

Denver Business Journal - November 15, 2004

<http://denver.bizjournals.com/denver/stories/2004/11/15/smallb3.html>

DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL

Friday, November 12, 2004

Technology can be valuable -- if you keep it under control

Denver Business Journal - by [Garry Duncan](#)

The headline trumpeted, "Frightened by a word -- technocracy." While this could easily refer to present-day technology experts trying to rule the roost, it actually appeared Feb. 19, 1933, in a Denver newspaper.

Technology long has been viewed as a mixed blessing, and today is no different. Palm Pilots, iPods, laptops, contact managers and customer management software are legitimate assets of the sales process.

However, these technologies also have increased pressure to respond immediately and have played havoc with priorities. Technology didn't create prioritization problems. Lack of its management is the problem.

An exemplary precedent for this dilemma lies with the 19th century Luddites, skilled technicians who worked on cotton gin machines. They supported the power of a useful machine, yet fought the increasing role of technology because there were many who mismanaged it.

Today's computer and technology benefits have become central to the operation of global multinationals, financial markets, security surveillance -- and sales. The challenge remains managing technology appropriately and balancing its use so that stress-inducing negatives don't outweigh the positives.

Even as we increase technology's role in sales processes, the negatives mount, as evidenced by a recent, typical sales field trip.

We held a morning coffee meeting to plan appropriate client servicing and prospecting priorities. Each sales representative had a well-thought-out plan for the day. Yet the plan was interrupted numerous times by immediate demands via instant messaging through cell phones or e-mail. In some cases, such as a production line going down and jeopardizing a customer relationship, the intrusion was warranted.

In other cases, such as a routine out-of-stock request, there was no immediate urgency. But the technology-induced "do it now" mentality diverted the plans to address this issue -- though it could have been handled subsequently.

Besides disrupting group discussions and meetings, these interruptions transform many salespeople into "instant messenger" crisis slaves, so focused on handling immediate account-servicing needs that they neglect to make time to hunt for new business.

In many ways, it's the Luddite dilemma, only a laptop has replaced the cotton gin.

How does the wise salesperson utilize the miracles of modern technology wisely, without letting them manage them? As with so many challenges, it's a matter of focus, determination and discipline. Beneficial moves include:

- Establish goals that address priorities and time management. Reduce distractions by laptops, Blackberries, cell phones, e-mail and instant messaging. Take charge of your time, and determine clear guidelines about what requires urgent attention and what can be handled in the normal course of business.

Set aside scheduled times without interruptions to make new prospecting contacts. Remember, salespeople without goals are most often drafted into helping meet someone else's goals.

- Plan time for interruptions. Doctors in surgery, attorneys in court and trainers in meetings all have times they can't respond immediately. Salespeople, likewise, don't have to be on call every minute.

Creating time boundaries lessens interruptions and crisis drills. Schedule specific times to check messages and announce on voice mail the best available times to reach you.

Let people know when you won't be available (including posting "out of office" e-mail messages to respond to incoming e-mails), and set aside a daily window of time to deal with unexpected emergencies and requests.

- Coach clients repeatedly about the best times to reach you. Stay resolved and consistent, and you'll discover people will call you during the designated windows. Concurrently, build a backup system -- similar to doctors being on-call for one another -- with an assistant, colleague or boss who can be there when you aren't.
- Make sure good judgment tempers the omnipresent "desire to serve." Qualify the urgency and priority of a particular matter with such simple questions as, "When do you need this?" or "Is handling this within the next few days acceptable?"

Salespeople are emotionally wired to serve clients, and sometimes go overboard to please, discarding prudent judgment along the way.

- Discipline yourself to keep accurate notes in software contact managers. Take 10-15 minutes a day during non-productive times such as breaks, lunch or in the evening to make notes about the current and subsequent call, while thoughts are fresh. Far from being time-consuming, this practice will help shorten sales cycles, minimize mistakes and reduce lost time looking for information.
- Learn to say "no." Sometimes, it's OK to say, "I can't do that right now." "No" doesn't mean "no" forever -- just for the moment. When we short-circuit our focus to deal with disruptive phone calls and email, we ultimately become less effective on behalf of all clients. Being prioritized and focused, conversely, will serve all clients better in the long run.

Just as for the 19th-century Luddites or technocracy-fearing leaders in 1933, technology has a valuable role in furthering business success -- as long as that role is properly managed and constantly re-evaluated.

Garry Duncan is principal of Denver-based Leadership Connections, a sales training company. Reach him at 303-462-1277 or garry@leadershipconnections.com.

All contents of this site © American City Business Journals Inc. All rights reserved.