

Zeigarnik Effect

When we feel we've been left hanging, it drives us crazy! We want to know the end of the story. What is the missing piece? We want our tasks to be completed so we can check them off our list. This is also known as the "Zeigarnik Effect," named after Bluma Zeigarnik, a Russian psychologist. This effect is the tendency we have to remember uncompleted thoughts, ideas, or tasks more than completed ones.

The story goes the Bluma Zeigarnik was sitting in a café in Vienna when she observed that a waiter could remember everything someone had ordered, but once the food was delivered the waiter forgot everything. This led for her to realize that it is easier to remember everything about an uncompleted task, but once the task is completed the memory will immediately fade. That uncompleted task will hold onto our memory, improve the recall and help us remember. We experience intrusive and almost nagging thoughts about a goal or an objective that was left incomplete. It is built into our psyche to want to finish what we start.

We see the Zeigarnik Effect on the television news and other programs. Right before a commercial break, the newscasters announce some interesting tidbit that will come later in the hour. This piques your interest and, rather than flipping the channel, you stay tuned. Movies and dramas on television also leave you hanging in suspense. By leaving something uncompleted right before the commercial break, the programs draw our attention, keep us involved, and motivate us to continue watching. We don't feel satisfaction until we receive finality, closure, or resolution to the message, our goals, or any aspect of our life. Incomplete tasks trigger thoughts. The thoughts of the incomplete task trigger more memory retention. More memory retention triggers anxiety that triggers more thoughts of the uncompleted business.

You also see the Zeigarnik Effect in the courtroom. We already know that people feel more confident and impressed with information they discover for themselves over time.

This dictates that persuaders slowly dispel information, rather than dumping large volumes of information all at once. A good lawyer does not disclose everything he knows

about the case or the plaintiff during his opening statement. As the trial progresses, the jury can fill in the blanks for themselves with the additional information they gradually receive. This works much better than dumping all the information on them in the beginning. It holds the jurors' attention longer and gives the message more validity. The jury discovers the answers for themselves, and is more likely to arrive at the desired conclusion.