Beware of False Equivalence

Idea In Short

Vet your sources the way you vet produce. Two similarly named things are rarely equal, so verify pedigree before quoting anything. When handed a binary choice, test whether both, neither or a third option exists. Consultants who feed clients false choices disrespect them and erode trust.

Check the Quality of the Fruit

Nobody buys bananas blindly. A green banana and a yellow banana mean completely different things depending on taste, timing and intended use. Shoppers are discerning, even picky, about fruit. The uncomfortable question follows: how picky are we with the information we consume and repeat? The last twenty years produced a Cambrian explosion of news. A generation ago, a dozen official sources dominated print, radio and television, editorially aimed at the middle 80 percent of people because advertising economics demanded broad appeal and the update cycle ran slowly. Collecting, analyzing, typesetting, printing and distributing news was expensive, so everything was slower, more general, more local and arguably less inflammatory. That world is gone, and the filtering burden moved from editors to readers.

Two Newspapers Called Washington

Consultants live on credibility, which demands judgment to tease fact from fiction, gauge what is representative and hold outliers at arm's length. Discernment, skepticism, hypotheses, inquiry and grit form the toolkit. A small story shows the stakes. Someone once proudly cited a claim from the Washington Times, and a quick check seemed warranted: was that the Washington Post? Similar names, both based in Washington, and there the similarities end. The Washington Post was founded in 1877, the year of the phonograph, with a 2013 circulation above 474,000, home of Woodward and Bernstein's Watergate reporting and dozens of Pulitzer prizes.1 The Washington Times was founded in 1982, the year of the compact disc, by the Unification Church, with a 2013 circulation near 59,000 and no Pulitzer prizes. People quote the two interchangeably, and that is exactly the problem.

Naming the Trap

False equivalence is the formal name: two things presented as equal when they are not.2 The pattern appears constantly. Beware of people telling you how to think and how to decide. Beware of anyone oversimplifying complex ideas. Beware especially of pressure to decide quickly when the menu itself may be a false choice. Consultants are paid to think critically, which means understanding context, interrogating defaults and refusing to accept the options as handed over.

Sometimes Both

The first escape from a false choice is realizing you may not have to choose. A personal example from 2003: the apparent choice between management consulting and teaching at business school looked binary at the time. Spread across a longer horizon, twelve years as it happened, both proved possible. Useful questions unlock the both path. Can I take one option now and the other later? Can I take part of each option now? What should I do today to keep both alive? Can I lower expectations and hold a version of both? Can I shift my schedule or location to accommodate both? Time is the dimension false choices most often ignore.

Sometimes Neither

The second escape rejects the menu entirely. The vast majority of readers live in wealthy economies with enormous life choices, and saying no to two or three bad options is often exactly right. As the classroom line goes: if someone asks whether you want to be slapped in the face or poked in the eye, say neither. Three disciplines support the neither move. First, break down the problem. Facing unsavory choices, slow the conversation, step back and think, the way puzzle solvers confirm they hold all the pieces before forcing any of them. Fear of missing out creates anxiety that pushes people toward poor choices. Second, get more information. The more emotionally involved the decision, the more you need smart, informed, trustworthy feedback, and the more you must watch for choices driven by pride, anger or shame. Third, get creative. Negotiation theory teaches win-win solutions that expand the pie, find the third way nobody brainstormed, break artificial constraints and call out hidden assumptions.3

Building the Verification Habit

Source discipline scales through small routines rather than grand policies. Before repeating any claim in a client setting, spend ninety seconds establishing the original source, its track record and who funds it, because provenance predicts reliability better than production quality does. Keep a private tier list of outlets you have personally verified, and treat anything outside it as unverified rather than false. When a striking statistic arrives, find the underlying study before the number enters your deck, since secondhand summaries routinely distort sample sizes and definitions. Teams can normalize the challenge question, asking where a claim comes from without implying bad faith. The habit costs minutes and protects the asset consultants can least afford to lose.

Are Consultants Guilty Too?

The mirror question stings. Do consultants fall into the mentally lazy trap of handing clients false equivalents and false choices? The rationalizations sound noble: we just want them to make good decisions, we just want progress, we do not want to confuse them. However right-hearted the intent, the shortcut puts clients in a bad spot and disrespects them. At some level it assumes they are not smart, mature or motivated enough, or lack the time, to really understand. That assumption corrodes relationships over the long term, whatever it saves in the meeting.

Be the Adviser You Would Hire

The better path is patient. Educate clients and keep them mentally on board. Slow down and supply sufficient context and nuance so they genuinely understand the spectrum of choices, not a curated pair. The standard is reciprocal and simple: be the type of adviser you would like to hire. Advisers of that kind check the fruit, name the false equivalences out loud and never mistake a convenient binary for the truth.

- 1The Washington Post
- 2False equivalence
- 3Getting to Yes

Summary

False equivalence presents unequal things as equal, and false choices hide better options. Check source quality, slow the decision, gather feedback and get creative before choosing among unsavory defaults. Advisers owe clients context and nuance, the treatment we would demand from advisers of our own.