

“Time to Think” (*Business Builder* September 7, 2011)
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Business consultants often advise us to be “laser-focused” on our business goals and issues. When in crisis mode, I agree wholeheartedly that being focused on the problem at hand is critical. But constantly wearing blinders limits your vision. Every so often, it’s time to step back, look at the big picture and think.

Bombarded as we are with constant communication and information, it seems harder and harder to find the time to do that.

“The Elusive Big Idea”

I recently read a most disturbing New York Times op-ed piece by Neal Gabler titled, “The Elusive Big Idea,” which warns that constant information overload short-circuits the process of thinking -- of generating truly original, big-impact ideas. “It may seem counter-intuitive that at a time when we know more than we have ever known, we think about it less,” says author and critic Gabler, currently Senior Fellow at the USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. “...We are inundated with so much information that we wouldn’t have time to process it even if we wanted to, and most of us don’t want to.” *

To be sure, Gabler is talking about societal implications on a profound scale. Yet I couldn’t help reflecting on my own work, since **thinking about information is my business**. It’s my job to not just gather data, but to analyze it and then make it understandable and actionable for my clients.

Drowning in data

When it comes to running my own business, however, I struggle with information overload like everyone else.

I too feel the pressure of keeping up with e-mail, discussion lists, my favorite blogs, Linked-In and other social media, e-newsletters, trade magazines, books -- not to mention deciding whether to accept invitations to webinars, seminars, and networking events. ***More and more information coming my way!***

Before deciding whether to read/ listen/ attend, my automatic question usually is, “*What’s in it for me? Will I learn anything new that I can put to use right away?*” Many times, though, there is no immediate use I can think of. But still the nagging thought comes, “*This might be useful later.*”

A better question might be, “*Will this information give me a better understanding of the big picture?*”

Time to think about the big picture

What is the “big picture”? My simple definition is anything beyond your immediate day-to-day business. It’s the forest which we often don’t see because of those trees we’re laser-focused on!

Here are five “big picture” questions to ask yourself as you wade through information from a multitude of sources:

1. What new ideas are being generated within my profession? My industry? *Should I spend time learning more about them?*
2. Am I seeing any relevant trends that look like they are picking up momentum? *Should I pay more attention to them?*
3. What issues are on the minds of many of my colleagues? *Should I be concerned about them too? How are others dealing with them?*
4. Is this a new opportunity I haven't thought of before? *Should I do some research on this?*
5. Is this news likely to impact me or my business in some significant way? *How should I act on it?*

When you start to suffer from information overload, remind yourself to remove the blinders and think. You may not develop any “Elusive Big Ideas,” but you can gain a better perspective on what's going on around you. The result is better business planning.

*(www.nytimes.com/2011/08/14/opinion/sunday/the-elusive-big-idea.html)

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