

Business As Usual... or Breaking Point?

By Karel Murray

I had no idea how long two straight weeks on the road really was. It seemed like a great idea when I booked the five engagements in four different states. The travel itinerary flowed logically and I certainly did not want to disappoint my new and repeat clients. So... I lifted my pen, made my travel plans and grinned like a fool. I felt efficient and effective.

The reality of extensive travel slapped me in the face when my first flight had a delay of 3 hours. It only went downhill from there. Envision borrowed toiletries because of misplaced luggage, overheated planes, and surly hotel staff overworked and under motivated. I had a regular movie of the week plot line. Thank heavens I approached it like a comedy.

The stress I place on myself to achieve professional goals has to have a negative impact on me. Couple that with menopause symptoms, insanity can't be but a step away.

What I missed most was the casual conversation with my husband, Rick, the playful welcome of the two Airedale dogs, and the comforting lump of a cat curled contentedly at my side while I slept. What I need is a hotel that offers surrogate pets to fill the emotional void.

Because I travel so much, I watch the behavior constantly of other people. The variety of personalities always astounds me. During this two week stint, I couldn't help but zero in on individuals who couldn't sit still. Cell phone and impassioned discussions with work counterparts fill the air as the talkers stride down the airport halls. Legal and personal issues are discussed openly with little regard for confidentiality. Faces creased with concern, papers shredded in clenched hands and rolling of the eyes to others who happen to catch their notice, all belies an atmosphere of business as usual. It makes no difference that they are juggling several things at once. Or does it?

The significant paradigm shift for my generation revolves around the immediacy of communication. We used to call places and leave a message if the people we wanted to speak to weren't there. Now, we call people. I've heard individuals have cell phone conversations in bathroom stalls, along the street and during their grocery shopping excursions. Cell phones clipped prominently on a belt announces to the world "I'm someone that others want to call!" I swear competitions will evolve around who is the fastest draw off the belt in answering that urgent ring.

My question is – Do we really have to be that available? What ever happened to “down” time? During the fourteen day tour of bookings, other work surfaced. Now faced with handling the keynote and training sessions as well as those business items piling up at home, stress continued to mount.

How did I know I was stressed? I woke up at 3:00 AM five nights in a row to make sure I hadn't over slept the 6 AM wake-up call. No peaceful rest for me...there was business to attend to!

I've recently been appointed to plan a national convention in Las Vegas. Never mind that I've never done this before. Worries about venue space utilization, programming, food, and participant response accumulate into a persistent hum of duties to coordinate, check lists to complete and people to e-mail. The possibility of allowing a critical convention item fall through the cracks is unthinkable. Too many people are counting on me. Add tracking down a presenter who will become the “face” of the conference only adds to the stress. I will never again, as a speaker, assume the meeting planner can read my mind or know my location without a global positioning system tuned into my frequency.

Over last few years, I've learned my personal “business as usual” mentality may not coincide with the standards of someone who hires me. My day often ends by 6:30 PM... that just won't do when I'm teamed up with an individual who feels their business needs to be addressed at 8:30 PM. And there's the rub ... we come full cycle - like a hamster on a wheel - spinning constantly to stay upright and on top of things.

Having the opportunity to speak with other presenters and road warriors, I've discovered that our need to succeed and be perceived as competent, efficient and effective often interferes with our duty to take care of our bodies, minds and family. A good friend of mine, Ryan, recently suffered a severe heart attack... healthy one moment, in the hospital the next. When the physician told him to take six weeks off work, Jake's immediate response was “I can't! The backlog of work will be too much and probably give me another heart attack from the stress of playing catch up!” The physician, with obvious misgivings, shortened the recovery period to two weeks and included strict dietary instructions.

It wasn't until Jake and I both read Fast Company's May issue article that cited research indicating only 1 out of 10 people would actually change their lifestyle if they knew they were going to die without the making the necessary changes. Jake's face paled visibly after reading the article and he suddenly made the

conscious choice to live. He was going to take the full six weeks off work. End of story.

I've learned some fundamental lessons regarding business – the most disturbing one is that I'm dispensable. There will always be someone else who can step up and fill my professional shoes. I can't be duplicated, but the tasks themselves will miraculously be completed with or without me.

The process of living our lives is harsh, demanding, and unpredictable, yet holds an infinite opportunity for joy, fulfillment and awareness of those around us. When I returned home from that long trek on the road, I immediately implemented a plan to change the way I do business in 2006 and beyond. Hiring a coach, redirecting my efforts, narrowing my focus and understanding the value of a fulfilling home life must merge or I may very well reach a breaking point that can't be repaired. I'd like to share my observations with you now:

8 Commitments To Achieve A Positive Lifestyle:

1. Take inventory of what makes you genuinely happy. As you list each item, evaluate what you do every day to ensure that source of joy remains solidly planted in your life. Also list things you do that jeopardize your ability to be happy. Sometimes we are our own worst enemies and don't even know it.
2. Be accountable for the decisions you make. Every time you say "just a minute while I finish these e-mails" and you end up missing dinner with your spouse, understand you chose to stay "plugged in" to the business. It doesn't control you...you control your choices.
3. Learn to turn off the phone...voice mail was created for a reason. If you do make a phone call, be focused on the conversation rather than split your attention and give only half effort to the interaction. Make it clear to those who work with you what your availability schedule is. Learn to bundle calls and when returning calls, stop and fully connect to the other person on the line.
4. Laugh at the absurdities that otherwise contribute to your stress level. A young lady in shorts, sitting next to me at the airport terminal, was the recent victim of a walk-by sneezing. Another passenger inadvertently spit on her leg in his convulsion. He ambled on oblivious. She, however, quietly dug in her purse and pulled out a tissue. She wiped her leg, careful to shield her actions from others... Except I caught her eye and we both howled with laughter. Bless her heart, she

showed class in an awkward situation and exemplified the statement “Stuff happens...deal with it!”

5. Learn to say “NO” with love and affection. Only you know what your priorities and life goals are. Evaluate what others ask you to do, and then determine your response in terms of how it interfaces with your plans.
6. Talk with those closest to you to gain a well rounded perspective regarding how your behavior impacts them. Sometimes a mirror held up before us can tell more than what our mind eye chooses to rationalize. It may not be pretty, but at least you will have an honest starting point on which to make your lifestyle decisions.
7. Handle your business tasks correctly the first time you deal with them. Often I consult with clients who feel like the rats in the race are winning... they are overwhelmed by the volume of work they deal with. When I evaluate their efforts, often I find tasks are addressed multiple times for a variety of reasons. My advice is simple - slow down and check twice. Not a bad motto to live by.
8. Balance your high tech and low tech mentality. I believe, as humans, a disconnect is happening with our ability to interact effectively with others. Using e-mail exclusively only broadens the distance between us and our clients. Find ways to make your contact personal. A warm voice over the phone or a quick face to face visit can go a long way to cement a relationship. I’ve learned that it’s the eyes, body language, and tone of voice that speaks volumes – imparting information that e-mail could never provide.

I am working my way back to a simple understanding regarding my business aspirations:

I work so I can live.

I believe we have to define how far we are willing to push ourselves before we damage the positive aspects of our lives that give us true satisfaction and joy.

It's my choice. It's your choice... business as usual or live your life like you mean it. Choose well.

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