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How to

# Maximize Downtime

Wait! Before you flip past this page, thinking “Who has downtime? We’re so busy there’s no such thing,” I ask you to reconsider. BY MARK OKUN

Every showroom staff has more and different types of work to do today; yet, in consumer sales, there is *always* downtime. How we plan and utilize that time is what will separate the winners and the losers.

Think about it; there are various periods throughout every day in a showroom when there is a flurry of activity, and times when there is not. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could predict when those timeframes occur? Since there is no way to know when we will be swamped or empty, having a plan to maximize the use of downtime is essential.

For the purpose of this article, let's clarify the meaning of “downtime.” I consider “downtime” to be when an individual salesperson is not personally servicing any clients face-to-face in the showroom or on the road. The self-motivated salesperson is focused on the tasks involving the clients in front of

them, which is terrific. However, there are people on the team who require direction and structure. Even a stellar salesperson will benefit from structure and being reminded of the associated daily side duties needed to keep themselves and their showroom top notch.

## TIME TO LEAN?

There is an old phrase my Dad would use when there was downtime in our furniture showroom. In a booming voice, he would say, “If there's time to lean, there's time to clean!” While cleaning the showroom was a good use of available time in 1974, it is not true in 2019.

Today's salespeople's time is too valuable to be spent just maintaining the cleanliness of a showroom. The most important part of their day is waiting on and servicing customers and building

one-on-one relationships with their client base. Downtime happens to all of us, which is why it is important to communicate what each staff member must contribute based on the role they play in the showroom. Create a daily/weekly task list for each person, defining what must be done and the time priority that it must be completed within. Express to staff members the importance of these tasks and how they contribute to the showroom's success. When a new person comes on board, make sure during the pre-employment interview that they know, understand, and are willing to commit to the showroom's downtime requirements.

## DOWNTIME STRATEGY

Since every aspect of a successful business has a strategy, it should be no different here. Having a downtime strategy – a real plan – will improve your bottom-line results. Not having a policy in place leaves a significant portion of every workday to chance.

When creating a plan, take into consideration that there are two types of downtime activities: structured and unstructured. Design an essential to-do list for each unstructured activity that can happen in a day, for example housekeeping chores. Even when there are dedicated people to clean a showroom, the day's events can take away that sharp look that the store had when the doors opened in the morning.

Everyday displays need attention. Think about it: There are burned-out bulbs and tattered tags to replace, jumbled props to re-organize, and cobwebs to remove. Unstructured tasks are best addressed when there is a short break in client activity. Think of it as reapplying makeup between the scenes of a play or the quick huddle a sports team needs to get reset. Provide any tools or items that are required to accomplish these tasks, have them ready in the wings, so between customer visits, there is no ramp-up time to get started.

Most showrooms already have some way that they handle their unstructured tasks, even if it is called “busy work.” This fill-in work helps keep the showroom crisp and the salespeople working together as a team with a common goal of keeping up appearances.

For best results, downtime tasks must be managed and have a structure – even if it's loose – to give an associate the ability to use self-motivation and direction. Structuring the task lends itself

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to activities that are planned and intentional in achieving the desired result. The performance expectations are clearly communicated, and there is a level of urgency to complete the task.

Structured activities are associated with longer-term goals, some of which are tied to the showroom's growth and others that are specific to the individual sales associate's development. This is when the sales team invests their downtime in accomplishing specific tasks that lead to their career progression.

Structured downtime demands that it be scheduled as part of a salesperson's weekly activities. At first glance, this idea seems incongruent. After all, we know downtime happens, we just don't know when. That's why accurate “scheduling” of downtime seems impossible. While this may be a challenge for some managers to wrap their heads around, this type of schedule is not rigid. Rather than schedule a time of day for the structured downtime tasks to be completed, make it a priority for the team to complete within the week. Most of the salespeople I have met know that they must continue to expand their knowledge to stay relevant in many areas and look for venues to gain that knowledge.

The types of activities that work best as structured are self-directed and focused duties that are a direct benefit to the team member and the showroom. Long ago, I gave these structured tasks a name – “Building Your Own Business” (BYOB) – that encompassed all that would be asked of the associate.

## BYOB, GOOD FOR YOU GOOD FOR ME

To save space, I will use the acronym BYOB to refer to the structured tasks that sales teams must include daily that will impact their performance.

BYOB time can be a rigidly scheduled activity if staffing and traffic permits – usually, this is easy to do with larger teams. In smaller showrooms, when

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all hands on deck are a requirement, and having a set time is difficult, sales associates must be self-motivated and accountable to accomplish their BYOB work within the workweek.

BYOB is a good time for professional development that can focus on product knowledge. For all intents and purposes, this is not catalog familiarity, but a much more in-depth, self-directed education that puts a focus on the team member becoming an expert in a specific area of expertise or category. Think about the power of a showroom if every member of the sales team was an expert in one or more areas. This is appealing to potential clients, and it builds the confidence an individual has in themselves and their peers have in them.

Another aspect of BYOB in the digital age is marketing. Back in the day of fax machines, the real sales professionals kept business cards with them because you never know when there was a chance to share what you do with someone.

In 2019, business card distribution and telling everyone what you do is still a sound practice, but now we have social media. Every person who has a public face representing their showroom is also a networking and marketing asset every day. Today, using digital marketing tools to supplement the showroom's efforts will pay big dividends. All marketing today is a promotion, including self-promotion — and that is everyone's job. Some people reading this might think this is a logical activity; others may not. In successful showrooms, the sales team is part of the marketing process.

One of our industry leaders requires the sales team (as a mandatory part of their performance) to market as part of their jobs. The salespeople

contribute to their defined digital marketing efforts DAILY! While this may seem a stretch for some, the juice is worth the squeeze. The way that you incorporate the team into the marketing of your showrooms will vary with the marketing plan in place. Any way that you bolster the showroom's digital presence helps increase reach.

Salespeople who promote over digital platforms are more likely to lead in sales performance. The types of posting sales teams do are essential, too. Teams post about supporting a store-wide campaign or introducing a new style or product category, offering digital-only promotions that are time-sensitive and exclusive to followers of the showroom and the salesperson. This style of promotion encourages followers to make buying decisions.

The real driver of the BYOB program is the incentives provided for success. Because the tasks that fall under this category are often based on self-motivation, an additional reward and recognition for doing the right job will bring along others to reach the same level of success.

Set your KPIs accordingly and make them attainable, the key here is to reward the activity first and the results a bit further down the line. No matter the time of day, there are always slow periods that can be optimized. Time to follow up with current clients and connect with potential customers, time to promote in traditional and digital ways, and time to invest in learning about the business and the clients we serve. This article has provided some ideas that will build the skills needed to increase the success of the individual, the sales team, and the showroom.

And, as always, Happy Selling! ❖

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