

Beware Of Shiny Things!

Steven Covey was an educator and author, probably best known for his book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. He covered a lot of ground in that book, but there's one element I think is more important than any other. Covey wrote about *urgency* and *importance*, and specifically about how any task on your plate can be both of those things, just one of them, or neither of them. If you have more tasks on your plate than you have time in your day, it's really important to know exactly where each one fits in terms of importance and urgency.

Four Possibilities

The combination of urgency and importance yields four possibilities. Something can be (1) urgent and important, (2) important but not urgent, (3) urgent but not important, or (4) neither urgent nor important. It's pretty obvious, I think, that anything that's urgent and important should sit at the top of your priority list. But what about something that's important but not urgent? I hope you'll see that any task in this category should sit lower on your priority list. It needs to be done, but it doesn't need to be done *now*! And I'm sure you see that something that's neither urgent nor important should sit at the very bottom of your priority list. (I'm sure you see it, but I'm not sure you really embrace it. More on that to follow.)

The real killer for most printing salespeople is the things that are urgent but not important, although in this case, *urgent* may not be quite the right word. Let's substitute a word one of my clients like to use, *shiny*, as in he (or she) is easily distracted by shiny things.

That's a serious problem, especially in any circumstance where time is money – like printing sales, or probably any other aspect of managing a printing company! Too many salespeople are guilty of putting time into activities that aren't going to generate revenue, profits or commissions.

Here's a classic example. The salesperson's plan for the day includes a block of time for making prospecting calls. Just after the start of that block, an e-mail arrives. It's a request from a lower-tier customer – low volume, low profit, low potential and high maintenance. It expresses some level of urgency on the part of the customer, but it's not really important in terms of the salesperson increasing sales, profits and/or commissions. But it's there – bright and shiny! – so the salesperson abandons his/her prospecting and tends to the request, and by the time that's completed, the time set aside for prospecting has passed, and the salesperson has to move on to other things.

Let me be clear on something. If this same request had come from a top-tier customer, it might have been urgent and important. But coming from the low-tier customer I described, it was not. And the time spent tending to the request didn't turn into nearly as much money as it might have, and that's what I'm really talking about here. Let's make it a simple question. Which is better for *you*, spending your time on maintenance activities for low-value customers or spending that same time trying to maintain or develop high-value customers? Time *is* money!

Here's something I've been teaching in my seminars for close to 30 years. Make yourself a little card, that can fit in your pocket. On that card, draw a four-quadrant matrix, and in each of the quadrants, write in one of Covey's four categories. Pull it out as you plan your day, and evaluate each task on your plate to assign it the correct amount of urgency and importance. In other words, plan your day around your priorities.

And then, when one of those shiny things appears, pull it out again and evaluate before you let yourself get distracted from anything more important.