

Filter Down

Beware the cost of inadequate business advice

WHEN I WAS IN HIGH SCHOOL, I wanted to take typing and shorthand. But Sister Lorraine, who oversaw the secretarial skills classes, refused to let me take them because I was college-bound. Sister Lorraine's filter was that those classes were only for students who were not going to college. I was frustrated because I planned to do secretarial jobs to help pay for college. Finally, I pled my case with the school principal, explaining my perspective, and he got me in. The usual guidance for high school students, in that school and at that time, didn't apply to me relative to my goals.

This happens in business as well. There are so many moving parts in most businesses, and it is a rare individual who

has a firm grasp on all areas of business practice. So you must always remember to take a person's experiences and preconceptions into account when you receive their advice, because their filters may not be beneficial to your needs. Here are a few examples:

EXAMPLE A

The Issue: You need an employee handbook. You consult your attorney, who drafts a handbook for you. The handbook you get back is very large, and it has a punitive character to it. But the attorney's fees have already been earned, you must pay for what you've received, and you'll have to pay more if you want it changed.

The Problem: The attorney looks at all employee issues as a potential lawsuit, and everything he writes is designed to avoid one. In this case, the attorney is also a person who believes that people will take advantage of you if they can. That is not your worldview, however, so this perspective in the handbook didn't feel right to you.

The Solution: Before asking the attorney to draft the handbook, you should thoughtfully explain the type of culture you are trying to cultivate, your perspective regarding employee relations, and how you want to resolve problems as they occur. This will either soften the attorney's filter, cause the attorney to say, "I'm not the best person for this job," or at the very least, give you financial recourse if the result does not meet your needs.

EXAMPLE B

The Issue: You have a website written on a platform called Joomla. Joomla is excellent software, the current website is working, and all it needs is a facelift. You go to a website developer who gives you a terrific quote, but it's to create an entirely new website in WordPress. This will force you to learn a new platform when you are already comfortable with Joomla. It will also negatively affect your site's SEO ratings.

The Problem: The website developer only works in WordPress. WordPress is his default answer, because it's what he



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knows. This filter keeps him from properly considering what is best for you.

The Solution: Before committing to that direction, talk with other resources who can help you challenge the filter and decide if what is being offered is truly the best option. Consider it just like getting a second opinion before agreeing to a surgery.

EXAMPLE C

The Issue: You're a small goldsmith and jewelry designer who has worked primarily at the bench for others but now you're interested in producing your own work for sale. You seek advice from a consultant, who guides you to create three collections of 25-30 designs each, sign up for the main jewelry trade shows, and buy advertising in the jewelry trade magazines.

The Problem: You are far more interested in creating limited editions of your work, and that's where your talents lie as well. This is also an extremely expensive approach relative to your limited funds. But the consultant you are working with has experience only in the traditional jewelry industry market and the traditional paths to that market. Her filter has caused her to guide you away from your core competencies.

The Solution: When working with a consultant, it's important to ask about her overall experience. If the examples she gives you point to a narrow range of expertise, then you should ask for examples outside that range. For instance, whenever someone advises you about the "right" way to do something, a good question to ask is, "What other approaches could we take?"

We all have filters, and those filters

influence everything from what we order at a restaurant to the advice we give our children to the people we trust in our business. In the same way, every person you ask for advice has his or her own filters. So you must learn how to be proactive.

But how do you ask questions about an area that you don't have any expertise in? It's easier than you might think. Asking questions can provide insight into the flexibility of the other person's thinking and experiences. Here are a few to consider:

"Do you have any alternate ideas?"

"I see you're proposing that we use _____ (fill in the blank—a software program, tool, or approach). What are some alternatives to

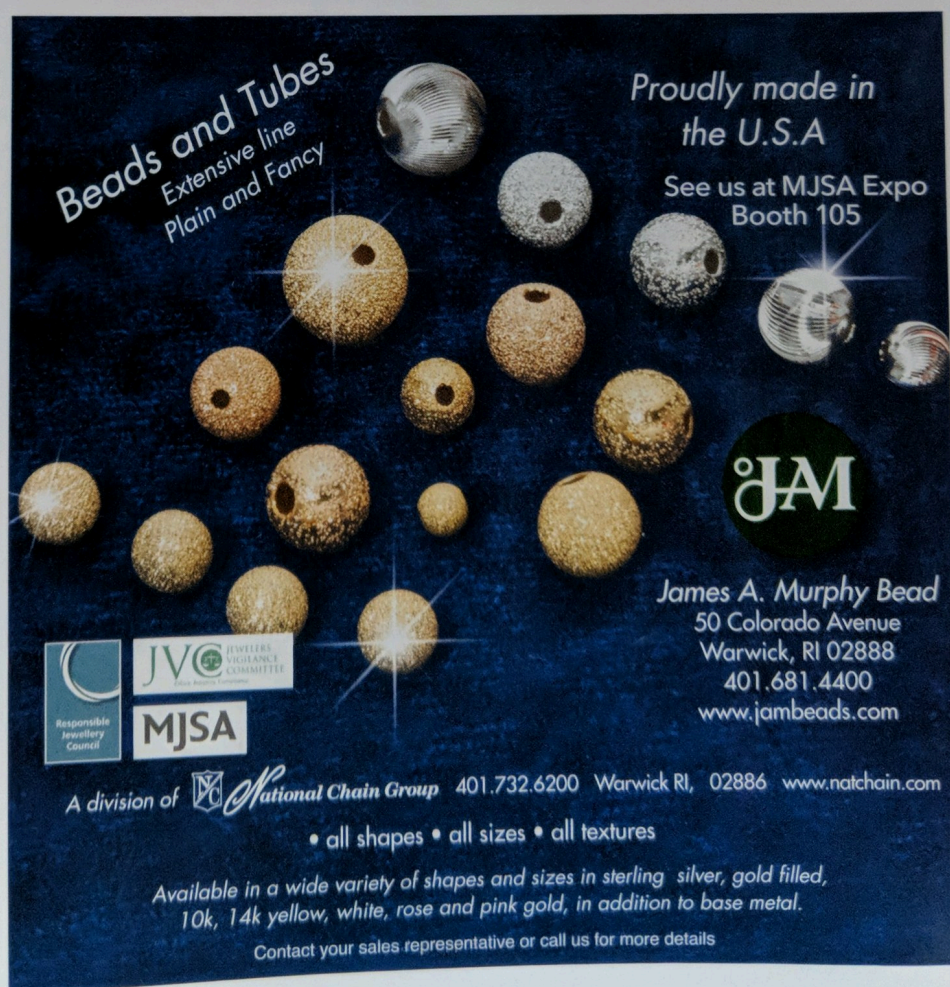
this approach?"

"What other industries do you have experience with?"

"If I don't have the capital for this approach, is there something else I can do with the capital I have?"

"If you were going to do something completely out of the box, something different than this proposal, what would it be?"

Protecting yourself from filter-induced bad advice takes practice, but awareness is an important first step. Be aware of the influence filters have on the advice you receive, and engage the advice-giver in exploring alternatives. Your business will thank you. ♦






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