

SCHEDULE DISCIPLINE – A KEY TO SALES SUCCESS

One of the most common topics I'm asked about when it comes to training is that nebulous subject called "time management." "There just aren't enough hours in the day!" yell salespeople and sales managers. The truth is that there are usually enough hours in the day to get done what needs to get done, and successful people tend to use those hours to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. Here's how.

Successful people have what I call "Schedule discipline." Schedule discipline is that ability to make plans, appointments, and commitments, and keep them in all but the direst of circumstances. I've found that most people are pretty good at knowing and understanding what is important in their lives and careers, and most people are pretty good at building a schedule, in advance, to address those important tasks. Not everyone, of course, but most people. If I were to ask you right now what would be your priorities to accomplish next week, or the week after, you'd probably have a pretty good idea.

What separates the successful from the unsuccessful is their ability to ACCOMPLISH those priorities and KEEP those commitments. Take that hypothetical set of priorities two weeks down the road. If we were to review that set of priorities at 5 PM Friday, how many of them would you have gotten accomplished? That's the difference.

So, what happens to interfere? Distractions. A customer calls. You see a post on Facebook. Someone walks into your office. Any number of myriad events occurs that can disrupt a plan; some are avoidable and some are not. This is where schedule discipline comes in.

"Schedule discipline" is the skill that allows someone to immediately assess a distraction from the plan and decide if it really must be handled immediately, or if it can wait. One of the biggest fables that has been taught is that we are capable of "multitasking." We are not – study after study shows that our brains are only capable of processing one input in any particular moment, no matter what the stimuli. And when a new input is accepted, our brain must first detach from the previous task, then accept and process the new input, and then re-engage in the previous task. All of that is lost time.

So, how can you implement schedule discipline in your career? It's more than just "Plan your work, and work your plan." The real key to working the plan is personal and team discipline.

1. First of all, when you have a key task to accomplish –whether it's prospecting, or a coaching session, or a meeting – schedule it as an appointment, even if it's only an appointment with yourself. And then keep it. And have some mechanism to inform your other team members that you're working on something important. As a salesperson, I used a version of the old college "sock on the doorknob" technique; I had a yellow sign that said "Prospecting," and I used to hang it up to let people know not to interrupt me unless it was really important. Which leads us to....
2. Manage interruptions wisely. Interruptions of any kind are killers to your work. The key is to manage and prioritize interruptions wisely. Everything isn't "hair on fire, have to deal with it RIGHT NOW" level, but if you allow it to become that, it will. Not only do YOU have to discern what's important enough to break your workflow, you have to help your TEAM discern as well. If it isn't an issue that would jeopardize a key customer relationship, or a key employee, or

represent an opportunity that would not be open if it weren't handled RIGHT NOW, then don't let it interrupt your work. Again, schedule that which is important.

3. Schedule tasks in no more than two hour blocks, if at all possible. There are a few reasons for this. First of all, if you're prospecting (for example), I find that you get stale if you do more than a two-hour prospecting block at a time. Secondly, in my experience, there are few issues that can't wait a maximum of two hours, whether it's email, a customer call, or an upset employee. Keeping your task-time to two hour blocks means that nothing has to wait for an unacceptable period. Again, there are exceptions, but they are rare.
4. Allow time between blocks for the unexpected. If you're isolating yourself for two-hour blocks, you'll need time in between those blocks as a catch-all for whatever issues might come up. This is also time to answer emails, return calls, and other random acts of being busy. For every two hours "in session," allow a half hour to an hour "off session."
5. Keep your commitments. To yourself, to internal personnel, and to external personnel. Schedule discipline is all about respecting the value of your own time, and getting others to respect the value of both your time and theirs. If you commit to a task or a meeting, keep it. You're not only making yourself more productive, you're also modeling behavior for the rest of your team. If you're a manager and they see you doing this to manage your own time, they'll use this system to manage theirs as well. On the other hand, if they see you coming in to work in the morning and waiting to run from putting out fire to putting out fire, they'll do that too. Oddly enough, those who work under schedule discipline seem to have fewer fires to put out in the first place.

What I've discovered about so many "time management" approaches is that they focus so much on the details that the big issues get lost in the shuffle. Remind yourself of the value of your own time, and you'll have the schedule discipline that separates the successful from the unsuccessful.

Troy Harrison is the author of "Sell Like You Mean It!", "The Pocket Sales Manager," and a Speaker, Consultant, and Sales Navigator. He helps companies build more profitable and productive sales forces. To schedule a free 45-minute Sales Strategy Review, call 913-645-3603 or e-mail Troy@TroyHarrison.com.