

There Are No Dumb Business Questions, Just Dumb Business People

Tim Knox



Q: I'm curious. What is the dumbest business question you've ever been asked?

-- Norris W.

A: Shame on you, Norris. There is no such thing as a dumb business question. OK, that's not exactly true. There are dumb business questions and I do get quite a few of them. Not through this column, of course. People intelligent enough to actually purchase and read a newspaper would never submit dumb questions now, would they. OK, that's a lie, too. I've gotten a few head-scratchers in response to this column. You know who you are, but don't worry, your secret is safe with me.

I have a confession to make. Writing an advice column, whether it be advice for love or money or business, is often hard to do with a straight face. Occasionally a question comes over the digital transom that just makes me go, "Huh?" It's kind of like trying to stifle a giggle when Grandma breaks wind at Sunday dinner. Some things are just better left ignored. Of course it's hard to blame a dumb business question on the dog.

Though this column is a fairly new feature for the *Times*, I've been writing online columns for years. Most of the requests for advice I receive are sincere and intelligent, and as a sincere and (somewhat) intelligent columnist, I feel obligated to dispense the best advice I can for the betterment of the person who asked the question. However, once in a while a real stinker hits the old email box and it takes everything I've got to resist shooting back an answer that is worthy of the question asked.

In other words, when I get a dumb question, my gut reaction is to respond with an answer of equal intelligence, or the lack thereof. Something subtle, like, "Forget business, my friend. The best thing you can do for mankind is to go find a pair of sharp scissors and run... really fast..."

Stupid is as stupid does, Forrest. Greater words of wisdom have rarely been offered before or since.

Then I remember that as an advice columnist I have a duty to my reader, my editor, my publisher, and above all, to my family, who enjoys eating on a regular basis. There aren't too many openings for smart aleck writers anymore (darn that Dave Berry), so I bite my tongue and respond to the question as intelligently as I can. That usually involves requesting more information from the reader so I can offer an informed answer. It's not as satisfying as firing off a sarcastic retort, but it is much better on the old bank account.

Since you asked the question, Norris, I feel obligated to give you an answer. What is the dumbest business question I've ever been asked? I'll let you decide.

The following are real questions from real people that are running around loose among us. If you recognize your question please don't be offended. This is all in good fun and remember, ridicule is the sincerest form of flattery. Or something like that.

Here's a question I get at least once a week: "I have never been in business before, but I think I'd be really good at it. Can you tell me what would be the best business for me to start?"

Hmm, how about one that involves the Psychic Hotline, since that's who I will have to consult to answer your question. I don't know anything about you, your background, your abilities, your talents, your experience, or anything else. How can I possibly tell you what would be the best business for you? Who do I look like, Miss Cleo?

Here's one of my favorites: "I need to make a lot of money really fast. What business should I start?"

You need to make a lot of money fast, huh. No problem. I have one word for you, my friend: counterfeiting... Somebody hand me an umbrella. It's raining stupid in here.

Here's an oldie but a goodie: "I have a killer business idea, but I don't have any money. Do you ever invest in businesses or just give advice?" Unfortunately, I only invest in non-lethal business ideas, so I'll have to pass on your killer idea. Thanks for thinking of me, though. This window is now closed...

And my all-time favorite: "I have a great product that nobody wants to buy. How can I make customers buy my product."

How can you *make* a customer buy your product? Piece of cake, buddy boy. Try using the same method I use to *make* my kids mind. Threaten to put your customer in time out if he doesn't buy something from you right this second! Don't make me get up and sell you something, young man...

I could go on, but I think the point is made. Keep those cards and letters coming, boys and girls. It's readers like you that make this job so darn interesting.

Here's to your success!

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