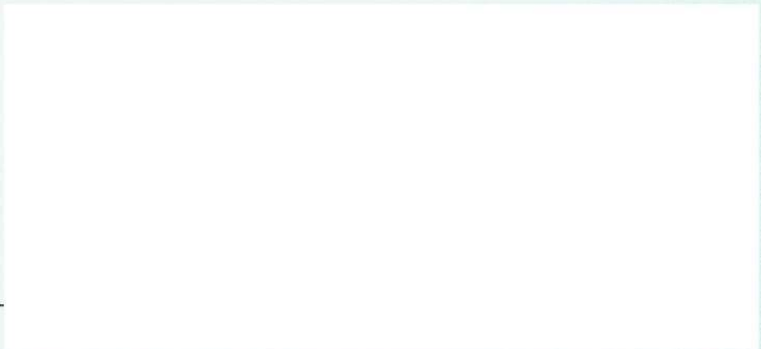


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Confidence vs. arrogance

Are you crossing the line?

Back in 1890, Rhode Island gave birth to something that almost died of a tragic ailment in 2005.

Narragansett Beer owned a 65 percent share of the New England beer market from 1919 to 1967 and was scooped up at its peak by Falstaff Brewing Corp. in 1965. By the early 1980s, the brand was in a downward spiral. Falstaff closed breweries and what was once a warm and friendly regional mainstay (“Hey neighbor—have a ‘Gansett!’”) became a ghost of its former self.

Enter Mark Hellendrung, former CEO of Nantucket Nectars, and a group of Rhode Island investors who in 2005 saw potential in the dying 6,000 case-per-year brew. Six years later, Narragansett serves up more than 600,000 cases annually.

Last year, Narragansett’s 120th anniversary weighed heavily on the guy who grew the iconic brand’s distribution hundredfold in a mere six years.

“Don’t screw this up,” Hellendrung recalls thinking. “It’s too good and too right to put it in the hands of someone who might screw it up.”

But then he realized that screwing up the revitalized brand was the least of his worries for one simple reason: “It’s not my brand or even our brand—it’s a public trust,” he says. “Our customers let us know what they want and we listen to them every day. If we get arrogant, we’re going to hear about it—and fast.”

Hellendrung had the guts to take on a brand left for dead. But whether you’re a startup or a brand in need of a makeover, how do you avoid the land mine of arrogance that’s so common?

So far this year, I’ve seen more than 75 startups pitch their goods to prospective investors. In every instance, I was able to say, “Yes. They have something.” And they did. So what was it that resonated?



NARRAGANSETT'S
MARK HELLENDRUNG
DIDN'T SCREW IT UP.

Humility. And while it takes confidence to push an idea into the marketplace, it’s humility that prevents it from turning into arrogance, the idiot cousin of the confident businessperson.

“The difference between arrogance and confidence is self-awareness,” says Jason Mendelson, founder and managing director of the Foundry Group. “The confident leader is self-aware of their customer’s needs, their company’s culture and the rapid changes that occur in their industry.”

How do we avoid becoming the idiot cousin? We stay humble. Here are some thoughts to ponder as you bring your business down the road toward success:

- **Ditch the swagger:** Regardless of what you read in *Nice Girls Don’t Get the Corner Office* or heard in the golf course locker room, people want to communicate with people who are respectful and humble. Swagger, while mildly impressive to some, is a turnoff for most.
- **Communicate:** Information flows both ways, but you can’t listen when your mouth is moving. The best leaders are the best listeners and know when to turn down the noise and make a move.
- **Know the difference:** Humility is knowing we’re going to get kicked (and when we least expect it) and striving to get kicked differently each time. Arrogance is thinking that no one would ever dare take aim.

Mind the line between confidence and arrogance and keep communicating. Given that only two-thirds of small businesses survive the first two years and fewer than half make it to the four-year point, we’d do well to embrace humility. After all, we never know who’s listening and more important, who will have a great idea that helps us make the leap toward memorable, instead of becoming another forgettable casualty on the road of business. —ERIKA NAPOLETANO

ERIKA NAPOLETANO IS HEAD REDHEAD AT REDHEAD WRITING, A DENVER-BASED ONLINE STRATEGIES CONSULTANCY DEDICATED TO KEEPING COMPANIES FROM LOOKING LIKE IDIOTS ONLINE. VISIT HER (IF YOU DARE) AT REDHEADWRITING.COM.