

Promoting Brain Health Online, With Science – and Honesty



By Erik Lief — March 20, 2017



Tom Brady says he uses BrainHQ's cognitive exercises to stay alert, and avoid crushing tackles (photo courtesy: Shutterstock) [1]

An interesting thing happened on the way to verifying claims that an emerging technology can assist in concussion prevention and recovery: a resulting phone call with the firm's CEO delivered clarity, transparency and admission of a PR misstep that served to cast his company in a better light than previously thought.

Such is the case for Dr. Henry Mahncke and BrainHQ, which wants to be recognized as the leader in web- and app-based cognitive training to promote brain health. With just a few established players in this digital space thus far – and his contention that his competitors don't have the goods and are prone to making unsupported claims – he wants to reinforce his position that BrainHQ is "the only evidence-based company in this field."

Sounds good to us, because claims supported by proven science are what we're interested in – and interested in writing about. Which, of course, is also why we wrote to the company seeking clarification on BrainHQ's products.

Having received a rather bold marketing pitch, which encouraged us to take a closer look at [BrainHQ](#) [2] since it contained a link to praiseworthy statements made by Patriots quarterback Tom Brady, I eventually spoke with Dr. Mahncke, who was more than willing – eager, in fact – to set the record straight and to correct any misstatements made by the company's public relations firm, Ericho.

"They got a little ahead of their skis," said Dr. Mahncke, who holds a PhD in neuroscience at the University of California, San Francisco. "I apologize for having them sent out that pitch." He was addressing this statement made by the New York-based marketer: "BrainHQ is used by Tom Brady to manage concussion risk."

As you might see, that's quite a claim – and a vague one at that – which first needed to be clarified and then verified by supporting scientific research and evidence. As it turned out, prior to last month's Super Bowl the New England icon and future Hall-of-Famer took it upon himself to speak favorably about BrainHQ's brain-training program without prompting by, or contractual obligation to, the company.

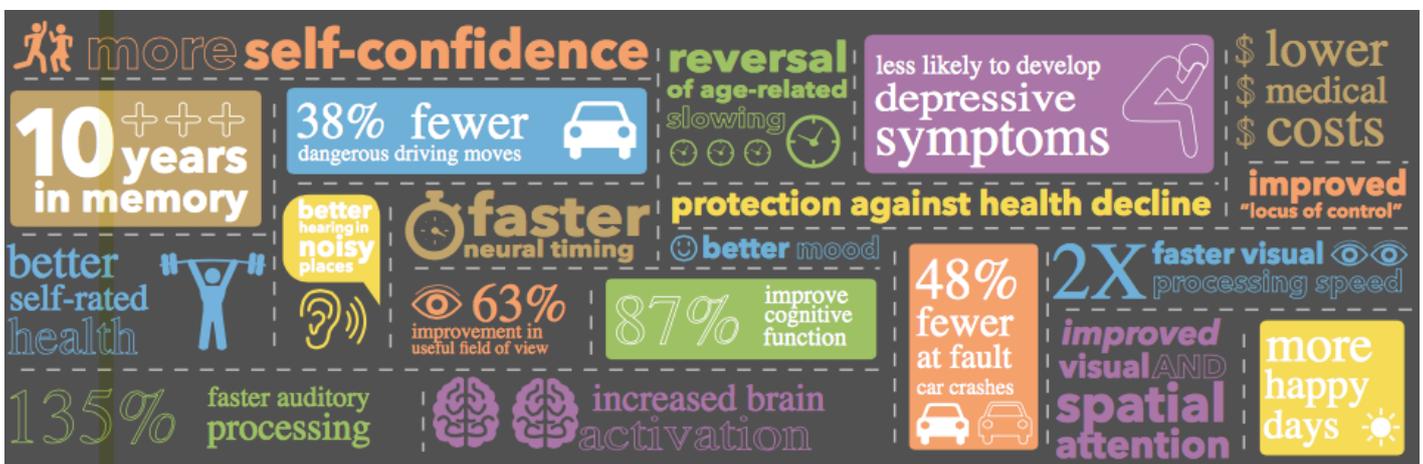
"I've used it for probably three years now consistently," Brady said on Feb. 1, as reported by the [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#) [3]. "There has been a lot of talk about concussions and head trauma and CTE," referring to chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a brain disease that results from repeated blows to the head. "I've learned that prevention is part of the issue. I work hard to try and prevent some of those things from happening. BrainHQ does a great job of cognitively trying to keep me ahead of any of those problems."

"Tom Brady is not a spokesman for us," said Dr. Mahncke, matter-of-factly. However, Ericho, in an emailed story pitch to us, promoted the superstar's impromptu product endorsement, made before the national media, in a manner that could easily be mistaken as conveying the idea that the product that was scientifically effective *in concussion prevention or recovery* – which it is not.

"We do not have clinical trial data showing that BrainHQ can assist in concussion recovery," the CEO said. "And we don't recommend it for that use," however, "BrainHQ has been shown to improve cognitive function."

To the company's credit, Dr. Mahncke, who initiated the conversation with us after our initial inquiry, sought to be clear and precise, adding, "We are quite cautious about making medical claims."

We appreciated hearing that, because as any scientist or researcher would tell you, just because someone swears a product is effective – even if that testimonial comes from an NFL deity – that doesn't make it so. Scientific proof is required.



So what is BrainHQ, and what does it do?

On its website, the company bills it as "an online brain-training system that represents the culmination of 30 years of research in neurological science and related medicine," led by Michael Merzenich, "a professor emeritus in neurophysiology, member of the National Academy of Sciences [and] co-inventor of the cochlear implant," the groundbreaking device that aids hearing.

According to BrainHQ, the product consists of "29 online exercises that work out attention, brain speed, memory, people skills, navigation and intelligence," with users accessing them on their computer or mobile device for a monthly or annual subscription fee.

As for the benefits to brain fitness and health (see the graphic above; credit BrainHQ), they are supported by "more than 100 published scientific papers," posted on the site and available for viewing.

Most importantly, is BrainHQ effective?

That's a great question, and one we're hoping to answer sometime soon. But as of now we can't say. We first simply needed to address this matter involving Brady and the product's relationship – if any – to concussions.

Now, we did that, and we like the answers we received, and the straightforward manner in which they were delivered. To underscore that point, Dr. Mahncke, as a man of science, also bolstered his standing with us by correctly criticizing the unverified nonsense going on with the largely unregulated market of supplement sales.

"I want to see the field," of online cognitive exercises, "evolve much more like medicine and much less like nutraceuticals."

If this digital aid turns out to be as good as Dr. Mahncke's determination to be accurate, forthright and transparent, BrainHQ has a great chance of someday owning the market and lapping the competition.

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[3] <http://www.startribune.com/as-tom-brady-nears-40-brain-training-hones-his-edge/412503403/>