

HOW TO WOW CLIENTS AND INFLUENCE COLLEAGUES



What's the best way to build professional knowledge and demonstrate expertise? By training your memory, says memory champion Chester Santos

By Nathan Jaye, CFA

What if your memory had no limits? How would that change your career, your professional relationships—or your life? Chester Santos, the 2008 US Memory Champion, can remember the names of more than 200 people at once. He also teaches memory-training workshops and has spoken at CFA Institute member societies. In this interview, Santos explains techniques that improve memory, how better memory can help investment professionals in particular, and what it's like to remember just about anything you want.

How do you "superpower" memory?

When you force yourself to commit things to memory and recall them, your memory will automatically improve. That's one aspect. Another aspect is learning techniques that will allow you to memorize specific types of information—such as names and faces or information that contains numbers—and foreign language vocabulary words.

So, what have you committed to memory?

I memorized all the results of the Kentucky Derby since it started in 1875—the winning horse, the winning jockey, and the time it took to win the race, down to a hundredth of a second.

I also memorized the entire US Congress, both the House and the Senate, the representatives' first names, last names, state, district number, and party—and the congressional committees on which they served, special positions held within those committees, and special positions held within Congress in general. That was more than 4,000 pieces of data. I did a demonstration on the streets of New York City where people would call out a random state or district number, and then I would give all the other information.

How did memory techniques originate?

Most of the techniques I teach originated with the ancient Greeks. Back then, it was part of being well educated, along with mathematics and rhetoric. Everyone was educated in what was called the "art of memory." But somehow, that got lost over time. Nowadays, we don't teach it at all in our educational system. We are expected to remember a lot of information, but we're never taught how to remember it.

These days, we've become dependent on entering information into electronic devices. We all used to be able to remember the phone numbers of friends and family members. We could easily dial those numbers from memory. Now, some people don't even know their own phone number.

What's a technique for remembering names?

The best technique is to pick out a unique characteristic about the person—something about their look or a particular facial feature—then link an image that reminds you of their name to that facial feature. It's not a technique that a lot of people use. But in my opinion, it's definitely the most powerful because it's based on how a person looks. So, when you see the person again, you automatically see the image you've associated with their name.

So, if I meet a woman named Jane and she has long hair, I might imagine that her hair is made of chains (rhymes with Jane) and her hair is clacking together, making a loud noise. If I meet someone named Bob, I might imagine him bobbing for apples. But you can use your own images—whatever helps you remember the name.

When you remember details about a person, it helps you build a better rapport. If the next time you see Jane, you can say, "Hey, Jane, how's your husband, Bob? How was your last round of golf?" that person is often blown away and really likes you. Automatically, she likes you a lot more than she would otherwise. That can lead to her being more likely to do business with you, to become one of your clients.

How do you remember the add-on information?

It's very easy. You just attach an extra image. So, if the name is Jane, you've already imagined her hair as chains. If she plays golf, you would just see a golf club trapped inside the chains. That's it, really easy.

And her husband, Bob?

Maybe Bob Marley is swinging the golf club, and he also gets trapped inside the chains. I just went with the first thing that came to my mind, and that's what I recommend people do. If the first thing that comes to your mind for the name Bob is a famous Bob, then that will work.

Do we underestimate the importance of remembering names?

Remembering names is huge in any profession. I always quote Dale Carnegie's famous book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie writes that the sweetest sound to a person is the sound of their own name and that everyone's favorite subject is themselves.

When you're able to call someone by their name, they feel (sometimes subconsciously) that they must be important to you. The opposite, however, is also true—especially if you have already met someone a couple times. If you're still not able to remember their name, they feel they aren't important to you. That's just the reality of life.

What about giving presentations from memory?

I use the way the ancient Greeks would memorize speeches. First, research your topic and create an outline of all of the major points and subpoints that you want to get across to your audience or your client. Once you have the outline, count how many points and subpoints you have in total. Let's say it's 15.

Then, pick out 15 locations from, let's say, your residence. Now, mentally link images that remind you, in some way, of each of those points and subpoints to the 15 locations in your residence. When you want to remember your presentation topics, you just take a mental stroll through your residence and see the images that you placed at the 15 locations, which will remind you of all the points of your presentation.

In the time of the ancient Greeks, this method was known as the Method of Loci ("loci" meaning location). The famous Roman orator Cicero also used this technique to give lengthy speeches from memory without any notes. It was known then as the Roman Room method.

In the financial services industry, you can apply the method to a one-on-one meeting with a client. If you can talk about a bunch of key points from memory without looking at any notes, you'll seem to be more of an expert in your field.

How do you pick the locations?

You want to use places you're familiar with from your past or places you often frequent. It can be a house you grew up in, a school that you attended, or somewhere that you went on vacation—places you can just pull up visually without having to revisit physically.

The Method of Loci and the Roman Room method always used places that existed in the real world. The ancient Chinese also created imaginary “memory palaces” that, in some cases, consisted of thousands of locations. They just created those palaces using nothing but their imagination.

I’ve actually done that in competition. I’ve created a castle that began with a drawbridge, and this drawbridge leads to a giant castle door, and I open up the door and see a long red carpet. And that carpet leads to a staircase. Then, I climb up the stairs, and I open another door, and there is a treasure room. What you’re really doing is building a mental database. You’re creating all these locations. They are all storage places for things you want to remember.

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Why do memory techniques work?

We remember things in our environment that are really crazy and unusual; those things automatically stick in our memory. They tend to transfer easily to our long-term memory without any effort.

An example I often give is, If an elephant were to crash through the door right now, and the elephant started spraying water all over you with its trunk, you would probably remember that for the rest of your life. When you tell that story, you wouldn’t have to do anything to remember it. It would be fixed in your memory. In the same way, we can artificially create memorable images in our minds for things we want to remember—like the example of meeting a person named Jane.

I’ve broken my teaching into three main principles. One is visualization of the image. From there, we add additional senses—like hearing or touch or taste—to the visual image. Third is the psychological aspect of memory. Images that have an impact on us psychologically and that graphically hold our attention are much easier to remember.

How else can investment professionals benefit from memory training?

You want to be a lifelong learner in the financial services industry, and memory is fundamental to learning. If you master these memory techniques, you can quickly learn new information from a wide variety of areas.

Facts and figures is another area. Being able to have a lot of important financial-related facts and figures at your mental fingertips really helps you to come off as more impressive.

The bottom line is this: We always want to do business with the person we view as being the smartest. We view people who have razor-sharp memory ability as smart. Memory is huge in terms of how people view you.

What techniques are used for memorizing facts and figures?

You would use the same idea. I would recommend using the Method of Loci, or Roman Room method or journey method; those are three different names for the same thing, which is using locations from your environment. But there’s one other thing you’ll need for facts and figures—you need to learn a system that allows you to turn a number sequence into an image. It takes only about an hour to learn that system, but once you’ve learned it, then you’re all set with facts and figures as well.

Do you mean the major system?

One name is the major system. I like to call it the “phonetic alphabet system” more than the major system because it’s based on phonetic sounds.

How does it work?

For each single digit from 0 through 9, there will be a phonetic sound or series of phonetic sounds associated with it—for example, 0 is associated with *s*, *z*, and *soft c*; 1 is associated with *t* and *d*. That allows you to take a number sequence and turn it into a word. Once you have a word, you can see in your mind a corresponding image. Once you have an image for a number sequence, you can then apply the journey method or make a memorable story from the images.

It sounds a bit complicated at first, but it’s not hard to learn. In my workshops, I have people memorize a 21-digit sequence forward and backward in less than five minutes. Everyone is amazed with that.

Why bother improving your own memory when you can just Google the information?

If I’m a potential client, how do I feel if you answer my every question by saying, “Oh, hold on. Let me look that up really quickly. OK, here you go”? If I meet with another person who knows the answer right off the top of his head, I’m going to want to do business with the second guy because that guy seems like he’s an expert. He seems like he really knows his stuff. He seems a lot sharper and more intelligent to me.

Memory is fundamental to acquiring expertise. That’s what makes somebody an expert, someone who actually has the knowledge. A student can look everything up. When you’re going into a particular field, a student or an apprentice is the one that I view as still looking everything up. The person with 10+ years of experience, they know it already. They have gained the knowledge.

By training your memory, you can learn anything much faster, you will have better retention of what you’re learning, and it’s a more fun and interesting way to go about learning.

Have these skills made you more confident?

It does improve your confidence because it's like you've gained a superpower—an ability to quickly learn anything. After doing the Kentucky Derby demonstration and the Congress demonstration, whenever I have to learn some kind of instruction, I can say, "That's nothing. It's easy." Things that used to seem challenging to learn become a piece of cake once you've built up memory skills.

When I go on a trip to a foreign country, I quickly memorize a little phrase book of key words and phrases, just on the plane on the way to wherever I'm going. For instance, you don't have to ask, "Where is the restroom?" You can just say, "Bano?" That's quicker. Just learning a lot of key words and phrases can really help you get along in a foreign country.

Is there such a thing as a bad memory?

I've met many people who think they have a bad memory. That's part of the reason why they haven't decided to learn a foreign language or computer programming or some other subject. They haven't taken the steps to learn because they feel they have a bad memory.

After training their memories, many of these people become so inspired because they never thought they would be able to memorize things—so, their confidence is up. They are inspired to learn a lot of new things.

What's your training regimen like?

One of my favorite ways to practice is to shuffle a deck of playing cards and memorize it as fast as I can because memorizing playing cards is applicable to all the events in the memory competition. So, training with cards will help me in names and everything else.

I also print out sheets of computer-generated random digits. I practiced memorizing those, attempting the longest sequence I can memorize in five minutes. I've gone to poetry.com and tried to memorize poems. During the 2008 championship, I was still a software engineer, so I would have a full day of work and when I got home, I would train two to three hours after work. On the weekends, I'd train five-plus hours a day.

What is working memory?

Working memory is the memory that lasts a few seconds or less—when you hold something in your mind—and then it's gone. It's *extremely* short-term memory. Psychologists used to describe working memory as the memory that lasts long enough for you to write down a phone number and then forget it.

The Method of Loci is for *regular* short-term and long-term memory. Short term is minutes, hours, days; long term is months or longer. Long-term memory used to be described as your own phone number. Your own phone number is in your long-term memory.

One event in the World Memory Championship related to working memory is the spoken-digits event. There's a recording that spits out digits, one per second. And it never goes back; they never rewind it. You sit there while the recorder

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says, "One, five, eight, six, five, four, three, nine." It's not written anywhere. You just remember as much as you can. That's working memory.

Working memory can definitely be expanded by practicing with memory techniques. Some say working memory training has been proven to improve your overall intelligence.

Why are the ranks of memory masters dominated by the Chinese?

China's government is behind it. This is a good way to illustrate why the US is behind some other countries. I have been on TV a lot more than the average person in the United States, but still I'm not that well known. China's memory champion is *very* famous in China. His name is Wang Feng. Everybody in China would know that name. They treat the memory championships like the Olympics.

When I went to the World Memory Championship in 2008, it was just my ex-girlfriend and me. China's contestants show up with their own private coach and interpreter and with their uniforms on. Their job is to win the World Memory Championship. I have heard they memorize eight hours a day—and that's all they do, all year long.

What are some last tips for remembering names?

Whenever you meet someone, make sure to immediately repeat their name. Shake their hand if you can. Many times, we don't remember names because we didn't register the name in the first place. When the person was introducing themselves, we were thinking about something else. That's why making it a habit to always repeat the name right away is important. So, if you meet someone named Jane, shake her hand and say, "Nice to meet you, Jane." That forces you to pay attention. That's actually very key.

What's the secret to making the techniques work?

You actually have to do the exercises. If you read about it in a book, that's great, but a lot of people get bogged down. Either they never actually finish the book, or they don't necessarily understand how they can apply the trainings to their career and personal life. Hearing about the techniques is one thing. Practicing and applying them is another.

Moonwalking with Einstein (a book on memory training by Joshua Foer) was a *New York Times* bestseller in 2011. It was hugely successful. But many people who read that book still have no idea how to actually make the techniques work. That's why I have an online course (www.chestersantos.net)—so people can actually practice the methods.

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