

THE COST OF MULTITASKING

By Kathy McAfee, America's Marketing Motivator
Guest Contributor



In today's modern society of high-tech gadgets and high-pressure demands from work, we have trained ourselves to be multitasking machines. Many of us consider our ability to multitask to be a skill worthy of listing on our resume. We like to brag to others about our superior ability to do many things at once.

Awkward Situation on a Webinar

Yesterday I was reminded of how multitasking can get us into trouble. I was facilitating a webinar for a client on negotiation skills. We did our tech-check, I forwarded all of my calls, muted my mobile, shut down all other computer applications, and cleared my desk. I wanted to be 100% focused on this program, knowing that I would still have to keep my eyes on several moving parts: slides, webinar controls, participants, chat box, polling, and of course, the clock. It's not cool to run over time. We instructed the audience to do the same: to mute their lines, and NOT to put the phone on hold to prevent that wretched on-hold music from playing for all to hear. The client elected not to use the main "mute all callers" function of the webinar.

About 15 minutes into the webinar, I began to hear another conversation happening. I spoke a little louder to no avail. A participant complained that she could not hear me clearly because someone else on the webinar was having a side conversation. We thought it might have been the radio. Not knowing which participant was causing the distraction, the moderator tried to send out a message to mute your phone line. We elected to pause the discussion for 30-60 seconds in hopes that the distractor would figure it out and end their side conversation. No luck. His conversation continued, and we could clearly hear his discussion. It was a business call, and had elements of confidentiality. It was amazing to think that he was completely unaware that 60+ people were hearing his client conversation on the webinar. It was also being recorded and would be archived. When I realized that there may be confidential information being discussed, I suggested that we continue with the webinar, hoping that my voice would dominate his voice and content.

"Multitasking arises out of distraction itself."

*Marilyn vos Savant, world's smartest woman
(highest recorded IQ according to
Guinness Book of World Records)*

Reflecting upon this situation, there are certainly lessons for me, as the featured speaker, and my core client, as the moderator and host of the webinar. In the future we will mute all lines and control whose line is open and when. But the most critical lesson is for the participant himself. What made him think he could participate (even passively) in a live webinar AND take a business call on another device? Did he really think that he could do these two things at once? Could he do them well? Could he show up to both events with full leadership presence? I think not. He might have even endangered his job, his client, and possibly his organization.

Pay Attention: The Brain Cannot Multitask

One of my favorite business books is [*Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School*](#), by John Medina. John is a developmental molecular biologist focused on the genes involved in human brain development and the genetics of psychiatric disorders. He is the director of the Brain Center for Applied Learning Research, and is on staff at the University of Washington School of Medicine in its Department of Bio engineering. Net net: John is one smart dude.

In his book he talks about the Attention. In fact, Brain Rule #4 is "We don't pay attention to boring things." Okay, maybe there were aspects of my webinar that were boring to the caller in question, but more likely other things were going on in his brain. Medina plainly states, "The brain cannot multitask." On pages 84-85 of his book, he goes on to say:

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“Multitasking, when it comes to paying attention, is a myth. The brain naturally focuses on concepts sequentially, one at a time. At first that might sound confusing; at one level the brain does multitask. You can walk and talk at the same time. Your brain controls your heartbeat while you read a book. Pianists can play a piece with the left hand and the right hand simultaneously. Surely this is multitasking. But I am talking about the brain’s ability to pay attention. It is the resource you forcibly deploy while trying to listen to a boring lecture at school. It is the activity that collapses as your brain wanders during a tedious presentation at work. This attentional ability is not capable of multitasking.”

You Choose How to Spend Your Time and Attention

While there are many competing forces in our professional and personal lives, ultimately, WE get to determine how we show up. We decide where to direct our attention and energy. We decide which tasks are important right now, and which tasks can wait. And at that moment of choice, we must be mindful of how to re-direct our attention and focus. It is fool-hardy to think you can do two things at once with an acceptable level of quality. Why not take the pressure off yourself and just FOCUS on ONE THING at a time. Your brain will thank you, your colleagues will thank you, your webinar guest speaker will thank you, and your reputation will remain in tact.

Read the related article [“Going Out of Busy-ness”](#) by guest contributor David Lindsay Adams

About Kathy McAfee:

Known as America’s Marketing Motivator, Kathy McAfee has instructed thousands of professionals on how to maximize their talents for the greatest impact on their careers, businesses, and corporate environments. Her laser-focused coaching, keynote speaking and robust training empower emerging and established career professionals, and organizations, to make connections, expand their influence and move people to action. A graduate of Stanford University and is author of two books, [Networking Ahead 3rd Edition](#), and [Stop Global Boring](#). Kathy publishes her award-winning blog monthly to motivate today’s workers to realize their full potential. Read other posts by Kathy at her web site:

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