

Don't Repeat Cliché's; Re-arrange Cliché's! . . . by Sam Horn

Albert Einstein was once asked how he worked. He thought about it for a moment and then said with a smile, "I grope."

There ARE new things under the sun! Original material is waiting to be discovered and developed if you 1) promise not to be content with cliché's, and 2) invest the time, effort, and brainpower to coin never-before-heard phrases that delight readers and audiences.

If we use such platitudes as "Together Everyone Achieves More," "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice," and "Believe it and you'll see it," people will roll their eyes and tune out. Trotting out such tired expressions sends the message we don't have anything new or different to say.

Please note I'm not saying the above ideas aren't true or important, it's just they've been repeated so many times they've become the equivalent of white noise. People no longer pay attention to them because they elicit a "duh" response.

One way to create fresh content is to "riff" off cliches, just as a jazz musician spontaneously riffs off chords to improvise new melodies.

How can you do this? Identify the topic of your book, the theme of your presentation, or 3 core words you use to describe your business or product.

Then, enter "cliché," "quotes", or "proverbs" into your favorite online search engine. In seconds, your computer will bring up a variety of cliché dictionaries, quote sites, and proverb sources. Click on one that looks most promising; then enter one of your search words, (i.e., stress, team, leader, invest, sell, listen). In seconds, the site will list a variety of common adages containing "your" word.

Do not use the cliches verbatim. Instead, let the word play begin. Reverse key phrases. Substitute words. You've heard of Spell Check? I suggest you try Spell Chuck. Discard the normal way of spelling a key word to originate an axiom that is brand new -- and that belongs to you.

This type of "riffing" off a well-known saying and then word-smithing the result can help you produce concise, compelling sound-bytes that make your message, slogan, or title stand out.

An excellent example is "I think, therefore IBM." The popular online auction store eBay could launch an ad campaign with the slogan, "Go ahead, make my eBay." "Do you march to the beat of a different Hummer?" would make a perfect pitch for the offbeat, over-sized military vehicle that's become a boomer favorite.

If you speak to a group of female executives who are also mothers, start reading through the M entries in the cliché dictionary. You get to "mover and shaker" and think, "Hmmm. How about Mothers and Shakers?" That's a clever name for women who are balancing work and home roles. That clever title could be just what a decision-maker needs to book you instead of one of many other experts on that topic.

Are you writing an article for your web-site? Do you want to spice it up so it's not same-old, same-old? Identify five key words you use when discussing that subject. Ask associates to think of common phrases containing those words. Write down their suggestions and then start verbally "groping." That's how you could think up "Blood, Sweat, and Gears" for an article on bike racing. See how this works? That title puts a smile on your face, engages your interest, and helps the article stand out. Voila!

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Sam Horn, author of POP! The Art and Science of Creating the Next New Thing (Perigee, Penguin Putnam, 2006) helps individuals and organizations create original messages that help them be one-of-a-kind instead of one-of-many. For permission to reprint this article in your newsletter, to book Sam to speak for your group, or for info on Sam's learning products, visit www.SamHorn.com or call 805 528-4351.