Happy Endings, While Dining Out & in Our Heads

By Chuck Dinerstein, MD, MBA — October 21, 2020

I have long been a fan of Danny Meyer's restaurants, including Shake Shack and the Union Square Café. He's a man who understands food, organization, and hospitality. One of the great lessons the restauranteur teaches involves “service recovery” – fixing mistakes with food and food service. The take-away message remains that a customer's bad experience is often corrected and rewarded by how things conclude; in other words, the end counts more than the blip in the middle. And, turns out, that Meyer’s observations reflect the way our brain is wired.
"Well, we believe first of all that, that human beings are probably the animal on earth best designed for mistake making compared to any other animal there is. ... When you do make a mistake, we do have a philosophy, which we call the five As, which is first be aware you made it. If you're not aware, you're nowhere....Number two, acknowledge it. Number three, apologize for it. Number four, act on it. And number five, apply additional generosity. And we have found time and time again, this happens all day long, because again, restaurants just like everything else in life are just a series of mistakes."

Danny Meyer

The researchers were interested in answering whether it was the totality of experience or how it improved or declined over time that served the most pivotal role in our judgments — a variation on the economic tradeoff for short or long-term outcomes. Their subjects were 27 21-36-year old males asked to participate in a gambling experiment. They "were asked to choose which of two pots of coins, viewed on-screen one at a time, had the greatest total value. They watched as coins of varying sizes - representing their value - fell from the pots in quick succession. Simultaneously, a brain scanner revealed what was happening in their brain using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI). The task was repeated several times with different sequences of coins."

When the coin sequence showed declining value, participants systematically made the incorrect choice, favoring the alternative irrespective of the total value. What "I see lately" triumphed over any sense of overall value. Latter events are given disproportionate weight, an idea captured in recency bias where we tend to remember more recent events than a more distant one.

The use of functional MRI done as part of the experiment led the researchers to assign these judgments to the amygdala, an anatomic area found in both hemispheres associated with the remembrance of emotions. Most contemporary beliefs hold that the amygdala has a more coarsened role and that the insula helps refine its judgment. The insula is a different area found in both hemispheres. I will admit that this mapping of behavior onto brain areas is way outside my wheelhouse of comfort. But irrespective of which anatomic location is currently assigned a role, the behavior does appear to be hard-wired into our neural circuitry.

We have difficulty clearly remembering events and their associated emotions over time. It seems that our emotional gist is more weighted by how the experience ends rather than some aggregate measure. As a species, we simply respond more to what have you done lately than to what have you done overall or in the past. As events recede more and more distantly, the remembered endings gain additional strength.
Danny Meyers is not alone in exploiting this neurologically mediated evaluation "bug." He finds it a "feature" he can use to "recover service" and improve your overall impression despite a mishap or rough patch earlier on. All good public-facing services recognize the value of hospitality, an excellent finish, in enhancing your overall impression. Politicians know this as well. In the words of Dr. Vestergaard, one of the two researchers,

"Our attraction to the quality of the final moment of an experience is exploited by politicians seeking re-election; they will always try to appear strong and successful towards the end of their time in office."

Before you accuse me of politicizing science, might I suggest that this is nothing more than politicians "following the science," even if they are not aware of their behaviors underlying neurologic basis.

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