

One step at a time -- overcoming the barriers to staying in touch

Almost everyone knows that staying in touch with your former clients, current prospects and contacts is a good idea, and almost nobody does a good job with it. Why don't they (and perhaps you) do a good job with this vital job, and what can they (you) do to improve?

It's important but not urgent

Part of the explanation can be seen in Stephen Covey's famous urgent/important matrix that divides activities into groups with different characteristics.

	Urgent	Not Urgent
Important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current client work • Pressing problems • Tasks with deadlines 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevention • New opportunities • Relationship building • Staying in touch with former clients, prospects, contacts
Not important	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interruptions • Reading emails • Certain meetings • Many messages • Many phone calls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Surfing the Internet • Many emails

Most people spend lots of time on matters that are urgent, neglecting ones that are important but not urgent (at least until, due to neglect, they become urgent!!). Staying in touch with former clients and prospects and contacts is important, but not urgent... so unless you consciously devise a plan to stay

in touch and consciously think about how you will execute your plan, staying in touch likely will be forgotten.

We know it's good to do, so we don't do it.

Taking care of ourselves is sometimes harder than it seems it should be. Sticking to a needed diet, getting enough exercise, or following through on New Year's resolutions all prove to be quite difficult for many, even though we know that achieving that aspiration would be good for us. Staying in touch with clients and contacts falls into this category too -- we know it's good for us and we don't do it.

A theory about this suggests that many people are conflicted about taking care of themselves. Given how they've been taken care of over their lives (and especially when they were young) they feel better -- counter-intuitively -- when they don't take care of themselves. For these people, consistently acting in their own self-interest is hard; shooting themselves in the foot is easy.

What to do to ensure that you do stay in touch.

Trying to reach people is important. If you don't try, you definitely won't succeed (as the famous hockey player said, "I miss 100% of the shots that I don't take."). You can leave a message, and you can try again in a week or two. You can also ask them to email you to set up a time to talk.

Find the time to do it. Treat it as important!!

- Block some time aside to do it -- a regular block of time. If it is important, it deserves a regular block of time. Set up a regular time as an appointment, e.g., 1 hour per week, and don't schedule over it except for the direst emergencies (maybe something dire enough that you'd move a meeting with a prospective client because it's that big of an emergency). Otherwise, just do it.
- Use your "available time", e.g., at airports. Even though we are all busy, unfortunately there are times when schedules don't work out. Are you capitalizing on this time? Do you have the list of people you'd like to be in touch with on your phone so you can call them when you have time, such as when your plane is delayed?
- Set up a reminder system. When you fail to reach someone, just reschedule that call for a particular day in the future. Then it will show up on your calendar, and you'll remember to try again.

Get some social support

It's hard to do things alone. That's why people get running buddies, or go to Weight Watchers. You could benefit from a "stay in touch" buddy. You could:

- Pair up with someone. Agree that you'll remind the other person of what they committed to do. If you have colleagues at your firm, great. If you don't, you can pair with someone at a different firm who also has the same challenges (so if you are an architect, you can pair with a lawyer,

for example -- and you can find a buddy by asking your lawyer for suggestions); it's not hard to find someone who has this issue and is struggling with it alone.

- Make a team with some colleagues. It doesn't have to be just two of you. Maybe several people want to provide support to each other, and to figure out with each other what works.
- Get a coach. You pay a coach to help keep you on track. It can be a great investment.

Power calling

"Power calling" combines scheduling time and social support. In "power calling", you and a colleague both block out the same time, and use that hour to reach out to your contacts. You take no inbound calls during that hour (from anyone) nor do you read your emails, or anything else. If you get someone, you are prepared to talk, but otherwise you are calling and leaving messages that can lead to return calls. At the end of the hour, you and your colleague trade stories and congratulate each other.

Start small and easy

You can get your feet wet with staying in touch very easily. Start with a small number of people (perhaps 5-7) that you commit to yourself to reach out to and to stay in touch with. You'll get some positive responses that will provide you with energy. Then add a few people every month to the list.

- Start with people you like (from the recent or distant past). It's easier to call clients you liked, prospects you like, or contacts you like. Start with the easy ones. If you are calling someone from the distant past, you can just say that you were thinking about people you liked whom you were out of touch with and they were at the top of the list. They'll call you back.
- Then add people from not that long ago. Some people feel it's odd (though it's not) to start talking with someone from a long time ago. If it's harder for you to call people from the distant past, then move next to people you've dealt with more recently.

You are not selling, just seeing how they are and what they are up to and reestablishing contact.

What are these tips?

These monthly tips help professionals create more business and enjoy their work more. We focus on how to start relationships, how to build relationships, and how to convert those relationships into sales. Visit our [archives](#) to learn more.