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Lawyers: Lighten up!

Right now, I'm reading an excellent book by John Medina that explains how the brain best processes information, "Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home and School."

I'm in the process of preparing three presentations for CLE seminars in New York City and Los Angeles this fall, all focused on the topic of social media for lawyers. The topic still mystifies many lawyers.

From "Brain Rules," I've learned that, to be effective, presentations should be simple. Studies show learning and subsequent recall is increased if concepts are conveyed in short, concise snippets. Complex concepts should be broken down and convoluted explanations should be avoided at all costs. Otherwise, the audience's interest is lost instantly.

Likewise, supplemental visual presentations should be simple, with striking, memorable graphics and images. Slides should highlight and complement the material being discussed, rather than provide a complex, detailed road map of the presentation. The brain recalls visual information more readily than any other type and, when used properly, visual presentations can trigger recollections of important concepts long after the presentation.

Interspersing humor throughout a presentation also is a very effective technique. It keeps your listeners interested and assists in highlighting important points you'd like your audience to remember.

Finally, repeating important concepts is imperative to ensuring later recall. An audience needs to hear the same concept a number of times and in a number of different ways; otherwise, the idea will go in one ear and out the other.

The very principles that transform good presentations into great ones can be very difficult to implement effectively in presentations for lawyers, however. To most lawyers, simplicity indicates the subject matter is not lofty enough for their attention and humor, likewise, indicates the topic is not worthy of their consideration.

That is because we lawyers take ourselves far too seriously. Somewhere along the way, most likely in law school, we decided

we were very important people who do very important things.

To prove that fact, we use big words such as "heretofore" and "aforesaid."

We gleefully, and with reckless abandon, insert Latin phrases into our written work product, even though we know there are much simpler words available to do the trick.

Lawyers prefer complexity to simplicity. We prefer big words to small. And we absolutely love detailed Power Point slides.

If a presenter doesn't speak our language and insists on using simple terminology and graphics, we assume immediately the presentation is beneath us.

If the speaker repeats a concept more than once, we deem it insulting to our intelligence.

We find it strangely comforting when the title of a presentation is intricate and complex — the harbinger of the convoluted thought processes that soon follow.

We breathe a collective sigh of relief as the first Latin phrase rolls off the speaker's tongue. The presenter is speaking our language, and we are reassured that we are very important people who do very important things.

Of course, we immediately check out mentally as soon as we hear that first Latin phrase or compound sentence, since the habits we picked up in law school, while quite impressive, result in an incredibly boring presentation.

We flip through the handouts, surreptitiously check e-mail on our smart phones and remember little, if anything, from the presentation by the following day.

In other words, our egos and training get in the way. Our need for complexity and pretense prevents us from learning something new. It's such a shame and so unnecessary.

And so, my fellow lawyers — or at least those of you who will be attending my presentations this fall — I implore you: Lighten up! There's knowledge out there to be had, as previously set forth, *supra*.

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