

END ON A HIGH NOTE: THE PEAK END RULE

You ever wonder why a restaurant gives you some mints with your bill? It isn't because they know you like something sweet or think you have bad breath. And it isn't some way of saying thank you for spending a lot of money on a meal. While I appreciate them, twenty-five cents of mints are not going to make me forget I just spent \$100 on wine and dinner. So why do they do it? Why give something so trivial at the end of some spectacular meal?

The answer comes from how our memories are formed. While we would love to believe that our memories are an accurate snapshot of our past, the truth is that our memories only record the highlights and will quickly erase most of what we've experienced. We only remember the two-minute preview trailer, not the two-hour full-length movie. And it's not as if our "trailer-sized" memories convey the whole story of what really happened. For the most part, we only remember two things of an experience: the most intense part and the end.

This phenomenon is called the Peak-End rule, and it is something that is found in all humans, even you. The rule states that people will judge their experiences based on how they felt at its peak (either the most positive or negative point) and how it ends. Only those two moments matter in shaping your feelings about an experience. All the other points throughout that experience will just fade to the background.

I love this Peak-End rule, because when you use it correctly, it can positively impact the people around you. Do you want to impress a romantic partner? The Peak-End rule can help you ensure they remember the date with you as magical. Do you want to strengthen your customer relationships? The Peak-End rule can leave them wanting to do more business with you. Want to hire the best people? The Peak-End rule can make sure candidates leave wanting to join your company.

Freezing Hands & Colonoscopies

The Peak-End rule was first proposed in 1993 by the Nobel-winning economist / psychologist Daniel Kahneman and by the American psychologist Barbara Frederickson. I am a huge fan of all of Daniel Kahneman's studies and books, and I suggest everyone read his seminal work, *Thinking Fast & Slow*. They came across this phenomenon by researching how people felt during less-than-pleasant-experiences: putting a hand in ice water and getting a colonoscopy.

The first study split participants into two groups. The first group submerged their hands in 14°C (57°F) water for 60 seconds. The second group also had their hands submerged for 14°C (57°F) water for 60 seconds, but then they had an additional 30 seconds where warmer water raised the temperature to 15°C (59°F). The participants were then asked to repeat the process. Despite the fact that they experienced 50% longer unpleasant times, the participants in the second group were more willing to repeat the experience. The mere fact that they ended one degree warmer made the participants think about the experience more positively.

The second study focused on how people rated receiving a colonoscopy. They split the participants into two groups. The first group just received a normal colonoscopy, but the second group had an additional step added to the normal colonoscopy. At the end of the procedure, the doctor left the scope inside the patient for three additional minutes and kept it still. This created an uncomfortable sensation in the participants, but, importantly, not a painful one.

And thanks to the Peak-End rule, the participants who receive those three extra minutes with a scope inside them, actually rated the overall experience more positively than the people who had just a normal colonoscopy. In fact, the patients in the extra three-minute group were significantly more likely to return for subsequent procedures. Think about that for a second. Both groups experienced that same normal colonoscopy steps, and only then did one group get three extra minutes of uncomfortableness. But since the ending was slightly less uncomfortable, the overall negative experience was seen as less uncomfortable.

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How to Use the Peak-End Rule at Work

In order to use the Peak-End rule to your favor, you need to understand whether you are trying to strengthen a positive experience or make a negative experience feel not as bad. When an experience is overall positive, the goal should be making that experience feel even more special. You can do that by ensuring you have one really special moment in the experience and by ending on the highest note possible. If the experience is negative for the person, you probably can't minimize the negative peak they are feeling, but you can try and end the experience on a positive note. Just the difference between a negative peak and a positive end will help shape the person's overall memory of the experience.

Here are some ideas on how you can use the Peak-End rule at your work:

- **Training / Team Events** - Training and team events can be full of amazing experiences, but too often the endings are not that amazing or exciting. I can speak from experience. Many of my training programs end with people reflecting on how they can take the learnings back home. While this is important, it definitely does not take advantage of the Peak-End rule. Instead, you should be ending your training with one last fun exercise. Or maybe you should be ending team events by reviewing (as a group) photos of the team throughout the event. But no matter what you choose to do, you need to end on a high note.
- **Launching New Products** - When sales and marketing teams are trying to plan for customer events such as trade shows, demonstrations, or other types of experiences to launch a new product, there can be a tendency to try and pack the agenda. And that makes sense because they want to make sure they convey a great deal of information into a short amount of time with the customer. But the Peak-End rule challenges that type of thinking. While they remember the facts about the new product, their feelings about the new product will primarily be shaped by the Peak-End rule. So instead of trying to cram everything about the product into a short period, just focus on giving each customer / potential customer a high peak experience and a positive feeling as they leave.
- **Customer Service** - Most people don't usually call into customer service to say how good a product or service is. Ninety-nine times out of 100 they are calling because something has gone wrong, and they are upset. This is a classic peak negative experience. Obviously, the goal of your customer service representatives is to try and turn that negative experience around. While solving the problem is the ultimate goal, it isn't always possible. At a minimum, your reps should make sure the interaction ends as large of a positive note as possible. That way the positive ending balances out the negative peak experience in their memory.

You Can Use the Peak-End Rule in Your Daily Life

While there are many big events or experiences at work where we can use the Peak-End rule, I think we can also use it in our daily lives. Imagine you are in a meeting with your manager's manager, and you want to make a good impression. Instead of trying to act impressively throughout the entire meeting, the Peak-End rule indicates that you can pick your moments to shine. So, in that meeting, make sure you have one really good idea or moment where you really add value to the conversation. As much as possible, give your boss's boss a high peak experience with you.

And most importantly, don't forget the end of the meeting. Too many meetings have endings that are rushed because people are running to other meetings. Confirming next steps / actions or just reflecting on the positive agreements on the meeting are either skipped or done in a way where people are half paying attention. When this happens, even the most engaging meetings are lessened in our memories. So, if you want to make an impression at a meeting, be the person that tries to wrap up the meeting in a meaningful manner.

People are going to walk out of meetings happy with you if you provide one good moment of value and a positive ending to them. But this isn't just limited to your work meetings. You can use the Peak-End rule throughout all your interactions: dinner with friends, a romantic evening with a significant other, even playing with your kids in your backyard. So, the next time there is someone you want to have a good impression of you, make sure to use the Peak-End rule.

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