

Too Busy To Breathe?

Perhaps it's time for time management

By Michael MacDonald

Well it's here! The start of the summer touring season is upon us, while the contracting market is picking up – both good signs.

Yes, it's the time of year when things really start to get busy. Comments like, "It's so busy I can't breathe," are often heard. Too many balls in the air, and they begin to be dropped. Calls don't get returned, and hair gets pulled out.

Time management is the key to getting more done in any business. Recently, at a conference of dealers from another industry, the keynote address included a phrase that really hit home with me: "You need to work on your business, not in your business."

Boy, does this hit the nail on the head!

So often business is all consuming, pulling us into a quagmire of details that have to be handled, all the while leaving little time to plan on significant improvements.

It's vital to understand the difference between strategy and tactics. Both terms are thrown around frequently, but do most of us even know the difference?

Strategy is long-term planning with an eye toward an end goal, while tactics are (usually quick) actions or reactions intended to improve a short-term situation.

Effective planning requires a long-term approach that drives what you do each day. A solid business plan relies upon the development of a strategic plan. On the other hand, tactics are individual elements that contribute to making the strategic plan take shape and become realizable.

The million-dollar question: how does all of this talk of terminology actually impact time management? Simply, if you're overwhelmed with tactical responses to unforeseen problems that arise day after day, it's very likely that you'll never have the time to create a strategic plan that will truly allow you to grow and thrive.

I term this a "negative feedback loop." The less time spent working on strategic planning, the more chaotic business will be. That chaos can easily suck you into a vortex of low-level firefighting (read "unproductive") activity that wastes so much valuable time that can't ever be regained.

And so it goes, round and round. (Again, think vortex.)

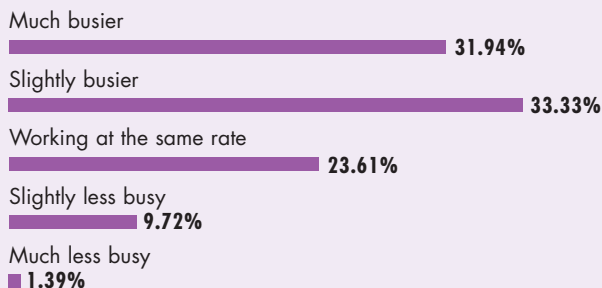
NEED SOME HELP?

In my view, controlling time is really the key. Without it, all other issues in your business (and your life) will instead control you.

Breaking out of this mode requires very disciplined time management.

Live Sound – ProSoundWeb Poll

Compared to last year, this summer touring/festival season I expect to be:



Polling period: 3/2/04 – 3/30/04. To participate in LSI/PSW polls, go to www.prosoundweb.com.

How do you get there? As with many things, it starts with admitting some help might be in order.

There are many very good time management programs available. For example, FranklinCovey, a noted business productivity firm, has highly useful materials available, consisting of both classes and materials to assist in both controlling time and planning. (Check these out at www.franklincovey.com.)

In addition to the available resources, there are some simple things you can do right now to get things moving in the right direction. For example, when planning the use of time, write it down.

It starts with admitting some help might be in order

Keeping a detailed log will quickly help you pinpoint where time is being spent and wasted. You'll be able to clearly track how time can evaporate even while you're "busy" all day, every day.

Chatting with people (be it colleagues or otherwise) is a common culprit. Talking on the phone and "around the water cooler" can account for a significant drain, and often, we don't even realize it.

It's also vitally important to differentiate between discussions that "count" and those that are just for fun. Take this further by setting priorities: a "need to do" list of discussions and a "nice to do" list. (I believe you'll figure out which list gets higher priority.)

A POINT ON IT

Meetings. Ugh, the great time waster. All meetings must have a specific agenda and goals to be attained, and these drive the process. Attendees should come to meetings prepared to make decisions, not just discuss topics.

Every meeting must be assigned a "closed end" schedule, complete with hard finish time. Let's be honest – the vast majority of meetings should be done within an hour. My meeting mantra: "Stick to the subject. Come to a decision. Assign duties. And we're outta here!"

I've found that many of the modern organizational tools – electronic organizers, PDAs, software for your PC, and the like – can be of considerable help. Pick the format that works best for you in this regard, and then stick with it.

You'll quickly notice a difference. The tool itself isn't all that important; rather, it's the commitment to using the tool as a mechanism that will then drive you to adhere to better time management. (It's all in the consciousness.)

Time management is a constant and perpetual challenge. And you will fail - count on it! The important thing is to strive for perfection while accept-

ing incremental improvement. Realize that backslides are part of the game and you may have to start over (and over) again.

MATRICULATION

Plan on taking a time management class every year. This will push the topic to the front of your mind, keeping your focus squarely on the value of time.

Then, be fruitful and multiply. Your time management strategies, once honed, must matriculate to the entire organization. With everyone on the same program, there's the exponential effect of better individual output as well as improved cooperation among the team.

When it's all said and done, you can only get ahead if you make the time to plan out the path. Without this, there's simply no way to measure results and begin navigating forward.

Time management is the key, but the trick is making the time to plan for time management ■

Michael MacDonald has been involved in the professional audio industry for more than 20 years. Beginning as a freelance mixer/engineer in the '70s, he transitioned to working for manufacturers in the mid-'80s and has been employed by, developed products for, and consulted with major companies such as Yamaha and JBL Professional. Michael can be reached at mchlmacdonald@aol.com.

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