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New business owners end up doing juggling acts

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Multi-tasking is something that most people have to do at work. Those who start their own companies quickly find they have an even bigger juggling act.

Many brand-new entrepreneurs try to do it all: finding new customers, doing the work when they land an account, sending invoices, keeping the books, dealing with high-tech problems. Building a new company can be exhilarating, but doing it all yourself can be overwhelming and that can lead to burnout. It may end up hurting rather than helping the business.

People who have started companies usually find ways to get the work done. Often, though, it means getting some help.

SHOULD YOU DIY? OR GET SOME HELP?

Many entrepreneurs try to do everything themselves at the start simply because they can't afford to pay someone else to help them. Others believe they can and should do it all. And many can, until they get so much work that it's impossible to keep juggling. Or, when they realize their time needs to be focused on building the business, not on administrative tasks.

Jason Brown juggled everything when he started PublicCity PR, a Beverly Hills, Mich.-based public relations firm, in 2008. But as the company grew, he was spending more time on administrative chores, and that took away from finding and working for clients.

His first solution was to hire a part-time bookkeeper to handle invoices and the company's books. Then, as he became more successful, he took on a full-time staffer to help with clients. He also enlisted the help of an accounting firm.

This has made it easier for Brown to focus on clients. "You don't want to get bogged down and have them wait three days for you to call them back," he said.

Craig Clark said at first he could manage to do everything himself, but not if he wanted his business, Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Clark Communications, to grow.

"I can get by, but if I'm going to take the firm to the next level, I have to be mature in how I run the business," Clark said. Clark now has a full-time staffers and has outsourced his accounting and human resources work.

A JUGGLING ACT IS A SERIES OF JUDGMENT CALLS

John Mooney, owner of Over the Moon PR in Westfield, N.J., has found that he sometimes has to stop and ask himself, what really matters right now? For example, do you do the work for a current customer, or look for new ones?

"You don't want to lose your biggest client and not have another one in the hopper," Mooney said. On the other hand, "if you don't take care of your current clients, you'll lose them as well."

The answer requires a judgment call by an owner. And the answer might be different tomorrow, or next week, depending on your circumstances at that moment.

Mooney has learned that he needs to be careful about what he focuses on. One of his problems is chasing after clients who don't pay or who are slow in paying. How much time should he devote to that chore? Again, he noted, it requires a decision. Is this bill big enough to spend time trying to collect? Is the client one you'd want to work with again?

Another possibility: Can someone else do the chasing for you?

BE HONEST ABOUT WHAT YOU CAN DO

Be honest with yourself as well as your customers. If two customers want a project or a job done at 9 a.m. tomorrow morning and it's impossible to get them both done, don't say yes to both of them.

Clark says he learned "not just to take requests, but to give counsel and change a client's priorities." In other words, talk to a client or customer and see if they're flexible about when they need results. Does it really have to be done right away?

And, if both jobs have to be done at the same time and you can't do it all yourself, there's that mantra again: Get help.

FLEX TIME AND DOWN TIME

Don Domanus opened a **Fibrenew** franchise in Fort Collins, Colo., after he was laid off from a manufacturing company. He repairs leather and plastic upholstery in cars, homes and offices.

"I've always been a big company guy," used to having teams of people to handle different tasks, Domanus said. Now, he says: "I am everything. I delegate to myself."

Domanus spends his days going from one car dealership to another to assess and repair torn upholstery. As soon as the work is done, he writes out an invoice. While he's on a job, he takes phone calls to set up more appointments.

There's more work to do, including keeping the books. So, like many owners, he'll work at night. Sometimes he'll take a car seat home with him to accommodate a dealer who has a prospective buyer coming the next day.

But Domanus realizes that he can't work around the clock. He starts the day with some down time.

"I start out every morning giving myself at least a half-hour walk or workout," he said. During that time, "I pump myself up and think about the rewards that come with owning and running my own business."

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