

Brands are Rebuilt, Not Remembered

By Reilly Newman

The problem with memory is that it doesn't work quite the way we think it does. Most of us assume the brain is like a computer that pulls up a saved file. But remembering an experience is not simply opening an untouched record. We draw on stored information, associations, and cues in the context of the moment. Memory can be **reconstructive**.

That doesn't mean every memory is invented from scratch, or that nothing survives intact. It means the impression someone carries of your brand is not a perfect copy of the one you tried to leave.

And when a brand fails to come to mind, weak first impressions are only one possible explanation. Something may have been learned but be difficult to retrieve in that moment. For a business, the practical question is worth asking: what are we giving people to reach for?

Impressions and Emotion

"Making an impression" is an old adage, and old adages usually carry some truth. Feeling can give an experience weight. Relief, delight, confidence, frustration. All can become part of what someone carries away.

But feeling is not the whole memory. **Research on emotion and memory** shows that emotion can strengthen some details without improving them all. People can also remember useful, ordinary things without a dramatic emotional experience.

This is where brand lives: in the perception your audience holds of your company. How did it feel? What was the vibe? Did the experience match the promise? What did you actually help them do? Those answers give people different ways to recognize and describe you later.

Cues and Retrieval

Walk past a bakery and suddenly you're thinking about your grandmother. The smell can be a cue that brings an earlier experience to mind. The bakery didn't put the memory there. It gave you a way back to it.

The **encoding specificity principle** connects retrieval to how an experience was originally encoded: a cue's usefulness depends on its relationship to what was learned.

For brands, this offers a useful way to think about recognition. A friend asks for a recommendation. You walk down an aisle. A familiar shape appears on a package. Each moment offers different cues, and different reasons to reach for what you know.

The implication for a business is practical: give people consistent, specific things to connect to the experience. A name. A visual feature. A phrase they can repeat. A problem you helped them solve. These are different pieces of the puzzle, and they should help people find the same company.

Feelings and Vibes

"Vibe" is how people describe a feeling they can't quite put into words. "It had a beachy vibe." "That place's vibe felt kind of haunted." "Total Small World vibes." The word does a lot of work.

When someone recommends your brand, they may be translating a feeling into words. They may also be recalling a practical benefit or a distinctive detail. And the words shift depending on what they're trying to do:

"It's the organic one that the kids love." "That brand with the bunny and purple box."

Same brand. Different words. Imagine one person reassuring a friend and another helping their spouse find the right shelf. One description emphasizes a reason to choose; the other provides something to recognize.

Neither sounds like a positioning statement. That is the point. People use the language that helps them accomplish something in the moment. The business needs to understand what survives that translation.

Give People Something to Rebuild

So are brands remembered? Yes, but not necessarily as the tidy, complete story the company would like. What matters is what people can reach for when they need you, and what they can pass along when someone else does.

Listen to how a customer recommends you. Can they explain what you do, name a reason to choose you, and give someone else enough detail to find you? Then compare that language with your website, proposals, and customer experience. Keep the cues that are both recognizable and true. Strengthen the connections that are missing.

This is part of the work behind Motif's **Positioning Flywheel**: repeat clear signals, support them with experience, and pay attention to what the market actually takes away. The audience's conclusion feeds the next decision.

If you want to be remembered, give people something worth rebuilding and enough familiar pieces to find their way back.

Reilly Newman

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Continue the thinking

Brand Memory

Build meaning that compounds

Find what the market is missing