

New and Improved

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We all have a few common greetings between friends ... “What’s going on?” “What do you say?” “What’s up?” “What’s new?” Sometimes “what’s new” triggers an amazing response. Of course, you never really think that you’re going to discover something amazing or, even interesting but, it’s a good opener to start a conversation.

And, it’s not unusual for your friend to respond by saying, “Not much”. At which point the conversation could end but it seldom does. Because .. something is always new in someone’s life. A milestone, a new purchase, a change in a relationship, the results of a doctor’s visit, even a bump on your head. But, if you want to really pursue a conversation with this person you need to do some digging. Maybe you need to ask, “What’s improved?” But, you’d never say that because it sounds like what previous existed wasn’t so good. “Hey, you look like you lost weight.” My response, “Why, was I fat?”

In advertising we expect to hear, “what’s improved?” If, for no other reason than the advertiser has competitors and he thinks he must be one step ahead of his competitors all of the time. While this may be true, he may also risk losing his customers who were already quite pleased with “What’s old?” Take me, for example. I bought a computer in the late 1980s. While I wasn’t quite sure why I need one in the first place, I figured I should get on the “what’s new” bandwagon while it was moving forward. And, being an old dog it took me a while to graduate from my trusty IBM Selectric. But,, after a while I got comfortable with this computer and we became fast friends ... until ... I was told I needed to upgrade my programs. “What are you talking about?” “I know how it works and it does the job just fine.” So, I ignored all of the upgrade notices for quite some time .. maybe five years or so. And, then the day of reckoning arrived. “Hey, Mr. I don’t need to upgrade ... we’ll, if you don’t upgrade we won’t back up any of your existing programs.” “You won’t back up what you sold me?” “How exactly does that work?”

So, I put off the upgrade for even longer. And, then I thought, “Maybe I should upgrade?” So, I went through the steps and discovered I had waited too long and they didn’t offer an upgrade that requires they go back into their dark ages files. So, they twisted my arm to do what they wanted. I bought a “new and improved” computer. And, you know what? It’s a pain in the ass to learn and doesn’t make my life any easier.

And, so goes my life experiences. I fell in love with a gorgonzola salad dressing. Next thing you know it’s .. “new and improved”. So, I tried it. Well, it was new but hardly improved. Remember New Coke? Coke drinkers gave it a resounding “NO”. It’s certainly new but hardly improved. And, that Heinz upside down plastic bottle? Well, the new version of this old standby certainly pours better than sticking a knife into the bottle and shaking it until it spills all over your arm. But, the design? Not hardly an aesthetic improvement. It actually looks like a ketchup bottle sitting on a toilet.

Now here’s one that just gets me livid... eyeglass frames. I spend an inordinate amount of time finding a frame that suits my personality. I go from one store to another and yet another. And, finally find the perfect frame. I order it and begin to wear it immediately. And, then one day I drop my glasses and the frame cracks. So, I go back to the eyeglass store. “Do you still have this frame in stock?” “No. That was discontinued.” “Seriously?” “I just bought it less than a year ago.” “I guess there weren’t many people interested in a green frame.” “Okay, I get that but, didn’t the manufacturer make a few extra?” “Apparently not. Can I interest you in a red

frame?" Grrrrrr ... Not being one to give up so easily my dear wife let her fingers do the walking on Google and ... you know what? She found exactly one frame available from an individual. And, even if it wasn't the same exact shade of green it was good enough. And, it was only 58 bucks! Not the ridiculous amount the retailer charges for a new frame. I'll stick with old. You can keep your "new and improved".

Does any remember the BetaMax video player? A far superior player than the VHS competitor. Yet it failed miserably. It was new and improved. But, consumers wanted to record their ninety minute movies on one tape. BetaMax tapes would only hold a sixty minute program. So, in this case, new and improved was the clear winner but, it just didn't work out for SONY.

And, if you're really old enough .. Do you remember Ford's Edsel? The Titanic of automobiles. A "new and improved" marketing disaster. After ten years and a \$250 Million Dollar roll out the auto reviews said it looked like a car sucking a lemon. "New and improved?" Maybe if it was named "Josephine" it would have fared better. Poor Henry Ford's son. What a way to be remembered.

On a personal note, after 31 years of producing and directing tv spots and corporate marketing films, I became "new and improved". Today, I'm a painter. Instead of pointing my finger at an actor or a cameraman I aim it at an easel. It's my new way of seeing the world. And, while it's new to me, I'm not sure if I'm improved. But, I'm getting there.