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Propel Your Career from Good to Great: Simplicity Sells

By Rick Smith

All ideas are not created equal. Some have the power to cut through all the filters and spam blockers that our brains have erected in an age of total-saturation communication, and stick. My research shows that ideas that grab your attention and get you to act share a very distinct characteristic — simplicity.

Willie Nelson once said that the toughest song to write is the simple song. It's that very simplicity that makes such songs the most compelling. That applies to ideas, too.

Simplicity has a tremendous impact on whether an idea takes flight or sits on the tarmac.

Simple ideas spread quickly because they are broadly interpreted and easily translated into action by others.

Because they are easy to grasp, simple ideas increase the odds that people actually will respond.

In *Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion*, author Robert Cialdini cites a study in which a group of randomly chosen people were shown two print ads for the same product. One ad scrimped on positive details about the product; the other was brimming with them.

Amazingly (but really not so), the barebones ad was judged by the ad hoc panel to be far more persuasive than the one with a longer list of compelling attributes.

Why? Because the less you tell people, the more they can write themselves into the story.

As I write this, Apple is doing the same thing with its TV ad campaign for iPod. The music is neat. The dancing people are clearly happy. And all the viewer sees or hears or knows about the product is the logo that flashes briefly on the screen at the end. The ad is nothing more than an invitation to join the iPod party. What you bring, what you wear, what you play — it's all up to you.

Complex ideas, whether theories or promotions, engage the intellect and rouse contemplation, but they are rarely goads to immediate action. Simple ideas, by contrast, anchor themselves in our consciousness and memory.

For example, lists of simple words are also easier to remember than lists of longer ones. In fact, the break-even point is about the same two seconds that we need to make buy–no buy, good–no good decisions. If a word takes longer to articulate than that, the memory bank tends to spit it out.

Simplicity also allows action to be very easily and personally translated, which almost exponentially increases the chances of participation. Why? Because you're not asking people to fill a particular niche in a complicated response strategy. You are asking only that they take part.

The absence of specific direction allows them to shape their response in accord with their own means, talents, and interests. In effect, participants can take possession of their own contribution to the cause.

With ideas, less really is more. It's what isn't there that encourages participation and ultimately makes the sale.