

The price of dumbing it down!



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For almost two decades, *Dumb it Down* has been an increasing business mantra. Supposedly hyper-efficient business people breathlessly explaining how time is money, insist on the removal of “five dollar words” and demand three salient points, max!

Don’t get me wrong, I was raised in the *Clear, Correct and Concise* school of communication and fully believe things should be said simply whenever possible. There is a caveat though—people, business and life in general are complicated! If ideas and communications are watered down for easy digestion by the lowest societal denominator then surely the result will be a banal, mediocre offering. Will we produce a mindless, unthinking and unchallenged population? Maybe that would be desirable for some.

Watching *American Idol* grind to a close brought Ayn Rand’s famous phrase to mind: “The third rate glorified by the fourth rate!”

Shows like this have their place, and are even fun at some level. But when such a mediocre artistic offering becomes the ultimate in mass entertainment—eliciting participation, viewing and voting that eclipses presidential elections—then surely we have a society or civilization in trouble. The tawdry production, complete with tacky gimmicks and judges mired in pathology, is dressed up with the glitter and pomp that made *American*

productions famous. Faded stars dragged out to sanction the proceedings serve to remind me of an era of excellence and real stardom that has temporarily waned.

Here in Canada, we have taken note of what works—*Canadian Idol* again has ground its way through the summer—a complete download of the American deal. There is something sad about the way Ben Mulroney and the judges valiantly put their desperate spin on the original recipe with faked enthusiasm.

Originality and individuality give way to template roll-outs that bring in dollars.

The debacle of CBC Television’s *The One* is a result of what can happen when an organization, intent on driving profit at the expense of creativity, blindly *dumbs* excellent programming down to what works in the U.S. I am sure those responsible are scratching their heads, asking: “Gee Whiz! ...the template failed?”

The Da Vinci Code saga is another case in point. The original *Holy Blood & Grail* was dismissed in 1982 as a conspiracy theory because it was presented as fact. Dangerous research (the authors often received death threats) went unrewarded.

Brown’s piracy of the plot and his *dumbed down* best seller has broken all records. Why? The money spinners and marketers liked the *dumbed down* complicated theory and manipulated what I believe to be third-rate work into the best selling novel of all time. The movie cashes in on this with an even simpler version ... more hype and “must see” manipulation!

Not for a moment am I fighting against the inevitability of all this. I am asking, though, that people be aware that stagnation and mediocrity are guaranteed in the short term. What we are seeing today is the clear result of catering to the masses for a quick buck. Dirk Bogarde, in his novel *The Gentle Occupation*, puts it rather well: “The great mass leaves no mark on the face of time. It is anonymous in the face of its very ordinariness.”

The real danger is that even decision-makers are often guilty of not thinking. The clichéd “time is money” has been reinforced so often that executives rely almost exclusively on the *dumbed-down* three point summaries thrust at them to digest on the run.

I do remember a time when amateur/national sport, entertainment and the arts in general were more about passion and human achievement. Today it seems that sports people, actors, artists and authors (or perhaps their handlers) have their eye on the pay cheque and revenue streams rather than the desire to achieve, express and create.

Canada is a nation with a proud history, although with a penchant for following rather than leading. The Trudeau era, for those who approved of the man or not, did give us a glimmer of what we can mean to the rest of the world.

Leadership perceives a requirement and steps forward to provide a solution. Are we up to the challenge that threatens our individuality and excellence?