

Firehosing—Stoke Fires Don't Soak 'em

By Robert Siegel

Did you ever notice that when you, or someone else comes up with an innovative new idea, there is always someone who can't wait to give you five good reasons why it "won't work," "can't be done," "not in the budget?" Happens to everybody.

Firehosing is what David Brandt and I, in our book, *Sacred Cows Make the Best Burgers*, call that response. A firehose dampens people's enthusiasm, douses their spark and kills creativity. In other words it just plain puts out the fire, killing excitement and motivation. Firehosing is not a legitimate dissent. It's an automatic response that effectively ends conversation. Genuine differences of opinion extend the dialogue, hosing stops it and you dead in your tracks. Below are some of the more common firehoses.

COMMON FIREHOSES

Yeah, But – This response is designed to give the appearance of fair consideration. But it's code for "I think the idea stinks." Anything that precedes the but is bull.

The toos – It's too hard, it's too complicated, it takes too long, it's too expensive, it's too quick, slow, showy, incomplete. Anytime you hear the word too, it's too late.

They'll never buy it – Introducing "they" is a way of adding muscle to your obstruction by invoking the name of an authority or group that are conveniently out of the room. Imagine how many people told Starbucks' founder Howard Schultz that they'll never pay \$3.00 for a cup of Joe.

It's unrealistic – Realism is just a name for yesterday's thinking. Remember, yesterday's reality is just today's fond memory.

It's just a fad – Yes and at one time so was most every new idea that is now in common practice.

It can't be done – Don't you just love the "seen it all" veterans who specialize in throwing the wet blanket of experience on anything new. Experience is based on the past, on yesterday, which is most likely outdated today and will be gone tomorrow.

What if it doesn't work – The way to succeed is to be willing to risk failure. If you're afraid to fail you'll never win. Never making any mistakes means you haven't tried anything new.

"If it ain't broke don't fix it" – Brought to you by the crew who also advise "don't mess with success." Look at some of the old giants who turned into dinosaurs like Blockbusters, Pan Am, Sears Catalogue. If you don't mess with success you soon won't have any

Don't Rock the Boat – A variation on "If it ain't broke don't fix it" emphasizing the need for everyone to act harmoniously and with moderation. The "Don't Rockers," don't realize the dangerous waters they're sailing in. Huge waves of change are already rocking the boat and will sink if you're not prepared to change course.

Don't stick your neck out – Play it safe, hide under a rock. It's an ostrich strategy that won't work in a competitive environment. If you don't stick your neck out you'll lose your head. To succeed you have to be bold. Playing it safe is dangerous.

We tried that last year – A favorite argument of the history major or the old soldier who remembers every battle. He can tell you the specifics of each campaign from the dates of a skirmish to the casualty rate. But he's got a lopsided memory because all you hear about are the losses. You might wonder why he didn't get drummed out of the corps with that attitude.

You're the boss! – Another cipher meaning "It's a dumb idea but since you've got the authority, what choice do I have." This firehose is usually followed by a halfhearted effort resulting in a half-baked result and the kicker, "I told you so."

It's not in the budget – Of course not. This year's budget was made up last year when circumstances were totally different. Besides it's just a financial rationalization for wet blanketing your ideas.

"That's not the way we do things around here" – If you keep doing things the way you always have, you're using yesterday's strategies in today's game which insures you won't be around tomorrow.

"Let's wait and see" – A delay tactic based on the hope that down the road you'll forget the whole idea. "This too shall pass" is the underlying belief.

SQUELCHING THE HOSERS

Several years ago I came up with a unique, if unconventional, way of squelching firehosers. It was the last session of a three day program for leaders of a hospital chain that, like most health care organizations, was experiencing a great deal of change. The focus of this session was on developing specific actionable ideas. Knowing that this type of session breeds firehosing, I put a little orange water pistol on the table, saying that anyone that firehoses gets a squirt.

The meeting started and sure enough whenever any idea came up, one "old vet" would consistently firehose it, "the docs and nurses will go on strike if we try that," "the insurance companies won't reimburse us....," "The budget's already in."

The room after, about twenty minutes of hosing, was as if someone had put a pin in a balloon. Our “old vet” had not only effectively hosed just about every idea but zapped everyone’s energy as well. At that point the C.O.O., who was responsible for this change and had spend months planning this meeting got up and began giving the hoser a piece of his mind.

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I’ve never seen anyone that angry in a meeting. His face was red, jaw jutting out and I think people in the next county could have heard him yelling at the hoser.

Then in the middle of his tirade he spotted the water pistol. Picking it up he looked at the hoser and said, “I never want you in any of these meetings again!” And he actually squirted him! Everyone was shocked, but after a minute or two the mood changed and everybody started laughing, even the hoser. When people are having fun they get more involved and more creative, so ideas abounded but so did firehosing. And every time someone hosed and idea out came the pistol.

After a while with a lot of people wet and a lot of good ideas on the board, the “old vet” stood up. Silence ensued. He then proceeded to turn the gun around and squirted himself three times right in the face saying, “If you had heard what I was thinking, you would have squirted me too, so I beat you to it.”

The key to remember is to stoke fires, don’t soak them.