

business issues

PROCRASTINATION IN BUSINESS (AND SALES)

BY ANNE SCARLETT

If you must procrastinate, then at least make your procrastination work for you.

WHERE DO YOU FALL on the procrastinator spectrum, particularly when it comes to business and sales?

The old me was a "get it done" type of person. But when I recently experienced a great deal of frustration with my class of procrastinating college students, I decided to take a good look at myself. And I admit it; the current me is a bit of a procrastinator.

For some, procrastinating might mean filling your time with busy work and using that as an excuse to not do something. There are ways, however, to work with these tendencies and get the tasks accomplished. Here are some things I do to both tackle—and make the best of—my current procrastinating nature.

Spend those windows of "procrastination time" doing something truly productive and relevant. If you are hesitant to call a prospect because you feel "touching base" will be an imposition, then first do something that's different but still productive (and relevant to the bigger picture effort).

For example, if you can't pick up the phone to make that call, instead do some additional research on the prospect to ensure you have all of the most recent data about their company (including what can be found on social media). You might double check LinkedIn to see if you have any new connections to this prospect. You might also further research their personal background—education, career path, etc.

It's true that all of those steps are still, unfortunately, procrastination. But at least they are productive and they may help to better inform your next step.

Spread the word. Tell others about your specific projects and deadlines. Tell someone whom you want to respect you professionally about your plans. For example, if I tell a

professional colleague (particularly one I admire) that I plan to check in by voice with four prospective clients, craft a new online curriculum and write a business article, I'm fairly certain that person will inquire about the tasks. Since I can't bear the thought of them thinking I was not on top of my game, I'm more likely to follow through.

On the other hand, if I tell my husband about those tasks, I know he'll cheer me on. (But I also know he'll love me whether I complete those tasks or not.) He's not likely to hold me accountable.

Set interim deadlines. I teach Business and Professional Communications at DePaul University. I quickly learned that if I assign a six-week intensive project—due at the end of the term—I'll regret it. The students are not willing to pace themselves on their own. Rather, they need small incremental deadlines every step of the way. Why not do the same for yourself? Break up your big projects into smaller tasks by setting interim deadlines of your own.

Capitalize on any bursts of confidence, ambition and energy. I can't be the only one who starts working on one thing only to get a burst of energy to switch gears and work on something completely different. Maybe I just experienced some level of success doing something else, and now I want to apply that same mojo to the task I'd been holding off on. Maybe I just had the right amount of coffee. Maybe I took a walk out in the sun and felt refreshed and ready to handle anything.

Whatever the reason, even if it seems like an unusual or inappropriate time to complete the task, don't wait. If it's something you can fully execute, or even take a step towards completion, then do it—without delay.

Be real with yourself. Answer the following question as honestly as you can: "Why am I procrastinating on this task/effort/project?"

Recently, I was frustrated with myself because I put off preparing a fee proposal. I crafted excuse after excuse for three separate delays. (If I had just applied that same level of brainpower and effort towards writing the darn thing, it would have been finished!)

A colleague of mine asked me why I couldn't just "get it done." After hearing my initial lame reasons, she pressed further: "Seriously. What is stopping you from preparing this fee proposal?"



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Upon reflection, it was easy to see the problem: I didn't want to win that particular piece of business. The thought of completing that scope of work for that prospect and within that timeframe—well, it was unappealing at best. Yet I felt obligated to provide a proposal because I certainly intend to meet my revenue goal for this year.

So out of curiosity, I decided to "be real" a step further. I went back and looked at all of the fee proposals from the past two years. It turns out I dragged my feet on about 25% of them. Reasons for my procrastination included: fear of losing the project, fear of winning the project and dread of having to expend a great deal of effort on the proposal (because I expect nothing less than high-quality output from myself).

Once you identify the reason for your procrastination, it's time to ask yourself, "If I cannot adjust my attitude, then should I adjust my commitments?" The result may be that you need to re-prioritize and possibly make some permanent deletions.

Reward yourself. Once upon a time, I would offer myself rewards once I had attained "success." Success included a

new client, an expanded piece of business, an extra degree or certification, an election to a board position, etc. These days when I'm in procrastination mode, I also reward myself when I complete a particular task or project.

For example, when I complete a fee proposal that is of high quality, I reward myself with a sushi dinner—whether the client hires me or not. Or when I finish grading a stack of papers or a series of student speeches, I give myself a big chunk of time to catch up on a good book. Or when I finish a presentation I prepared for a professional talk, I head to the movies. The bottom line is that I no longer wait to see the results of my efforts. Instead, I celebrate the success of finishing something to the very best of my ability. Premature? Some might think so. But this is one trick that gets me over the procrastination hump.

I'm not proud of the procrastinator I've become. I'd like to channel the old Anne, the one who often completed quality projects with ease long before her deadlines. Until then, these are my coping techniques. If you have any of your own that you are willing to share, please do! ■