

Time Management Tips for a Tough Economy

By Joe Rickard

At every presentation or training workshop, we ask, “What is the single biggest obstacle you face in generating more printing sales?” The answer may surprise you. It is not competition from the Web, not difficult decision makers or the economy. It is simply the lack of time to get things done.

Time management is a challenge for most business professionals. Though managing time can make you successful, it does not mean that successful people manage their time well. For salespeople, mastering time management skills is critical because wasting time means losing sales.

Even if you are a born procrastinator, by practicing a few simple techniques you will get back valuable time to focus on productive selling activities. There is not a more relevant phrase for sales people than “time is money”. Top producers must consciously look for ways to gain the most effective selling time out of each day.

Even the Weak Economy Has Not Given Us More Time to Sell

For many, the stress of the current recession has made their time management problem worse. In this economy, many salespeople have extra time in their day as their customers are spending less and in some cases, refusing to take meetings. As a result, we are finding that many sales people are in the state of selling paralysis where nothing is getting done. This may be caused by the fear of not meeting their sales goal, depression and/or uncertainty.

It is Time to Get Started Now

Time management guru, Timothy Pychyl of the University of Ottawa suggests, “Uncertainty and not knowing the next step to take, is a key factor in procrastination. Learning how to take manageable steps is crucial to getting started.” If you don’t know the next step to take on a project – ask a mentor or a manager – don’t get held up by uncertainty.

Here are some additional tips for managing your time right now:

Set Sales Goals, Priorities and Objectives

A simple first step is to ask yourself exactly what are your goals and priorities and what you need to do to accomplish to them. How much income do you want to earn this year? Write it down. Determine how many new customers, how many sales daily, weekly and monthly you need to generate and at what margin. What new applications do you need to identify and close? How large must each transaction be? It is astounding how many printing salespeople do not take the time to ask themselves these simple but important questions.

Without specific goals, priorities and objectives there is no basis to structure your day. Knowing what you want and what you need to accomplish is an important first step to better time management.

Create a Sales Plan

Once you have set your goals, determine what sales activities you need to execute daily, weekly and monthly. How many customers must you see face-to-face? How many proposals or quotes do you need to generate? How many prospecting emails or phone calls must be made? Basically, you need to decide exactly what must be done to meet your sales goals. Getting the plan down to the vital few will help you to leverage the 20/80 factor; where 20% of your activities will generate 80% of your business.

Early in my career, I recorded my daily activities. It became clear to me quickly, that I wasted enormous amounts of time, and I spent much too little time on productive sales generating activities. For example, I was spending the majority of my time on administrative tasks and not enough time generating prospects and asking for the business. Set a plan and stick to it.

This revelation could be a good first step for many salespeople who are having trouble getting started.

Stay on Schedule

Do not finish your day unless essential activities are accomplished. If you plan on 10 phone prospecting calls per day, do not finish the day unless this is accomplished. Keep track. If you miss one day, then you need to make it up the next day. You may find that with reasonable goals for each day that you finish up earlier than you anticipate – if so, use this time wisely to read up on industry news, prepare your to-do list for the following day and clean up your desk.

Over time this effort will pay off. If you are not making your numbers within a defined timeframe, usually 90 days, then you may want to rethink what you are doing each day and create a new plan.

Stay On Offense

Many salespeople think they are working hard and executing sales activities because they talk to their customers regularly. Putting out fires, following up on problems, passing the time, building relationships and working on a print job are important. But, unless you are closing or moving a sale forward, these sales activities should be characterized as defensive. I recommend salespeople keep track of each sales contact where they are actually selling something.

Defensive sales contacts are part of maintaining and keeping the business. Offensive sales contacts grow the business.

Create “To Do” Lists

Most successful salespeople start each day with “to do” lists. Mike Long, Director of Sales for Jet Mail Services of Hudson, MA recently told us he starts his day by creating a list of objectives and lining up his phone calls/callbacks before he starts the morning. List specifically, what customers will you see in person, call on the phone or email. Aside from customer emergencies and critical customer related activities, your daily prospecting plan is your first priority.

Many salespeople spend their time on low payback activities. This is a natural tendency. Most people like to accomplish easy tasks first. A good technique is establishing a priority for each daily task. The most important are rated A, less important and lower impact “To Do’s” are rate B or C. Activities that would most likely generate business should be rated A and must be completed first.

Keep Good Records

Many printing companies have invested in sales automation tools to help salespeople track activities, manage their pipeline and follow up on opportunities. If used regularly, these will eliminate rework and help prioritize sales activities. If your company does not have sales automation resources, use Microsoft Office, or an inexpensive off the shelf sales territory management and tracking software, easily found on the web, or in most office super stores.

Avoid the “Time Suck” Tasks

Identify what tasks are “sucking” up too much time. It is common to go home and feel that you have not accomplished anything. By keeping records and setting daily objectives, you can often find and avoid common time sucking tasks. They can come in many forms, including meetings, personnel and customers who talk too much, family members who call too often, Facebook, or simply spending too much time searching the web. The best approach is to identify and eliminate or minimize them.

Mike Fatse, Partner and Vice President of Sales at Premier Printing and Mailing Solutions in Stratford, Ct told us, “I pick up e-mail before and after hours. I make sure I return all of my email after 7 PM. This way the senders will have a reply first thing the following morning.”

Limit Your Desktops

With the expansion of technology, we often find salespeople with multiple “desktops” or places that hold success-related information. Most salespeople have at least five desktops. They include desktop computers, laptops, company MIS systems, sales automation software, office and home desktops, hard copy notebooks, sheets of paper and blackberrys. Each can contain countless and redundant bits of sales and customer information.

It may be impossible to get down to one desktop, but it is worth consolidating and better organizing your information. Most professionals spend inordinately large amounts of their day looking for electronic or hard copy documents.

“Many salespeople have actually lost selling time in recent years” said Mike Long of Jet Mail Services “Instead of providing productivity, some web, email and voice-based tools have kept customers and salespeople further apart. Customers and salespeople get bogged down with low priority and unproductive activities versus focusing on actions that will drive the business.”

Just Say No

An important challenge for many salespeople is their inability to just say no. There are countless individuals in our lives who attempt to get us to do things for them that they could easily and realistically do themselves. Among the biggest abusers are bosses and coworkers.

Working effectively with CSRs and production teams can drastically increase sales time by delegating and letting other personnel manage projects and support their customers. Too many salespeople are chained to their desks, getting bogged down with details of print jobs that should be managed by others.

For time challenged salespeople, getting everything done can be exhausting. Leonard Bernstein once said, “To achieve great things, two things are needed; a plan, and not quite enough time.”

Though most salespeople have practiced some or all of the techniques we have described, rethinking how you spend your time is well worth the effort – especially when customers are facing financial constraints. By spending more time on sales producing activities, you will not only gain more sales and compensation, but you’ll feel a lot better doing it.

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