

Violent Prioritization

I had a weird dream the other night. I was sitting in a courtroom, in the defendant's chair. The judge walked in and the bailiff said "All rise," and then the judge pointed at me and said: "You stand here accused of *Violent Prioritization*. How do you plead?"

I started to answer, but another voice drowned me out. "You cannot convict him because prioritization is not a crime. In fact, you should reward him!" The speaker looked a lot like me, but sounded like James Earl Jones.

The prosecutor then spoke. He looked a lot like James Earl Jones, but sounded like Bob Dylan. "It is not the prioritization which offends the state. It's the sheer violence with which it was applied."

The judge said "What do we do then, convict him or reward him?" The spectators yelled out "Convict!" and "Reward!" in just about equal numbers. Then Dylan started singing "Last Train To Clarksville."

What, you don't have dreams like that?

What Would You Do?

OK, it's a fact of life that there's not enough time in the day to do all the things you could be and should be doing. It is also a fact that the busier you are, the more important time management becomes. If you have 20 things on your plate and there's only enough time to do 10 of them, you have to prioritize aggressively. If you have 50 things on that same plate, you have to prioritize *violently*, and I don't think most quick printers prioritize violently enough.

Here's a WWYD exercise. It's 3:00 PM on a Wednesday. Your plan for the day calls for you to go into your office and close the door and make follow-up calls on 10 prospecting letters you sent out on Monday. You close the door, but before you're in your chair, it opens and your press operator sticks his head in. "I'm glad I caught you before you started something," he says. "The paper guy is here, and I know you wanted to talk to him about that credit they owe us."

OK, maybe that's a bad example. You already know that growing your business is more important than talking with the paper guy just because he happens to be there at that particular time, right? Even without my input, you'd have said: "Tell him to wait. I might be 20 minutes making some calls, but I do want to talk to him. If he can't wait, tell him to call me first thing tomorrow morning."

How about this one. The press operator says: "I need you to look at the job we're reprinting for (your #1 customer)." Again, maybe a bad example. You already know that resolving a problem with your #1 customer should take priority over just about anything else, right? Even without my input, you'd do due diligence to that situation—but hopefully, you'd do it as quickly as possible and then get back to your sales activity!

Here's a third scenario. This time, you're going into your office at 3:00 PM to put together a quote for an important customer. It's a big job requiring a fast turnaround, and you promised to have the quote to them by 4:00 PM. At 3:30, you're about halfway through the task, and your CSR sticks her head in the door. "I have (a less important customer) on the line and he wants to re-order his business cards, but he wants to talk to you first." I hope you would say: "Tell him I can call him a little later on."

But what if your CSR shakes her head and says: "I already told him that you were tied up. He said you either talk to him now, or he'll give the order to someone else."

Let's set aside that you might be angered by his attitude. This sort of priority decision needs to be made on the basis of fact, not emotion. I think the *fact* in this situation is that someone's going to be unhappy with you. The *opportunity* in this situation is that you get to decide who that will be!

Hierarchy of Satisfaction

The more you have going on, the less likely it is that you can make everyone happy. I hope that suggests a "hierarchy of satisfaction" which probably has your best customers very near the top. Note that I said *near* the top. Remember that *you* have a place on that hierarchy too. The ultimate reference point for your priorities is not whether any individual customer will be happy, it's whether you'll reach your own business and personal goals—sales goals, profit goals, earnings goals, etc. Customer satisfaction is a means to an end, not an end in itself.

I think I can support that statement with this question: Which would you rather have, a small printing business with a few completely satisfied customers and earnings of, say, \$30,000 per year, or a larger printing business with frequent and stressful priority decisions resulting in the loss of some dissatisfied customers and earnings of, say, \$200,000 per year?

The ideal situation for most quick printers is probably somewhere in the middle of those two scenarios, but the point is that prioritization is necessary in order to reach your goals. I know that you're pulled in a lot of different

directions. Just understand that at every time management decision point—with very, very, *very* few exceptions—there will be a higher and a lower priority. Your decisions should be easy when the gap is obvious, like something special for a customer vs. something routine for a supplier. They get harder when the gap isn't quite so large, like something special for a \$50,000 customer vs. something special for a \$40,000 customer.

Please think about some of the time management decisions you made today. Did you consider your overall priorities before you made your decision? Did you let something minor that came up distract you from something important that you had planned. Did you have any sort of a plan for the day in the first place? Did you put any limits on any of your activities: "I can spend 15 minutes on this and no more!"

If your answer to those questions was *no*, *yes*, *no* and *no*, you're unlikely to be convicted of violent prioritization. Unfortunately, you're also unlikely to be rewarded for truly effective and efficient use of your time. Remember that time is money, and the less time you have, the more money it's worth—basic supply and demand, right?

A Final Thought

Here's a final thought for today. The exact opposite of violent prioritization might be trying to keep all the balls in the air. Remember what happens when you get just one ball too many up there! It's better to accept that you probably can't please everybody, and then make good decisions on who to disappoint.