

Columns

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Pump Up That Cortex

Ellen C. Wells



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At the very end of 2016 an article came out in the Sunday *New York Times* about “Superagers” (December 31 issue, if you’re interested in reading it). Superagers, as it turns out, are folks in their 80s and 90s whose minds are still as sharp as a tack. Ernest Wertheim, in his mid 90s, has been a shining example of a Superager. As someone in my late 40s and who is beginning to forget what my point was when I’ve barely reached mid-sentence, I was most interested in the “how” of it all, not so much the “why” (something about thicker “major hub” regions of the cortex).

How do these regions become thicker and thus become the brain of a Superager? “Work hard at something,” the article says. The article goes on to say that these “critical brain regions increase in activity when people perform difficult tasks, whether the effort is physical or mental.” In other words, give both your body and your mind a vigorous workout, especially as you age. The other critical piece to this may surprise you: It needs to hurt. Not stabbing pain, of course, but it needs to be uncomfortable, unpleasant, frustrating. Anyone who has trained for a marathon knows the feeling. And any student who has had to work out an algebra or calculus problem also knows the feeling. Pleasant or fun “brain games” like Suduko or those on the Luminosity app don’t cut it. What do they suggest instead? Take up a musical instrument or learn a language are a few things to give the brain some vigorous effort. Make the brain sweat. Do not shy away from the unpleasantness of the effort.

So, what’s my point? (Yes, I do remember what it is!) I am a little concerned about horticulture’s recent insistence on attracting more customers by making gardening “easy.” Gardening, as it has been for generations, is an activity full of effort, especially if it’s a vegetable garden that requires near-daily maintenance and a watchful eye. We know gardening is a pretty good physical workout, especially for older folks. It can be mentally challenging, too, if you’re planning a season-long garden or combating pests. My brain bulks itself up each summer trying to combat those darn pepper maggots and squash vine borers! (I will get you someday!)

This turn to a simple-and-easy outlook on gardening may be doing our aging customers a disservice. I know, I

know ... I'm the one who wrote about containers that make life easier (page 24). Not all aspects of gardening have to be taxing, though, and I'm not against viewing plants as décor elements. But I do believe there is way we can pump up our customers' cortices.

Like what? How about sponsoring a summer series of garden challenges? Grow the biggest pumpkin or fattest/earliest tomato. Build the most effective scarecrow or most efficient old-school garden-sized windmill. Or a "Battlebots" for garden stuff. Hold ornithology classes. Have weekly weed ID classes—with tests! Get customers involved in a community volunteer project. America In Bloom, anyone?

The key is engagement on both the physical and mental levels. We can sell a pretty plant in a gorgeous piece of pottery and call it a day, sure. Nothing wrong with that. But if we also engage that customer both physically and mentally through challenges or courses or longer-term projects, that customer keeps coming back. And they keep coming back for longer because they are staying active—are able to engage—deeper into their lives.

It's not our responsibility to do any of that, of course. After all it adds a layer of complexity to your business. And it would be a constant puzzle to figure out how best to engage and challenge customers in that way. Heck, it may even frustrate you and cause all sorts of unpleasantness. You can just feel your cortex getting bigger just thinking about it. **GP**