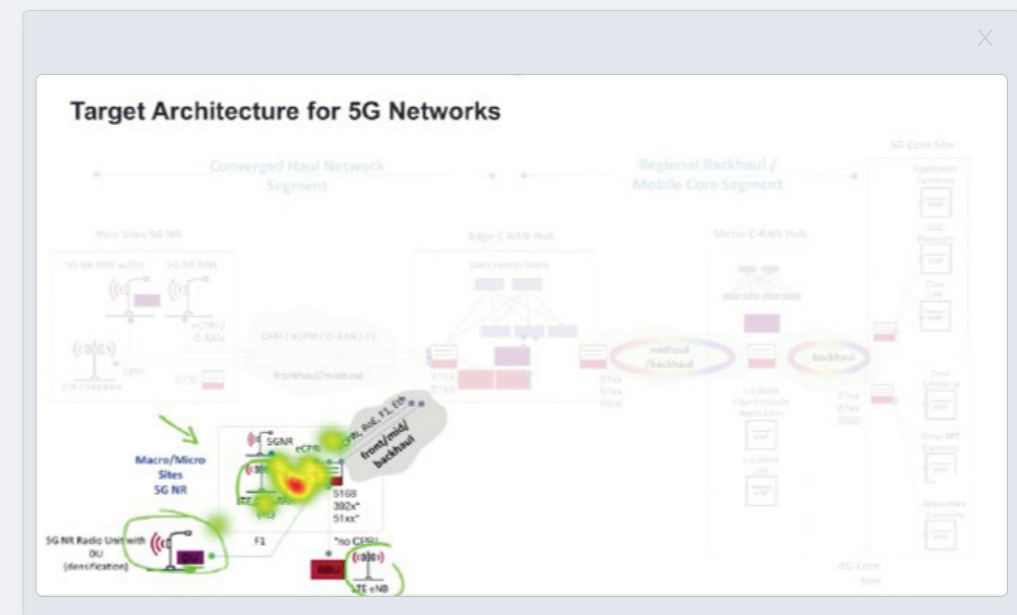
When the presentation included more movement, people were more likely to hold the information in their minds for longer (working memory) and remain less fatigued. This is important, given that the information they viewed was highly complex and technical.

These aren't the only benefits. Adding animation and annotation also improves how much your audience enjoys the content.

## Animation and annotation eye tracking



**When slides didn't include any movement**, the audience didn't know where to focus.



**When slides included animation and annotation**, all participants focused on the same information at the same time.

# make it *enjoyable*

Adding movement like animation and annotation helps your audience process the information easier. They don't have to expend so much cognitive energy to understand where you want them to focus and when.

That, in turn, appears to put people in a positive state of mind. And if they enjoy the content, they're more likely to want to continue to pay attention.

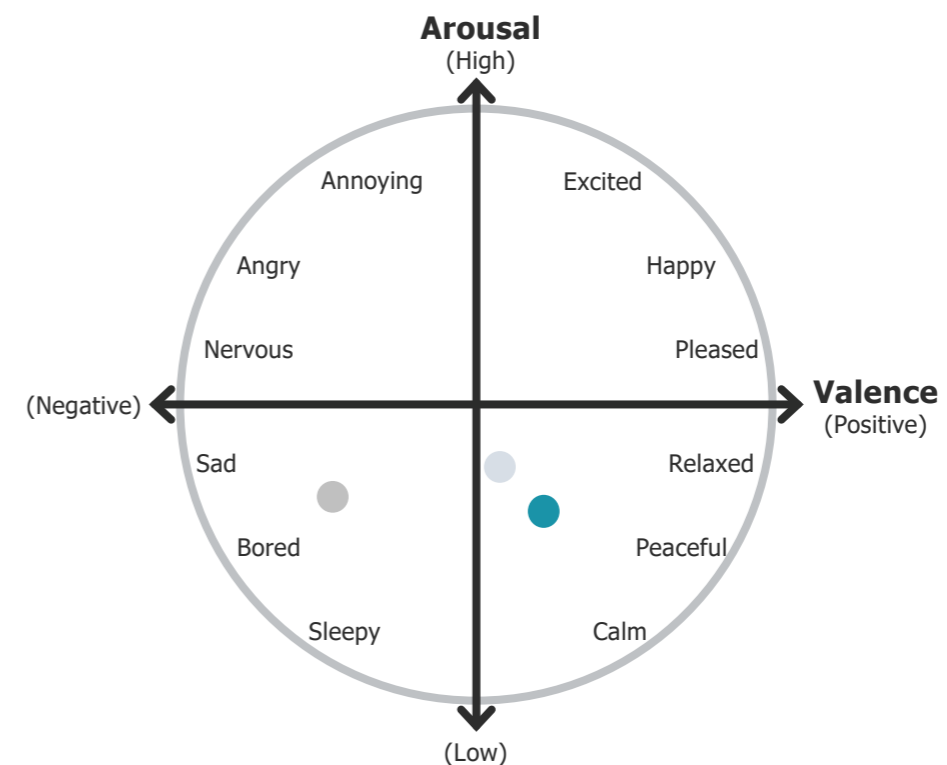
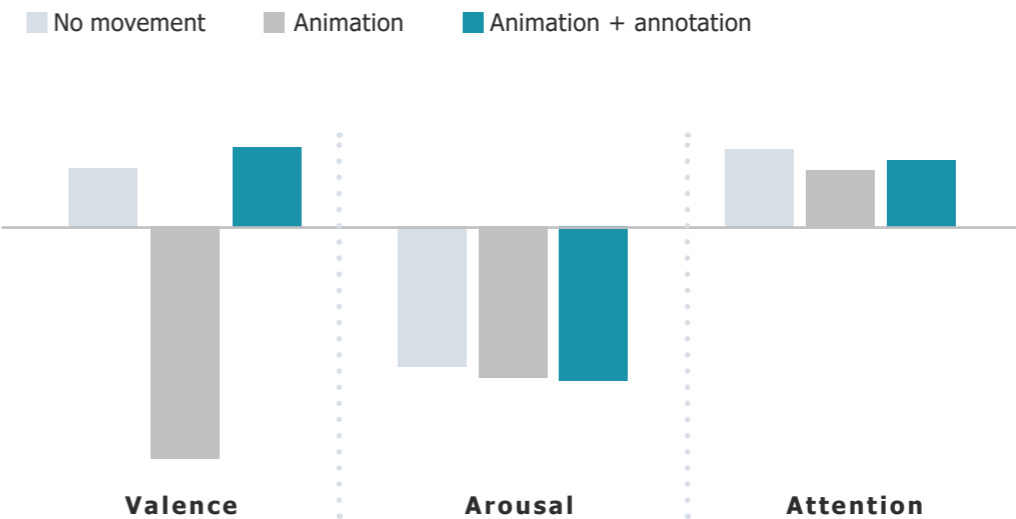
When a presentation included both animation and annotation, participants experienced positive valence, low arousal, and focused attention. They felt "happily calm"—a signal that they trusted the information they saw.

The participants who watched a presentation with only animations (no annotation) experienced very low valence, which might be due to lack of stimulation. Even though elements on slides were displayed gradually through animation, that group did not have as much movement on the screen to hold their interest.

By contrast, people who saw slides with no movement had many things to look at and hold their attention (even if it was unfocused), since all elements on each slide appeared at the same time.

▶ [Read the animation and annotation research study](#) 🔍

## Affective state during the presentation



Participants who saw animation plus annotation experienced the highest valence, low arousal, and focused attention. They seemed to feel "happily calm"—a signal that they were relaxed, engaged, and trusted the information presented.

# get focus with *aesthetics*

When people view business content, they tend to react to the visuals as much as the content. If your content is attractive, your audience will want to stay with it longer, and they'll remember it better.

So when you're designing your presentation, it's important to apply some universal design principles to make your presentation easier to understand and remember.

## Some universal design rules to follow include:



- 1. Proximity** – Placing elements closer together or farther apart to show how the information is related.
- 2. Harmony** – Creating cohesiveness among separate but related elements using color, size, shape, etc.
- 3. Balance** – Arranging visual elements so their visual weight harmonizes with the other elements in the design.
- 4. Contrast** – Using opposing colors, shapes, textures, sizes, or concepts in a composition.

## guide the eyes for cognitive ease

Delivering a persuasive sales presentation isn't just about making slides look great.

Using visual language that builds mental pictures will also direct your audience to focus on the specific information you want them to remember.

In the video below, notice how the presenter used visually descriptive language to support the movement on each slide. Showing and telling your audience where to focus makes it easy for everyone to follow the presentation—even if they can't see the slides.

### ▶ Watch the eye-tracking example:





persuade your audience  
to remember and act

build

precise  
memories

# control your 10% message

People will remember, on average, only 10 percent of your presentation after 48 hours.

Our research shows that this percentage varies—sometimes, people might remember three percent, sometimes 12 percent. But on average, it's a very small portion. And if you leave it to chance, the little they do remember will be completely random.

As a general measure, we refer to the small amount of information people remember as a metaphorical “10%.” You can't make anyone remember more than that, but you can control what they remember.

To ensure your buyers remember your main message with precision, identify your 10% message, and emphasize it on a distinct 10% slide throughout your presentation.

## An effective 10% message meets the following criteria:

- **Focused** – Do you have one main message with no more than 3-4 supporting points?
- **Rewarding** – Is your main message linked to something your audience finds rewarding?
- **Differentiated** – Can someone else in your field claim your message, or is it unique to you?
- **Repeatable** – Does your message come to mind easily so that someone can tell it to someone else?
- **Actionable** – Is your message phrased as an action you want your prospect or customer to take?



One simple way to emphasize your 10% message is to replace the typical agenda slide with a more concrete, action-oriented phrase, with three supporting points.

# determine what people *must remember*

Since the 10% slide is one of the most important parts of your sales deck, it's vital to design it in a way that makes it easy for your audience to understand and remember.

It should stand out from other slides in the deck and repeat throughout the presentation to improve memorability.

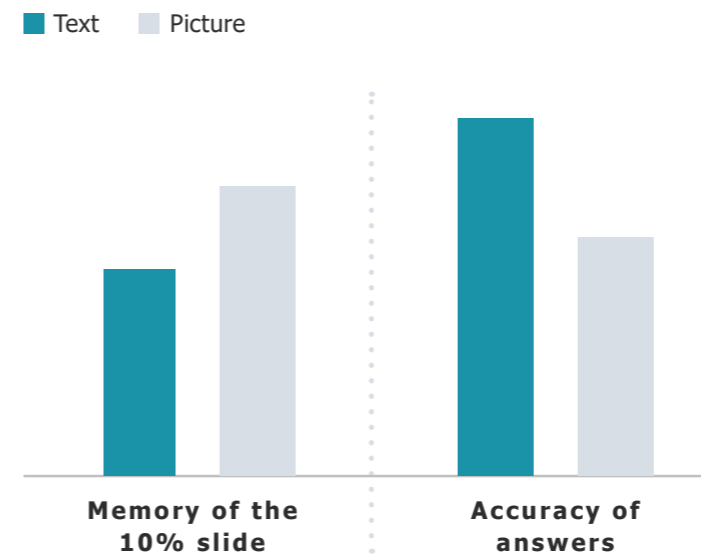
In terms of visual design, one neuroscience study found that under certain conditions, **using a picture on a 10% slide inhibits people's memory of the message.**

In our study, participants who saw a 10% slide without a picture recalled the main message with 39 percent better precision and 45 percent more accuracy. They were also significantly more relaxed than those who saw a picture on the 10% slide.

Text can be strong enough on its own to positively impact how buyers process information. And combining text with animation and annotation helps you draw your viewers' focus to what's important, keeps your audience relaxed, and improves comprehension and recall.

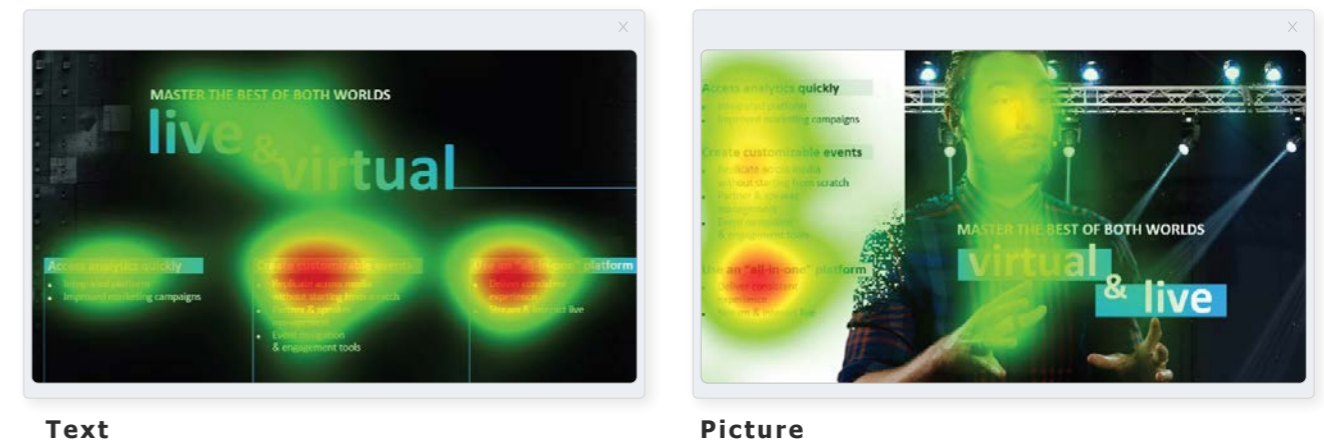
▶ [Read the 10% slide research study](#) 🔍

## Participants' memory performance



Participants who saw a text-only 10% slide recalled the main message with 39 percent better precision and 45 percent more accuracy.

## Eye tracking comparison for the last 10% slide



Including a decorative image on the 10% slide drew attention away from the 10% message, making it less memorable.

# use *repetition* wisely

It's no secret that repetition improves memory. When you repeat something often enough, your audience's brain starts recognizing a pattern. The pattern indicates that the information is important and should be retained for the future.

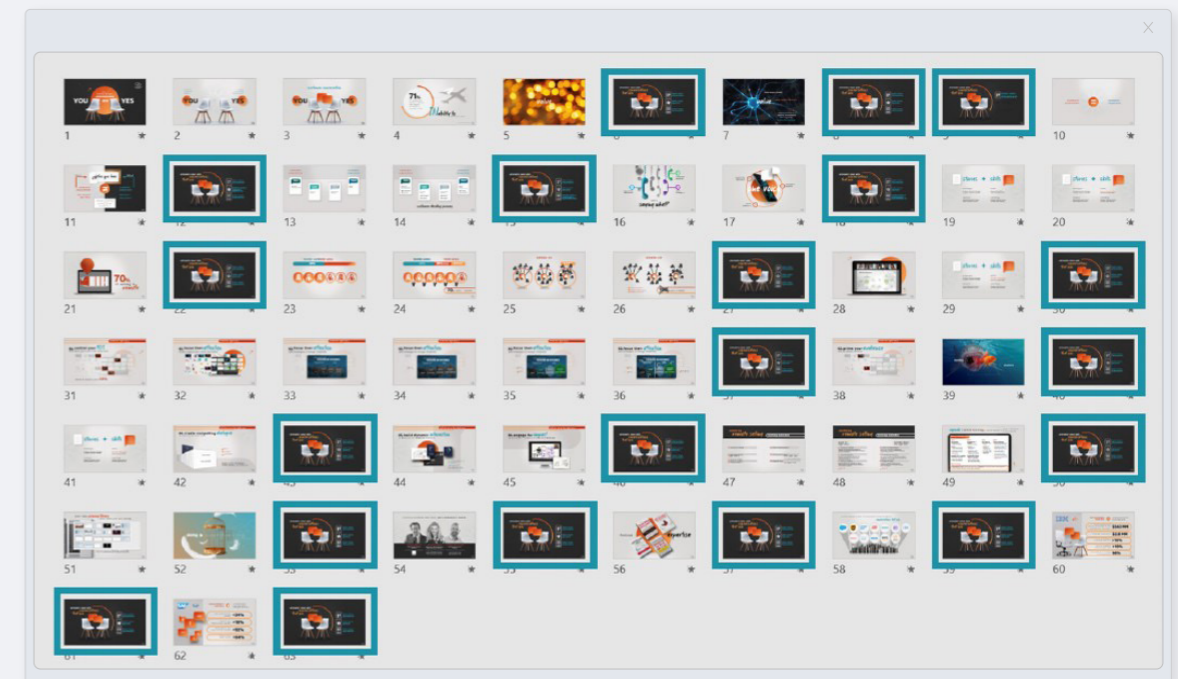
How much repetition is enough? Our research studies show it's more than you might think.

In one study, researchers asked three different groups of participants to view a 20-minute presentation. In one version, the 10% message was repeated six times. A second version repeated it 12 times. And the third version repeated the 10% message 20 times.

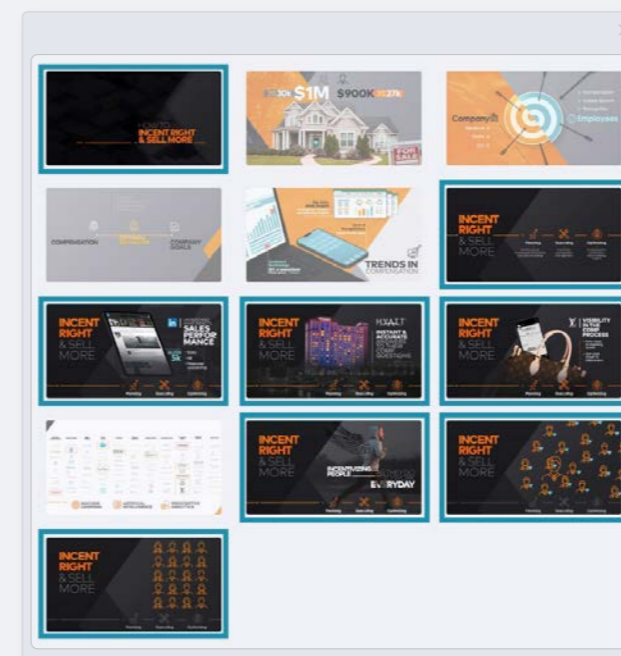
It turns out, **more repetition helped participants remember the message with greater clarity.** Forty-six percent of people who saw the main message repeated 20 times remembered it with precision.

In another study, the 10% message was repeated three times verbally and seven times visually during a seven-and-a-half-minute pitch. As a result, 74 percent of participants remembered the main point from the presentation. And the more accurately people remembered the 10% message, the more accurately they remembered the three supporting points.

This correlation provides further evidence in favor of creating a strong 10% message and three supporting points that are closely associated with each other.



Repeating the 10% message 20 times in a 20-minute presentation led to precision memory in 46 percent of participants.



Repeating the 10% message three times verbally and seven times visually during a seven-and-a-half-minute pitch led to precision memory in 74 percent of participants.

# make room for *elaboration*

Many sellers assume that “simpler is always better.” But the brain needs some complexity to remain interested. In many cases, you might need to add extra details to make your presentation more memorable.

One neuroscience study found that elaborating on complex information with extra details made the presentation more enjoyable and memorable.

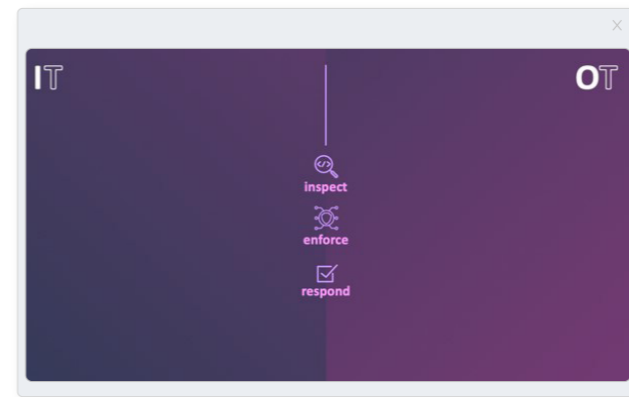
Participants in the study were split into two groups and asked to watch a presentation that explained the differences between IT (Information Technology) and OT (Operational Technology). One group watched a simple explanation, and the other group watched a detailed explanation with more complex concepts.

Results from the study indicate that **participants who watched the detailed version of the presentation paid significantly more attention** than participants who watched the simple version. And the additional attention translated into improved long-term memory.

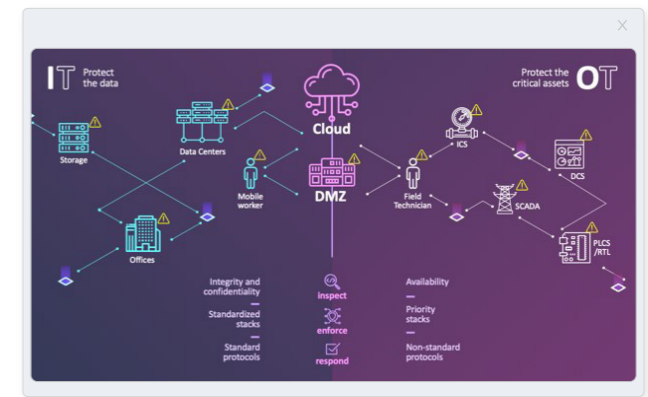
Participants who saw the extra details tended to remember the 10% message better. On average, there was a 24 percent increase in recall in favor of the detailed version. Those participants also understood the extra details and could recall them accurately.

Elaboration doesn’t make content complicated or difficult to remember. Rather, it helps link the content to semantic networks that already exist in your buyer’s brain.

► [Read the elaboration research study](#)

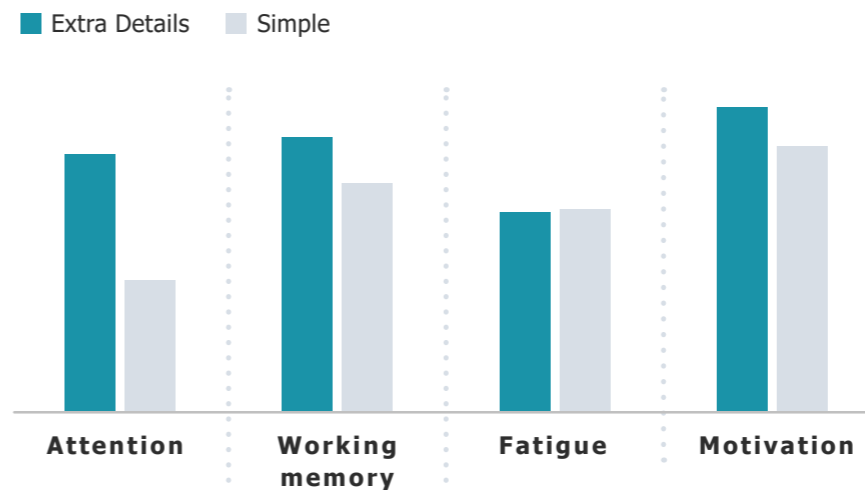


Simple



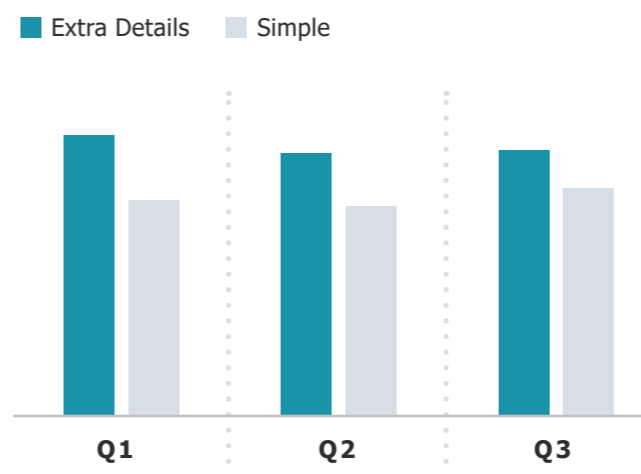
Extra details

## Affective state during the presentation



Participants who watched the detailed version of the presentation paid significantly more attention than participants who watched the simple version.

## Participants’ memory performance



Participants who saw extra details remembered the main points of the presentation better. Those participants also understood the extra details and could recall them accurately.

# define your *semantic theme*

To help your buyers process your presentation easier and faster, use semantic memory to your advantage.

**Semantic memory means remembering general knowledge, like ideas and facts, based on related concepts.** For example, when someone says, "Paris," you will likely recall that it's the capital of France.

Concepts in people's semantic memory are represented as nodes that are interconnected within a network via semantic pathways. And once a concept within a node is activated, that activation spreads to the other related nodes. For instance, Paris might be connected to baguettes, the Eiffel Tower, or the Louvre.

The problem is, **most business presentations don't follow any consistent semantic theme.** They include too many different metaphors, the text doesn't relate to the visuals, and the visual elements don't relate to each other.

Every time you activate a different semantic network, your audience needs to expend more cognitive energy to connect the information, and they remember very little.

When the concepts and visuals in your presentation stay within a clearly defined semantic network, they won't have to think so hard. The connections will come instantly, making your content easier to remember.



# create visual consistency

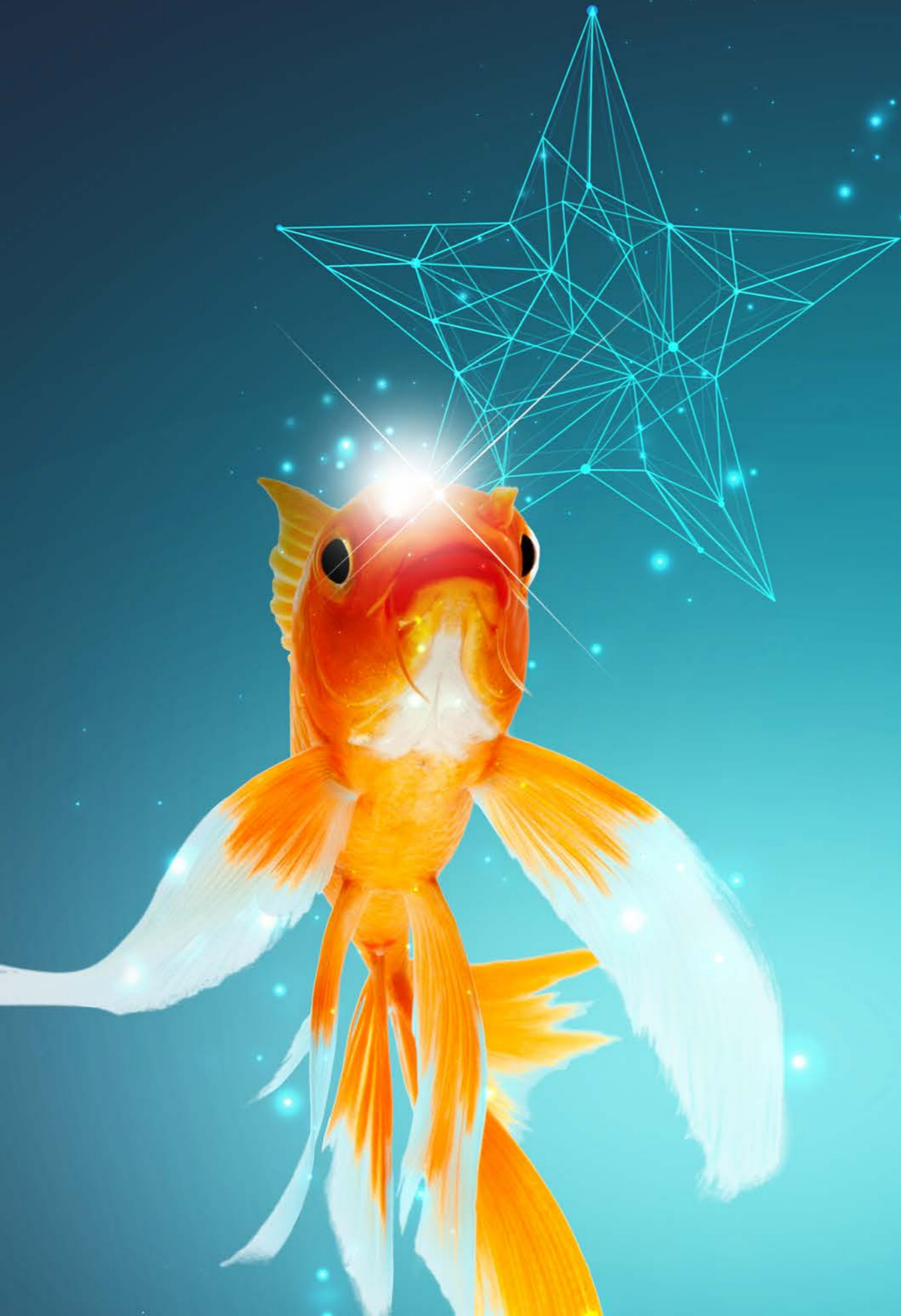
When you design your presentation to include concrete visuals that follow a consistent semantic theme, it makes it easier for buyers to remember.

In one study, images of gift boxes and branded gifts were placed throughout a presentation about corporate gift-giving software. As a result, when participants were asked what they remembered after watching the presentation, **56 percent clearly remembered the image of the gift box.**

You can imagine the next time one of the participants sees a gift box or a branded coffee mug at work, they'll be more likely to remember this presentation about gift-giving software.

The memory benefits go beyond influencing what one person remembers. Using visuals that follow a well-defined semantic theme will improve your chances of getting multiple decision makers to remember the same message.





persuade your audience  
to remember and act

influence

*decisions*

# prime the brain for a decision

Imagine you've just finished an important presentation to a small group of decision makers.

What will they remember? Will every person remember the same information?

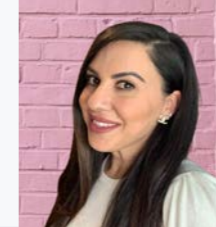
Decisions happen by agreement. The typical buying committee now includes as many as 15 decision makers, depending on which analyst you ask. And if you want to win the deal, you need to gain agreement from multiple people.

**One way to gain consensus is to use a neuroscience concept called "priming."** Priming means introducing one stimulus to influence how people respond to a subsequent stimulus.

In your sales presentations, every element influences how the next one is being processed. One slide influences how your audience perceives the next slide.

Controlling the sequence of the words, visuals, and ideas you present is one way to influence people's memories and decisions. When you understand how to use priming in your presentations, you can get multiple decision makers to remember and act on your message in a unified way.

## make it worth your buyer's attention



**Michelle Dotson**

Head of Sales Enablement  
Zoom

In a virtual setting, you have less time to build connection and trust with your audience, so every detail matters. Sellers should strive to make a positive first impression and create an interaction that's worthy of your audience's time and attention. Here are several ways Zoom's sales teams do it:

**Show up the right way:** Personalize your virtual background for your audience to build trust immediately. Additionally, good lighting and camera framing are essential.

**Connect through curiosity:** Asking about something in your attendee's background or about them personally can create a virtual environment built on trust and personal connection.

**Be comfortable with silence:** Listening is an important and underutilized skill—especially in a virtual environment. You'll be amazed how quickly a good listener becomes a trusted adviser.

**Remember that buying and selling are team sports:** Both buyers and sellers can bring the best team members to virtual meetings, so get the right people involved early and often.

# introduce *compelling insights*

Offering insights is an effective way to demonstrate an inconsistency or uncertainty with the buyer's current situation. They encourage your buyers to think differently about how they're doing things and prime their brains to be more receptive to your solution.

The most potent insights start with factual and relevant data. Data provides the facts, and your insights give context for your audience. They work together to establish the reality of your buyer's situation and illustrate the need for change.

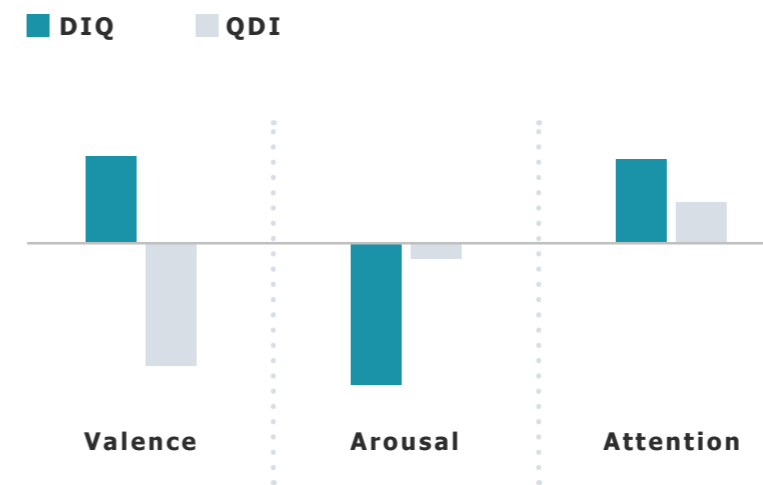
One neuroscience study that explored how multiple peoples' experiences might synchronize shows that **asking your buyers a thought-provoking question after providing data and insights can lead to more attention and motivation to act.**

When you prompt your buyer with a question *after* sharing a provocative insight, their brain starts connecting the insight to their situation.

This technique, called DIQ (Data, Insight, Question), primes your buyer's brain for your solution and initiates the process of self-persuasion. It also elicits a more positive emotional response than asking the question first (QDI).

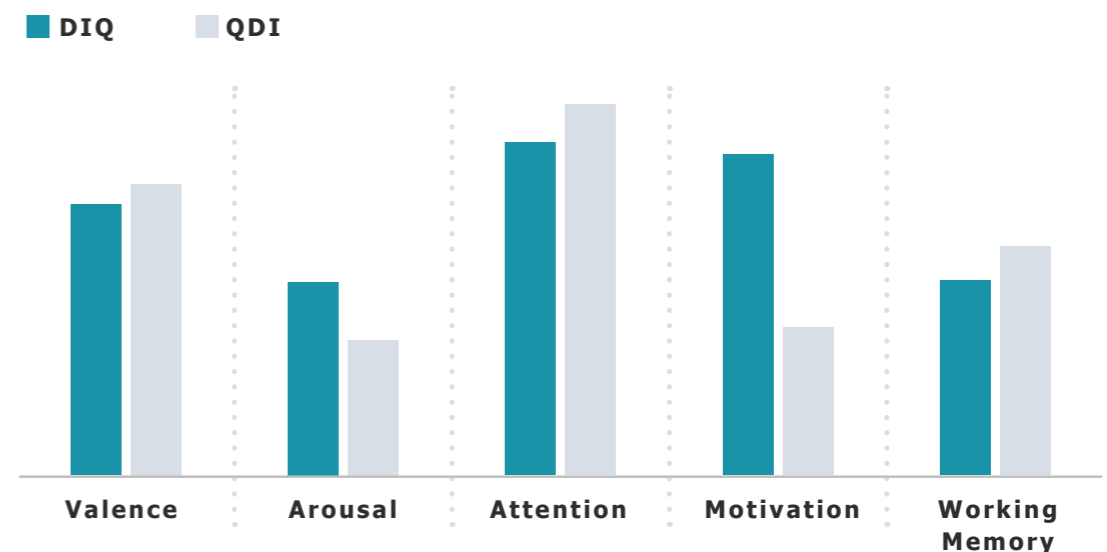
▶ [Read the DIQ research study](#) 🔍

## Individuals' cognitive state during Question slides



Participants who watched a DIQ presentation experiences high valence, low arousal, and focused attention during the Question slide—a combination of signals associated with trust.

## Pairs of participants' cognitive state during Solution slide



Pairs of participants who watched the DIQ presentation were simultaneously more motivated to act during the Solution slide.

# persuade your audience to *remember and act*

When someone attends your sales presentation, they often have a goal in mind. They need to solve a business challenge, and they hope you can provide a solution.

As they watch your presentation, they're trying to understand what your solution offers, and how it applies to their situation. They can and will pay attention if the information is stimulating and rewarding. But will they remember it when they decide to buy? And will your message affect that decision?

Building and delivering a persuasive virtual sales presentation requires more than just winning attention. When you apply the science-based techniques in this report, you can focus their attention on the right information, build precise memories in their minds, and influence their decisions in your favor.

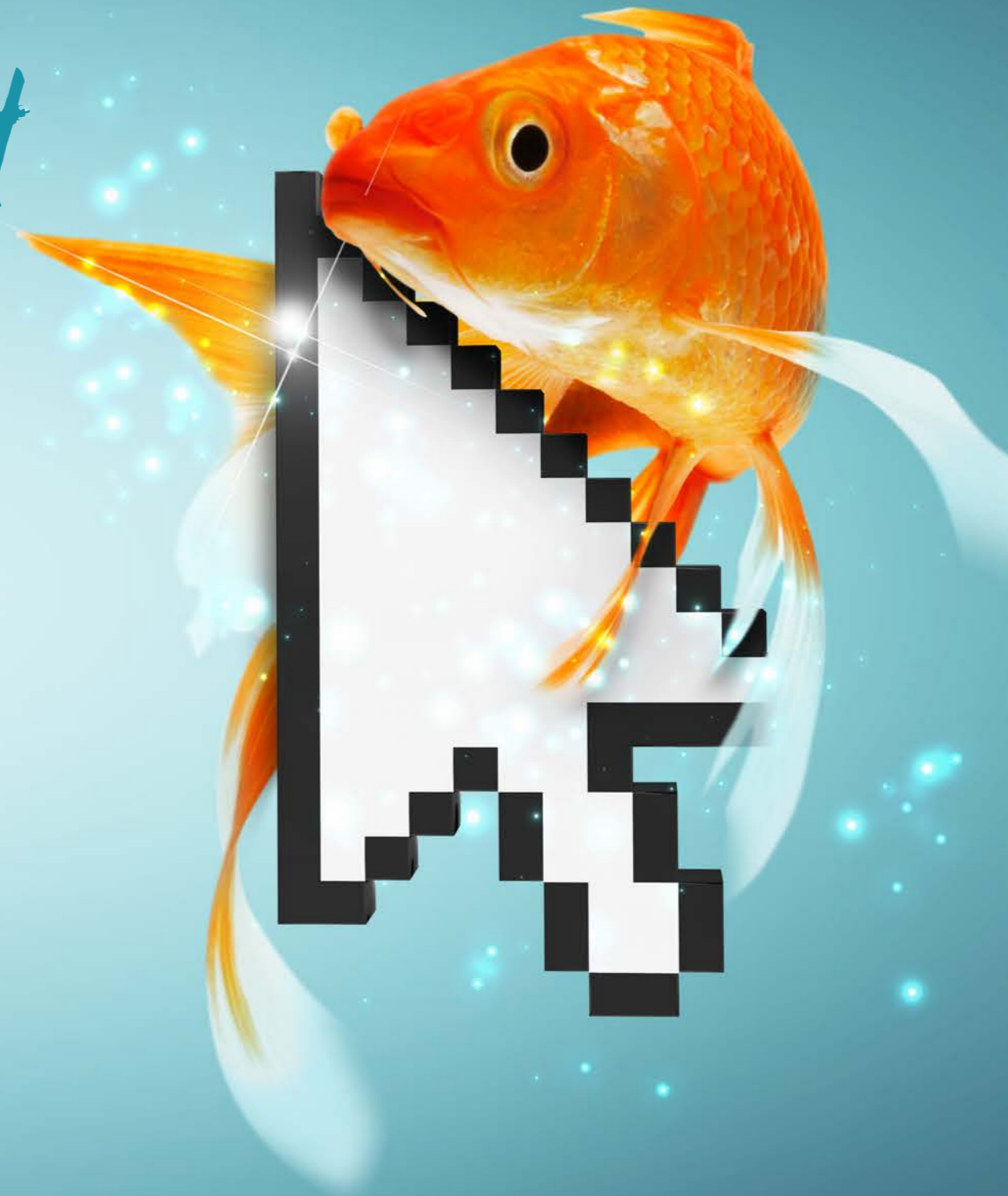
## ▶ **FOCUS ATTENTION**

.....

## ▶ **BUILD PRECISE MEMORIES**

.....

## ▶ **INFLUENCE DECISIONS**



## about B2B DecisionLabs

B2B DecisionLabs is the only B2B research firm dedicated to studying how decision-makers frame value and make choices. Unlike traditional market research and advisory firms, B2B DecisionLabs conducts rigorous research studies based in several Decision Science disciplines:

- **Behavioral studies** – understand why buyers behave the way they do.
- **Neuroscience research** – observe what’s going on inside their brains.
- **Field trials** – validate your approach in the real world.

[CONTACT US TO LEARN MORE](#)

## author



**Dr. Carmen Simon**  
Chief Science Officer  
Corporate Visions and B2B DecisionLabs



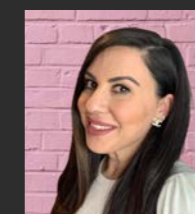
Carmen Simon, Ph.D., is a cognitive neuroscientist and Chief Science Officer at Corporate Visions and B2B DecisionLabs. A Silicon Valley entrepreneur and keynote speaker, Carmen addresses a groundbreaking approach to creating memorable messages that are easy to process, hard to forget, and impossible to ignore—using the latest in brain science. Dr. Simon is the author of *Impossible to Ignore: Creating Memorable Content to Influence Decisions*.



## contributors



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