

## Some millionaires wear plaid

MENTING  
OUR OWN  
BUSINESS



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ESCANABA — An accountant friend of mine — I'll call him Tim — told me the story of his first encounter with a wealthy local businessman. Tim was invited to a barbeque held at the businessman's beautifully-appointed camp on several acres of pristine forest land with a river running through it. The event was casual, and Tim struck up a conversation with an ordinary man in a plaid flannel shirt whom he took to be one of the company employees. Later in the evening Tim was shocked to discover the unassuming guy in the plaid shirt was the millionaire who owned the show.

Delta County is home to more than a few folks like this — ordinary people who don't wear expensive clothes, drive fancy cars, or put on airs, but who over time have grown successful businesses and squirreled away millions. It can be tempting to

think we know what a millionaire looks like, that the rich and powerful will stand out from the crowd and fit our stereotypes, but they often don't. First impressions can be wrong. And as businesspeople, our mistaken assumptions about who has money to spend or power to decide can cost us a lot in terms of lost sales, and lost profits.

In his book *Blink*, Malcolm Gladwell discusses the hidden forces that influence decisions we make. He tells the story of Bob Golomb, the sales director of a Nissan dealership in central New Jersey. Since he started in the car business a decade ago, Golomb has sold an average of 20 cars a month — more than double what the average car salesman sells. Bob attributes his success to a golden rule that guides his approach to selling: Take

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care of the customer. If Bob sells you a car, he'll call you the next day and make sure everything is okay. If you look but don't buy, he'll call and thank you for stopping by. Bob has a huge stack of letters from satisfied customers.

But Gladwell points out another, more important reason for Golomb's success. He tries never to judge anyone on the basis of their appearance. Bob assumes every person who walks through the dealership door has the exact same chance of buying a car. "You cannot prejudge people," says Golomb. "Prejudging is the kiss of death. You have to give everyone your best shot. A green salesperson looks at a customer and says, 'This person looks like he can't afford a car,' which is the worst thing you can do, because sometimes the most unlikely person is flush."

In business, if we prejudge someone based on our first impressions about their appearance, we make ourselves blind to opportunity.

When we turn up our nose at the guy in the greasy coveralls with dirt under his nails, we miss the sale. When we ignore the petite blonde because, of course, she can't know anything about buying machines, or tools, or televisions, we miss the sale. When we blow off the teenager with the long hair and sneakers because he's probably broke, we miss the sale.

After hearing Tim's story, I've been careful not to prejudge the people I meet in my role as EDA director. I do my best to treat everyone with respect and help every businessperson or entrepreneur who knocks on my door, because you just never know who might have the next million dollar idea for Delta County, even if they're dressed in jeans and plaid flannel instead of a three-piece suit.

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