

Strategic Event Planning:
10 Principles for Creating Meaningful and Impactful Business Events
by Victoria Matey

Chapter 7. Applying Findings from Other Industries

#EventPsychology

In 2019 event psychology as part of event design is our reality regardless of the fact that it's not widely applied yet. What surprises me much more, is that it has taken so long for the industry to leverage findings from cognitive psychology, behavioral sciences, learning psychology, social psychology, psychology of motivation, neuropsychology. Every event is a platform for observing various psychological laws in action, and a great opportunity to use this knowledge to get greater results both for organisers and attendees.

Why is psychology integral to events?

First, events are a people's business. An understanding of human behavior patterns, biases and influencing factors can enhance all the interactions (between organizers and event participants, inside the event team, between organizers and partners, and so on) in a more efficient and intentional manner. Guiding event attendees to achieve certain goals and change their behavior requires a solid understanding of what causes people to change and take action, what motivates them and what determines their actions and feelings. Psychology and neuroscience findings are therefore essential in planning almost every aspect of an event.

Then, every event is about learning something new. For learning processes to be efficient, event professionals need to know what helps our brains digest, process and remember information; how our attention function works; how to avoid information overload; and what elements can support creativity and problem-solving skills. These are the examples of where cognitive psychology and neuroscience domains become critical.

Furthermore, every event is about meeting with other people. That often means meeting with strangers who have their own, unique character, mindset, way of communication and networking goals. To make networking a success for everyone involved, event organizers should be aware of various types of personalities, how people feel and behave in the presence of others, how social relationships form—things that, for example, social psychology can largely inform us about.

Finally, every event requires creating emotional peaks; it's a moment in time that is filled with feelings greatly distinct from those we experience in regular life. How does your event make participants feel? Can you engineer specific emotions? People make decisions based

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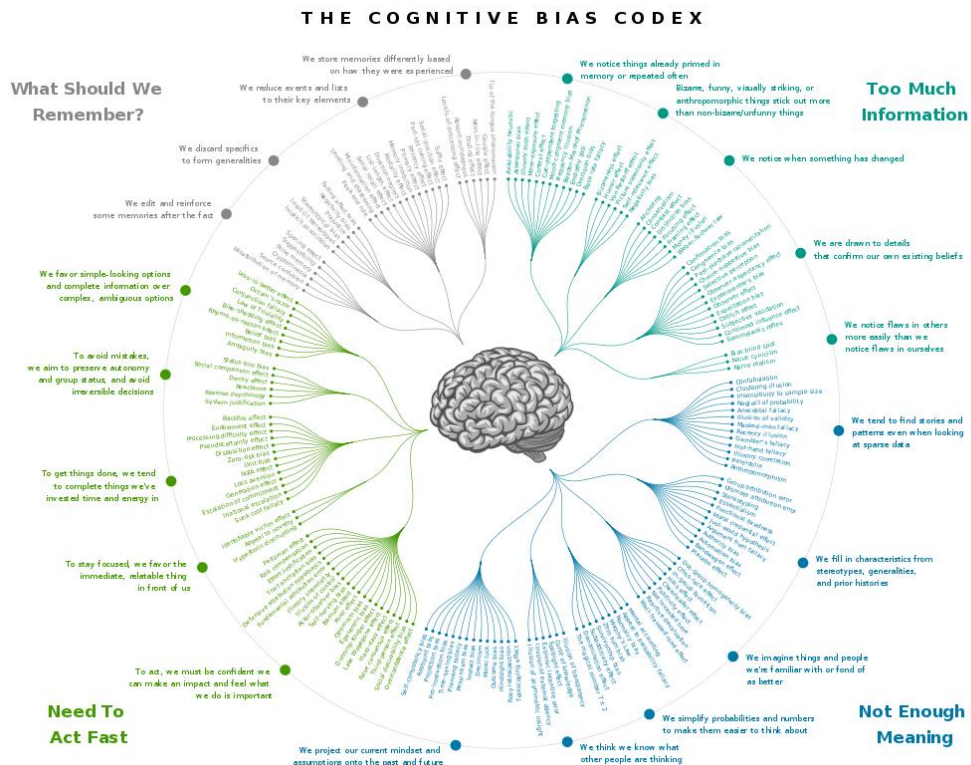
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on emotions first, so would your event participants decide to come back or promote your event among their networks based on how you made them feel? As you can see, it is essential to learn how emotions are created, what elements of event design intensify which emotions, and how to build that emotional connection that is fundamental to the event’s success—that is, to learn more about psychology and neuroscience of emotions.

From creating a psychological portrait of event audience to using brain-friendly food to increase people’s productivity to creating certain emotions with music – psychology is literally at the heart of event design.

Effects and biases

Psychological effects and biases per se can be a subject for another book. There are dozens of them¹.



¹ Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cognitive_bias_codex_en.svg

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Cognitive biases are certain patterns that occur while we interact with each other and the world and are explained by how our brains are wired. Everybody can relate to biases. The simplest example is a placebo effect: if an individual believes they get a treatment but instead are given a fake drug, they can still feel better – their brains ‘convince’ the body the treatment has made its effect.

So what biases are relevant for event planning? I’ve made a list of such, with a few tips on how to leverage each of them in practice, at the end of each section.

TMI (too much information) effect

This effect is truly a sign of our time. In a way, we are familiar with the fact that an individual is capable to ‘digest’ only some certain amount of new information. Long texts have become tedious, and we tend to favour short, succinct materials and facts: the most important only.

Interesting enough, information overload is the result of our own addiction. In other words, information is like drugs. Internet, smartphones and other technological achievements led to people got left with a few means to combat constant consumption of information. The result is fatigue and frustration: human brains just do not stand such pressure.

Moreover, researches show one more consequence of the TMI effect: large volume of information is more likely to lead to making wrong choice/decision. Interesting, right? To put it simple, our brains take information null as uncertainty, and starts working hard to change that. It also seeks to get yet more and more information. At that, information that was not there originally but got present afterwards can ‘considered’ more valuable for our brains. Thus, we make decisions based not on relevant facts but rather on what does not quite matter for our choice.

Practical tips

- On the website, make the event description short and concise. Find that middle ground where there is information just enough for perspective participants to make decision to attend. In other words. Do not use long description yet don’t be too short either.
- Do not seek to fill your social media stream up to the edge; that way you’d have an opposite effect where your audience get tired of so much information related to the event.

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Some would unsubscribe, some may even decide not to attend at all. Information that is meaningful, regular, but posted not too often is exactly what you need.

- Create rest zones at your event. The fresher participants' minds the better is their perception of the next portion of information. It means they would be more satisfied with your event content.
- Leave some portion of important information for the follow-up communications. That way, it won't fade away and would be processed to stay in their long-term memory. The bonus here is that your follow-up would be not a formality ("thank you for attending our event"), but rather the one containing a truly useful message.

First impression

This is yet another effect we all are aware about: first impression, as we know, is the strongest one and stays with us for long. However, since we know it that well, oftentimes we think 'yeah that's important' and do nothing. Let me remind that the first impression forms in less than one tenth of a second (!). First impression can not be changed, so it's crucial it is as the organisers planned it to be.

Yet, first impression is not about one moment. It's fair to say our mind collects a number of first impressions for a very short amount of time. In addition, there is 'last' impression which is not talked much about – however it has no less impact on people.

Practical tips

- Determine all points on participant's journey where they get first 'face-to-face' impression and pay more attention to planning those. Examples of such points are registration, or venue entrance. Alexander Todorov, author of the book about influence of first impression, says, "You should not underestimate psychology of what happens inside our mind when we enter the venue".
- Consider what first and last impressions you'd like to create and think over what is required for making them perfect.

Social proof

Humans are social creatures. Thus, we are wired to follow other people's behavior in certain situations. The term 'social proof' was coined by Robert Cialdini. It describes a form of

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conformity which we often observe in real life: e.g. we tend to trust recommendations by our friends and colleagues, we use reviews about a product or service to decide whether it's worth our money. When we don't know how to behave in a specific situation, we address wisdom of crowds and act as majority of people does.

This effect is helpful when marketing your event; in fact, it can turn event participants into its marketers. Once you're able to make your attendees recommend the event to others, you engage social proof, and its efficiency is a few times higher than any other type of ad.

Practical tips

- When you want your participants do some specific action, use stats/information including social proof that would help nudge them in that direction. So, for example, if you want them to use event app, you can say, 'X amount of people have already downloaded our app today' or 'X % of our attendees find our event app helpful when...'.
- Work with influencers - and choose them among your target audience and partners. One example is working with speakers who can promote event among their network. To make such cooperation success, do not leave speaker on their own at the pre-event stage, work together on the content and provide max support at all stages.

Important note here: you'd want to establish trust, and that means no opinion manipulations – only honest reviews, trustworthy information and win-win cooperation.

Idea Your partners and speakers are busy professionals, so the simpler is the action related to your event, the more eager they are to do it. For instance, if you'd like them to inform their network about the event – provide them with info-kit (templates of posts/tweets/infographics/quotes, and a posting schedule). All they'd need to do is a two-clicks action, and trust me, they will be grateful to you for such support.

Anticipation effect

My daughter turned 5 recently. About 2 months prior to the birthday date she realized it was approaching, and every day she asked me how long it was until her birthday. She was getting more and more excited every day, and in addition to 'when' questions she started dreaming aloud about her forthcoming gifts, and who would be present at her birthday party, and so on, with growing number of details every time. When her birthday came, she suddenly

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realized that here it was, and got very excited and somehow lost at the same time. I find it a perfect example of anticipation effect.

I bet you felt it, too. Remember the time you planned a vacation – purchased air tickets, booked a hotel, and here it is – a sweet feeling of expectance for something great ahead: nice rest, new places and friends, fresh impressions. It's well known that it is expecting a pleasure from an event that brings us more joy than the event itself. Economists say, when we purchase something, we feel pleasure not due to the product but due to its anticipation.

Thomas Gilovich, a psychologist from Cornell University did a series of experiments² in which participants were asked to think about a purchase in the future – it could be either material goods (TV/house/laptop) or experience (vacation/concert/travel to ski resort). Among other conclusions, one is particularly interesting to me: while both types of purchases could have equal cost, they differed in impact: people were much more eager to get new impressions rather than stuff. Also, anticipating an event was 'infused' with feeling of excitement, while when it came to goods, they rather felt anxiety.

Event is all about impressions, so leveraging anticipation effect is perfect for event promotion. Creating 'positive buzz' around event and a feeling of excitement 'when it's finally coming' will make your participants think and talk more about it and share event information – thus it would naturally support its marketing.

How exactly do we create and nurture feeling of anticipation and excitement until the moment event happens?

Practical tips

- Provide information in small portions. Don't spring all event's benefits and bonuses upon participants at once; keep on some intrigue. The key here is in keeping a balance: don't hide what is required for the attendee to get comprehensive and comfortable experience, yet keep something on hold, talking about some wonderful moments they can expect at the event. Pleasant waiting is what you should aim to achieve.
- Surprise starting with the first point of contact (e.g. event website)
- Exceed expectations. When you go beyond something your audience somehow expects from you (and the audience is not informed about that) – you'd double on the effect.

² Source: https://www.huffingtonpost.com/wray-herbert/anticipation-the-psychology_b_5588654.html

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Important note: the key in implementing anticipation effect in practice is to live up to it. In other words, if you've created an image of a super-cool event great for everybody attending it, and then failed on all your 'promises', anticipation effect will have a reverse effect. Moreover, it is crucial to thoughtfully consider your audience's expectations. No doubt, there always be those whose expectations did not materialize. However, expectations and reality should mostly match. For that,

- 1) study your audience's expectations in advance (e.g. use focus groups), and
- 2) keep in touch with your audience throughout the event cycle (e.g. monitor mentions, keep the dialogue going on social media platforms, react fast to inquires and questions).

FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out)

Imagine there is a conference with topics you are very much excited about, and speakers you have been looking for, and it seems like almost all your colleagues are attending – but not yourself, for some valid reason. Your social media feeds are filled up with event's hashtag and descriptions of amazing experience, with details, pictures and video. Yet all you can do is to feel 'wish I were there'. This feeling is exactly what is called FOMO.

The effect was described back in 1996, but I think it got a real traction with development of social media. It is often associated with negative emotions. However, if used with proper dosage, it helps promote your event and increase your audience's loyalty. It nudges those who have not yet decided if they are attending, to decide in favour; it heightens interest of those who were ready to attend but missed it - most likely these people would make every effort to not miss it next time.

So how do you create and leverage FOMO in a correct manner?

Practical tips

- Use social media, your website and influencers: methods are similar to those used with anticipation effect. What happens is that anticipation turns into FOMO for those who could not attend. Start nurturing the effect long before the event's date – talk about interesting moments you are planning, or some details relevant to your audience. Keep on such work during the event; focus on influencers to increase the target audience. Support the dialogue, have a designated team member to start or follow the discussions on social media platforms.

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- Plan something exclusive/out of the ordinary for your participants in attendance to let others know they miss on super cool stuff. It can be anything from special giveaways to fresh formats to a secret speaker – anything relevant for your event.
- Use scarcity principle if appropriate: let your audience feel there is a limited access to your event (e.g. a limited number of tickets/sliding pricing/attendance by application/invitation only, etc). Alternatively, you can combine principles of exclusivity and scarcity by creating ticket categories (discounted/VIP/promo). Early bird registration is a nudge for those who already decided to attend and would like to save money; VIP category increases perceived value.
- Engage those who follow the event online. It helps expand your audience and reinforce FOMO in a positive way due to developing sense of belonging regardless of not being present at the event. Thus, an individual is aware they miss a lot, but feels good about being able to take part at least to a certain degree and therefore, still be part of the event. Many people do not only follow event using hashtag but share a lot of information about it – also due to their unconscious desire to suppress negative ‘portion’ of FOMO feeling.

Peak-End Rule

This type of cognitive bias was studied, among others, by Daniel Kahneman and his colleagues. They found that people evaluate an event based on impressions they get at the peak or at the end of such event. For instance, those who were generally upset by a situation (e.g. waiting in a queue) but then got some positive emotion at the end (e.g. the queue moved faster than expected), considered their overall experience as favorable.

Peak-end rule naturally applies to any event with its ‘start – peak – end’ cycle. Therefore, if you plan 100% winning-type of activity in the middle or at the end of a conference, for example, you are much more likely to receive overall positive feedback from the attendees. Same rule can come to the help of the organiser in case of any force majeure potentially leading to participants’ dissatisfaction. Think over in advance or act fast to apply counter measures with ‘positive’ meaning. This way the chance is much higher the positive solution would be what your participants remember.

Practical tips

- Plan a surprising element(s) for the middle of the day/for the moment when some re-charging with positive emotions is required.

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- Plan some pleasant ending for the event participants: e.g. surprising swag, spectacular show.

Paradox of Choice

In 2000 Sheena Iyengar and Mark Lepper published an article, “When Choice is Demotivating: Can One Desire Too Much of a Good Thing?”. They described several of their experiments on choice, many of which have been often cited since as a proof for so called ‘paradox of choice’ phenomenon. Participants were offered to choose from 6 types of jam (or 24 types of chocolate in another study). Results in both lab and field studies have shown that larger assortment caused discomfort with making a decision and difficulties when choosing. With fewer options, there was a 30% increase in purchase; when participants were forced to choose from 24 types, only 3% led to a purchase.

In other words, plenty of options lead to a paradoxical effect: not, as one might expect, to the feeling of pleasure with the large assortment, but to the feeling of distress through having to make decision and further thinking over if the choice was right. Furthermore, it can even lead to refusal to make a choice.

For the event organisers it means they should make sure there is a certain balance in the agenda/entertainment activities/attendance plans. Too many options may negatively affect perspective participants or even make them refuse to attend. It’s best to have the happy mean and offer such number of options that would be just enough and would not cause the agony of choosing.

Practical tips

- Avoid offering your participants too many options; oftentimes it’s about having too many sessions on the agenda. Another mistake is having too many or too vague registration options. Making choice simple is key here.
- Having equally popular/interesting sessions on the agenda running at the same time is yet another pitfall. If you are aware of this, plan such sessions at different times. That way you don’t leave your participants making hard choices and feeling of frustration from missing out on something important.