

# Chapter 1

For Taylor Aisling, Circadian Lag was the worst part of the job. First few days back to a Day rotation, always harder on the sleep cycle than going into a Delve rotation. That's why the company usually scheduled rotation changes to happen over a weekend. And for Taylor, it never failed to screw the whole weekend because even with the E-Lucid® and the drugs they gave him, his internal clock was completely out of whack. The low doses of Modafinil never did enough to make up for the fact that he was used to sleeping hard during the daytime. But if Taylor didn't stay awake the whole day, he'd never get back into the right rhythm.

It was only 9:00 AM, Monday after switching back to Day rotation. Taylor cradled his head in his hands, fingers over his eyes, elbows on his desk. The computer monitor light pierced between his fingers. He heaved a sigh, dragged his hands down his face, pulling on his pasty skin all the way. He could hear the scritch of his five o'clock shadow against his fingertips on the way to his thin, narrow jaw line. Taylor's face snapped back to place even in his slack jawed dazed state. He groaned, bleary eyed for a moment before taking a deep breath, straining to focus on the screen. The monitor had one document open. It said:

“EDMON SECURITY PRESENTATION—QUESTIONS TO ANSWER:

1. Re-state client problem ('you wanted to target this group to buy this product,' etc.).
2. What kinds of dreams will the ad be placed in?
3. How will the ad fit in the dreams?
4. What should the ad say or communicate to the target?
5. What feeling should the target feel at the moment the ad is placed?
6. What feeling/idea should the target remember after the dream is over?”

Taylor's eyes glazed over the questions. He already knew most of what to present to the client. He spoke with the team about it before the focus groups started. Taylor just didn't feel like writing anything down at the moment. It was always easier for Taylor to figure out a problem's solution in his head rather than putting anything into written words or creating actual ads. It's probably why he was so effective at designing E-Lucid® ad campaigns. No creating visuals or writing copy like in his old ad jobs. The target subconscious and the E-Lucid® did that for him. All he had to do was analyze the target market and figure out a strategy to meet them.

Taylor's eyelids drooped as he read the screen again, taking in all the questions and releasing back into his mind everything he learned from Delving target groups in answer.

Security didn't mean the protection from the things you fear, it meant the absence of fear entirely. Calmness, serenity, peace of mind, those were important to the customer. Taylor's head deposited its weight into his palm. His vision blurred, darkening and lighting as his eyelids crept lower and shot back open over and over.

Taylor opened his eyes and saw a beach scene on his monitor. Had he dozed off long enough for the screensaver to come up? But it wasn't his normal screensaver. He looked around, saw he and his entire desk were outside, actually on the beach. Seagulls made calls that would be obnoxious if close up. Waves broke against huge jagged stones far off. Taylor could tell they were somehow still dry. He looked back at his monitor, realized it was just a frame showing the distant ocean. He scanned his desk—almost all the normal tchotchkes and office supplies were replaced by beach things: shells, seaweed, rocks, et cetera. All except for the framed photo of his father holding the infant version of Taylor above his head.

Everyone smiled.

Taylor's toes squiggled in the sand below his desk. Maybe he should get up? But why bother? It was nice enough there. He reclined his chair. The casters sunk into the sand and the whole thing collapsed beneath him. The chair was gone and Taylor's body descended like a feather. When he touched the ground he saw two clouds, pink and orange, drift toward each other and crash in slow motion. The clouds' edges billowed out, roiling in the sky, but none of the colors ran together.

A faint voice called out from the distance. Taylor couldn't place who, but he could tell that she was calling for him.

"Mom?" he sent as the voice got closer and louder. No body came with the voice. It was loud now. Right next to his ear.

"TAYLOR," the voice, he thought he recognized it.

Taylor jerked out of sleep, arms and legs flailed around as his chair nearly toppled beneath him. Adrenaline shot through his system, his heart pumped loud and hard as he worked every muscle in a wild spastic dance to find his balance.

"Whoa, whoa whoa. You must have been pretty deep there. First day back is always rough, isn't it? That Circadian Lag can throw you for a loop." It was Diana Bolton, the Production Designer. She was the one calling him.

His entire circulatory system still flipping its lid, Taylor's eyes widened as he grasped at his keyboard and mouse. He jiggled and clicked the mouse to switch from the screensaver and typed a couple of random letters on the keyboard. It was no way to fool anyone into believing he had been working, but it was instinct after working in offices for 15 years to at least try.

Diana chortled, "Taylor, it's alright, I don't think anyone saw you...*dozing*," She whispered the last word, accompanied by a little shifty-eyed mischievous look. "Anyway, we finished the focus group this morning and it looks like Franklin's eating crow at this point. From what we saw in the tests, your direction was the more memorable of the two plans we were considering. People seemed to respond better to the sense of calm security rather than fear."

"Well that's good to hear," Taylor nodded, eyes wide, focused on his monitor. He jiggled the mouse again and clicked around the questions document.

"Yeah, so I think it would be good if you were the one to take the lead on the client presentation since it was your dream direction that we're going with. Of course, if you need any help with mood boards or collateral to show the client, I'd be happy to help," Diana said.

Taylor gaped at her, "Th—Thanks, yeah, I'll get right on that. When's the due date for that again?" He cringed inside, thinking of having to lead any meeting, client or no. He led some past client presentations, but every one was a special type of nightmare. The last one, he bungled it by skipping over a major chunk of material in the middle. Went straight from the intro almost right to the end of the whole thing. It was only thanks to Franklin Donovan, the boisterous, blathery Account Executive, that the presentation wasn't a complete travesty. Franklin saved Taylor's bacon more than once with quick reactions and deft saves to his oratory missteps. Taylor did not want to have to go through that yet again. It frustrated Taylor when he was right about a dream campaign, it ended up shoving him in the spotlight. He was in the spotlight too often. Taylor's leg was bouncing as he fingered the shirt button in the middle of his chest, absent from the conversation.

Diana's lips were moving and there was noise, "...Does that work for you, Taylor?"

Deer in headlights, Taylor bobbed his head in a slow nod, "What did you say?"

"Are you alright? You must be really out of it today. I was telling you the date of the meeting," She paused, "It's Thursday at 10:00 AM. You sure you took enough wakers today?"

Most people in the company called Modafinil "wakers," because who can remember medication names? Wakers were handy drugs to have, a full dose would keep you alert the whole day, almost no matter what. Not the frantic kind of alert you got from Adderall or amphetamines, either. It was smooth and focused. But the company never gave full doses. They didn't want to get employees addicted and they thought E-Lucid® would help enough to make up for it. Like a trained idiot, Taylor forgot to take his wakers today.

It was obvious to Diana that Taylor had some sort of problem. She said, "Taylor, is everything OK?"

“You sure we can’t just have Franklin do it? He’s so much better. Every time I do client presentations I ruin them. The guy’s going to have to step in at some point anyway, he almost always does,” Taylor glowered.

“Oh hey, it’ll be alright, you’ll do fine,” Diana softened her voice, a placid tone, “Tell you what, if you want, we can go over the presentation together on Thursday morning before the internal practice session and I can give you some pointers, if you even need any.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t want to waste your time and I think I can work it out myself,” He did not think he could work it out himself.

Thursday afternoon, it was just before the client pitch meeting. Taylor paced about the conference room with note cards clutched in hand. He was mumbling below his breath, practicing again. Internal practice presentation was decent, only a few stammers here and there, but that was just in front of his coworkers. With his remaining nerves from the practice session and anticipation of failure in front of clients, adrenaline darted around his bloodstream. At least it was cold in the office so he wasn’t sweating on top of all this. Diana came into the conference room with a Caffeine Free Diet Coke in hand. She looked Taylor up and down, then gave him a calm, warm look.

“You did fine earlier with us, don’t worry about it. If you stumble, Franklin or I can step in to help. That’s part of why we always have a team for these pitches,” she shrugged and smiled. The soda in the can made little “plunk” sounds as she waved her hand around, “Besides, you know this material. You spent a month researching the target market and figuring out our plan of attack. If anyone should present, it’s you.”

Minutes later, Franklin Donovan sauntered in, a burst of laughter following behind him. It came from the clients. He was bantering with them, completely relaxed by all appearances. Taylor marveled at his ease with these strangers. It grated his nerves to sense Franklin’s obvious confidence. It oozed from the man, infecting most around him with admiration. He wondered what it took to become like that. How did someone become confident? He had heard “fake it ‘til you make it” a hundred times in self-help seminars and clickbait videos, he couldn’t believe it was as simple as that. And he couldn’t believe that Franklin faked anything.

“So Jackson, Mike, I want to introduce the dream team! This is Diana Bolton, the Production Designer. She’ll be the one actually programming algorithms so the dream ads work right,” Franklin gestured to Aisling, “And this is Aisli—er, Taylor Aisling, our Dream Designer. He’ll be designing the dream ads’ overall mood and concepts, making sure everything fits with the right feel for the target. It’s a real delicate balance, you know!” Franklin clapped him on the

back, flinging Aisling's head back as his chest heaved forward. "Team, this is Jackson Edmon and Mike Pearson from Edmon Security. Let's show 'em what we got!"

Everyone smiled. Taylor's lips squared to show his teeth in an awkward display.

They all shook hands, exchanged pleasantries. Everyone but Taylor sat down. He dimmed the lights and a projection lit up the wall. The ambient projection light brightened the clients' and his team's faces. Franklin and Diana were sitting behind Jackson and Mike at the conference table. Franklin gave Aisling an encouraging nod with a double thumbs-up. He took a deep breath, his pulse pounding hard enough for him to feel his eyeballs push out a little with each beat.

"You sell fear. Fear of the break-in, of losing all your stuff to some burglar. Fear of getting hurt in your own home, Dying in a fire, any sort of catastrophic event blasting their home off the face of the planet, et cetera, you tell people that you can protect them from what they fear," Taylor paused for a moment. The clients squirmed in their chairs and shifted their eyes as he continued, "For a generation, your company—and every other company in the home security industry—has sold fear to people, telling them that you were the only solution. But sales of new systems have been stagnant over the past five years. We think it's because you've already hit the limit on the kind of people driven by fear. New home purchases have been declining, and those who own their home either already have a security system, or they're not driven by fear to buy one," Taylor saw Diana jerking her head to the right, a panicked but stern glare on her face. Taylor paused for a moment, not understanding what she was doing.

"Th—these are the people we have to reach. And we have to reach them in a different way than threatening them to get Edmon Security systems installed, 'or else.' Our market research and extensive Delving research over the past month has brought us to the conclusion that we need to appeal to a different need than simply assuaging fear. Look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This is a representation of what motivates human behavior on a grand scale," as he said this, Taylor clicked the remote presentation clicker to advance to the next slide in the projection. A bar graph of Edmon Security's declining year over year sales figures popped up on screen. He had forgotten to click over to the next slide for the past three slides. Taylor felt an exodus of blood from his head, his guts dropped and swirled in his belly. This kind of stupidity was exactly what he was expecting from himself. Taylor advanced the slide again. Graphics of home purchase data. How long had he not clicked? Was it on the title screen the whole time? He was in a corporate nightmare of his own making. Sure, screw up the presentation on a major potential account. He clicked again. A pyramid with four horizontal trapezoidal cutouts and one little triangle at the top appeared, reading from bottom to top:

Physiological (food, water), Safety, Love/belonging, Esteem, Self-actualization. Safety was emphasized. Finally back on track.

“Uh, sorry folks, I guess I got ahead of myself, heh,” Taylor made a pathetic titter. He was sweating now, a thin layer seemed to hover across his back. He continued, his voice shaky, “Th—the um, the base is, uh...The base is physiological, sure, but we’re not interested in filling that need. Your target market already has that taken care of. We want the customer to be filled up to the brim of this pyramid. We want the customer to feel true happiness and comfort,” Taylor clicked to the next slide. Not making that mistake again. “And *you* can be the foundation of that contentment.

“This generation of home buyers is the most discontented, disaffected generation in a hundred years, for a number of reasons that we can’t change here. But through their dreams, we can make them feel that contentment is real, it’s possible, and it only happens when you are safe. I think I’ll leave it to Diana to talk about the technical aspects of making this happen.”

Diana got up and walked up to Taylor, facing Edmon and Pearson. Taylor handed her the clicker. She whispered to him, “It’s fine, I’m sure it’s fine.”

Turning to the clients, she projected, “Thanks, Taylor, I’ll take it from here.”

Taylor nodded and made his way to his seat. He tried to regulate his breathing to make himself seem calmer than the tempest of anxiety he was. A wash of relief came over him as he sat down next to Franklin. No more talking, thank God.

Diana clicked to the next slide and said, “As you know, with the technology of E-Lucid®, we can tap into the dreams of our customers and give them the unconscious experiences they choose. Since all the ads we place are done in an opt-in basis, these customers are already more open to unconscious ad suggestions.

“What we’ll do for your campaign is target the customers who set their preferred dream experiences to the key categories of Recreation, Chill, Healing, and Zen. These customers tend to feel the need to relax and have calm dreams. They’re looking for contentment and fulfillment. In the dream, the target will inevitably have a moment of calm, happiness, or feeling safe. Our algorithms and neurochemical measuring systems in the E-Lucid® will be able to tell when they feel these feelings. When those moments come, we’ll have the name drop. Either your logo, name, or a tagline, some other branded material from Edmon Security will be programmed into the unconscious, in the target’s dream.

“Last week, we finished a focus group examining the difference in the effectiveness of this type of campaign over one where we attempted to scare targets into using Edmon Security,” Diana clicked to another slide. From the tests we did, 80% of the targets remembered

your company's brand collateral from dreams where they were calm and content, and only 30% of targets even remembered seeing Edmon in dreams where they were met with a threat that Edmon 'solved' in the dream. On top of that, 75% of the people who remembered your company in calm dreams said they were more likely to use Edmon Security systems in their home after their experience in the dream. In fear-based dreams, only 33% of people who remembered the company's appearance in their dream said they would be more likely to use your systems. All that means overall, 60% of people who saw an ad for Edmon in a calm dream were more likely to become your customers. Only 10% of people who encountered ads in scarier dreams were likely to become customers. We think these numbers speak for themselves."

Diana clicked to the last slide. She stood, smiling at the Edmon and Pearson. Franklin got up and turned on the lights in the room.

With a toothy grin he asked, "Any questions, fellas?"

Edmon reclined in his chair, his eyebrows raised. He filled his lungs and blew between puckered lips. Edmon scratched his head. A frown expanded across Pearson's face as he leaned forward in his chair, depositing an elbow on the table.

Pearson said, "I don't see much difference between what we do right now and what you're suggesting. We offer people peace of mind and security, and you're saying you'll do the same thing. How is that any different?" He glowered.

Diana popped in, "The difference is the emotional state of the client when they see your ad. Working in the unconscious, working in dreams is completely different from working in print or online. You have to wait to place the ad in the right moment *on the chemical level*. It's much more targeted. You don't want to show an ad at just any time in any dream."

Pearson scratched his chin and looked beyond the floor, saying, "I'm not sure I like the idea of doing something so different from our current marketing strategy. I don't see how this is going to be beneficial enough to justify the change in direction, not to mention the cost."

Diana didn't miss a beat, "We currently have 20 million customers who use E-Lucid® on a nightly basis. Of those 20 million, 70% use the ad-sponsored subscription, and of that group, at least 45% choose dreams in the categories we discussed earlier. That ends up being almost 6.5 million people, and with 60% of them seeing your ad and being more likely to use your product, it ends up being well over 3.5 million potential new customers. The numbers are measurable and undeniable. E-Lucid® advertising works on the unconscious level, where we are most susceptible to impression—"

Pearson retorted, "Sure, the numbers seem impressive, but this campaign you're suggesting, it flies in the face of what our message to the customer has been for years.

'Happiness can be yours, but only if you use us?' Seems like a bit of a stretch there. Nobody will believe that."

They were on the fence and leaning to the "no" side. Taylor could tell it was mostly Pearson. No marketing guy ever wants to have the rug pulled out from under them like this. While Pearson and Diana went back and forth, Taylor studied Jackson Edmon. The man watched the debate, head shaking back and forth like he was at Wimbledon. He was more enrapt with their oratory tennis match than the decision at hand. The guy said hardly a word the entire meeting, just sat there, leaning back and observing. By his body language, he seemed almost flippant compared with Pearson. Taylor figured that Edmon relied too strongly on Pearson for decision making. For some reason, Franklin wasn't doing anything to help. He probably figured the numbers would do the talking for them, but Diana's numbers weren't getting through Pearson's defenses. Taylor had to cut out the middleman and go straight for the head.

Taylor closed his eyes, started in, "You ever had a dream that you knew intellectually, even in the dream, what was happening couldn't possibly be real? But it still *felt* real when you were in it. Your brain convinced itself to experience these events, that it's all true. You ever had a dream that made you question a decision you made in real life? That's what happens here. People respond to these ads because they come from their own head. To the dreamer, nobody is telling them to buy, they're telling themselves.

"Just like you, Mr. Edmon," Taylor turned and peered directly into Edmon's eyes. His pulse rising again, Taylor could feel his stomach tie in knots as he continued, "Nobody needs to tell you to go with Somnica on this campaign. You've already made the decision. Why even come to us in the first place if you weren't looking for something new and completely different? We're the only ones who do this, and this is what we do."

The conference room fell silent, pin drop style. Franklin glanced between Taylor and Edmon, trying to gauge his response. Pearson shot daggers at Taylor. Diana's shoulders dropped and her head tilted. Taylor held eye contact, focusing as his natural impulse tore at him to pull his eyes away. After what seemed to Taylor like a short eternity, the air conditioning turned on, humming from the vents in the ceiling.

This seemed to jog Edmon into action. He raised his eyebrows, nonplussed. A slow smile crept across his face as he shook his head, "Well, when you're right, you're right. We've gotta go with something new. I think it's a good plan, especially if those numbers hold up."



Pearson's jaw dropped. Taylor and Pearson both gaped at Edmon. It had worked? He just sealed the deal with a client? This hadn't happened before. His coworkers looked on, nodding and wide-eyed. Franklin flashed his teeth, grinning ear to ear.

Edmon stood, and everyone else followed suit, "Mr. Aisling, I look forward to our companies having a profitable partnership," He enveloped Taylor's cold skinny fingers in his. It felt like shaking hands with a tree trunk.

As the clients chattered with Franklin discussing deal specifics, implementation plans, and deadlines, Taylor worked to calm his nerves from the massive adrenaline waves he received for the past thirty minutes. He stared off into the distance and rubbed the middle button of his dress shirt, trying to empty his mind. He couldn't get over his own brashness in the meeting. It was uncalled for and was too much of a risk. He could have bungled the whole thing. He could have lost the client. But it worked, didn't it?