



Stopping “Productivus Interruptus” Once and for All

My life is one long obstacle course, with me being the chief obstacle.

—JACK PAAR

Interruptions destroy many office- or desk-bound individuals' productivity.

Put a stop to interruptions: multiply your productivity. It is that simple.

After reading a study claiming that the average business owner is interrupted once every eight minutes, I had three of my clients who spend all day on their business premises put a watch on it for a day. One reported a better average: once per ten. The other two, six, and the third hollered, “Hey, I need a stopwatch.”

When I used to go to my offices in a place where I was under the same roof with my staff, I found that to be about par—if I let

it happen. And, as a big thumb rule, the more employees or associates you've got, the more you get interrupted. Some years back, I suddenly wound up with a staff of 42 people thrust upon me. For a while, I was interrupted every eight *seconds*, not every eight minutes. It was embarrassing to ultimately realize that this was all my fault. I permitted, even invited the interruptions. And I learned to stop them.

There are many reasons for these interruptions, and almost none of them have to do with necessity! If you're going to achieve peak personal productivity in such an environment, here are the five self-defense, time-defense tactics you'll have to use:

1. Get lost
2. Don't answer the phone
3. Fix the fax
4. Set the timer on the bomb
5. Be busy and be obvious about it

Get Lost

Your first tactic—simple inaccessibility. When I was in the office I got asked lots of questions that I knew the people figured out for themselves when I wasn't there, so my being there, and being accessible, actually diminished *their* productivity as well as mine. The answer is not to be there at all. Some entrepreneurs think they have to set a leadership example by being the first person there, to turn on the lights, and the last person to leave, to turn off the lights. I made this mistake, and it IS a huge mistake. Leadership is *not* about outworking everybody.

I learned by traveling that my people functioned just as well or better with me as an absentee leader as they did with me

onsite. When I was on the road and inaccessible, they handled 80% of everything on their own, most of it satisfactorily, some with excellence, and a little bit unsatisfactorily but almost always repairable. And they asked me about the other 20% quickly and efficiently, in brief phone conversations or via fax. Since that worked okay when it had to, there's no reason it couldn't work all the time. So, I stopped going in to the office, period. I had a fax at home and at the office, so when I was in town, I stayed at home and worked there largely interrupted. When necessary, I faxed or phoned in; they phoned or faxed me.

Today, I live and work at my Ohio home more than anywhere else. I have only one staff person, and she is in the office—in Phoenix. About as far from underfoot as can be. Almost without exception, we talk by phone once a day, usually for less than 20 minutes; I get truly urgent faxes once a day; and once a week I get a nicely organized box of other faxes, mail, and a list of questions. She is far better organized in dealing with me than she'd be were I there or more accessible. I am far better organized in dealing with her. I'm certain it equates to at least two hours of productivity saved per day for both of us, and in my world, that's a whole pile of money. A lot more than the weekly FedEx bill.

Dozens of my clients have mimicked these practices, with very good result. In fact, I can name more than 30—some running small businesses like mine with only one or two staff, others running businesses doing as much as \$30 million a year—who have offices they seldom visit—from no more than once a week to as seldom as once a month. Chet Rowland, who owns one of the largest and most profitable pest control companies in Florida, as well as a marketing, training and coaching company serving the entire pest control industry, has sales, administrative, technical,

and in-the-field, on-the-truck employees. He goes to the office no more than twice a month. His right-hand person comes to his home for a meeting once a week. He gets daily statistics and information electronically. He works in a home office at his sprawling lakeside home or at his beachfront condo. He travels often with no anxiety about being away from the office, because he's always away from the office. He gets so much more accomplished than he would if in that office eight hours a day, it can't even be measured.

I have a friend, a CEO of a \$4 or \$5 million-a-year business, who can't work at home; he has six kids, two dogs, one spouse. So he has a small \$200-a-month office in town, about halfway between his home and his manufacturing facility. It has no phone and no fax. And he spends most of his time there.

He and I agree:



Dan Kennedy's #3 No B.S. Time Truth

If they can't find you, they can't interrupt you.

Another business owner I know has been weaning his staff from him and weaning himself from being in his office every minute, poking his nose in everything, second-guessing everybody. To his shock and surprise, things have been going well. A few people in his organization have risen to the occasion. A few have proven unable to adjust and been fired. Overall, sales and

profits are up. He is finding time to invent and work on “special projects” he’s been thinking about for years. And for the first time ever, he’s taking an entire month of vacation, at a rented beach cottage, several states away from his business. For the first time in 30 years, he’s really becoming a business owner instead of being owned by a business.

If you *are* going to be in your office with the rest of your staff, then, contrary to my dumb open door management experiment, it is very important that you have a CLOSED DOOR POLICY. You need some times when everybody knows—because of the closed door, red light, stuffed purple dragon in the hallway, whatever—that you are 100% uninterruptible. And if you want to sit in there and take a nap, you go right ahead. It’s none of their damned business.

Don’t Answer the Phone

Next, you’ve got to get control over the telephone. I think the phone is Peak Productivity Enemy Number One, and your people will be in cahoots with it until you break them of the habit. People somehow get conditioned that they must respond to the phone when it rings, and believe you should too. At home, on their own time, people will run dripping from the bathtub, jump up from the dinner table, even “coitus interruptus” to answer the phone. It’s incredible how cowed by Mr. Bell’s invention most people are. Ring. Run. Respond. *Nuts*.

So, first, let me offer a bit of philosophy: you have absolutely no legal, moral, or other responsibility to answer the phone or take a call unless you want to. At home, I routinely take the phone off the hook to take a shower, eat a meal, take a nap, watch

a favorite TV program or, well, for other things too. There's nothing—and I mean nothing—happening on earth that can't or won't wait an hour. Or two. You should carry that attitude into your work too. Different people need different levels of control over telephone interruptions, but I do not believe anybody ought to be wide open to in-bound calls. This is like walking around with a "Kick Me" sign tacked to your back. If you take inbound calls as they come, you are constantly stopping work on a task of known priority in favor of something or someone of unknown priority. You are turning control of your day over to the unknown. And at the end of most days, you'll be worn out, but you won't have gotten to do most of the things you wanted to do.

Personally, I have very rarely encountered an inbound call damaged by a day's delay in response. Most of my important calls are forwarded to me while traveling, and I start trying to return them the next day. A lot of the calls wait three, four, even five days before I take time to return them. Guess what? Occasionally, somebody's aggravated—which is their problem, not mine—but I have yet to notice this approach costing me any money. Not a nickel. In fact, ironically, in my business (and in many), being somewhat difficult to get to actually helps rather than hinders securing new clients and having those clients appreciate and respect your time and assistance. Rightly or wrongly, most folks don't put a lot of value on getting to the wise man at the *bottom* of the mountain. (I talk about this, in the context of "Takeaway Selling," in my book *No B.S. Sales Success*.)

The Take-with-You Phone

Now, the cell phone—an evil invention if there ever was one. People really feel compelled to answer these things 24/7. It is the

ultimate interruption welcome mat, and it has amazing, mysterious powers over its owner.

As comedian Dennis Miller says, I don't want to get off on a rant here, but. . . increasingly, I am noticing men standing at urinals in public restrooms taking care of business while talking on the phone simultaneously. Look, if you can't even pee in peace, you are not Mr. Super-Important. You are Mr. Super-Stupid.

Personally, I refuse to own or use one at all. I had one for two weeks once. Wound down the car window one day and threw it as far as I could. Never been tempted again.

If you insist on carrying one of these miserable things, have the good sense to turn it off. A lot. Like to walk to lunch with coworkers or friends, eat, and actually digest what you eat. Or pee. Or, say, navigate your SUV down the side of a mountain, on an icy, curvy road. And have the common decency to turn it off and shut up when you are seated next to me on an airplane before I ram it down your throat.

In my seminars, by the way, we assess a \$100.00 fine anytime a cell phone erupts. And confiscate the offending phone for the duration.

Often, the offenders have paid \$2,000.00 to \$5,000.00 to be in the room. Many are also very good clients. I don't care. I will not tolerate it. I warn everybody, I put some big, beefy bruiser in charge of collecting, and I take the money. If you can't have your life sufficiently in order to pay uninterrupted attention and be courteous to others, I'd prefer you stay home and annoy someone else. I think restaurants and theaters ought to collect them when you come in and give them back when you leave, like civilized saloons did with gunslingers' weapons.

The pay phone in a booth with a folding door on it was a wonderfully civilized thing.

And a word to business owners, salespeople, and my pathetically desperate and paranoid speaking colleagues who devoutly believe they must be instantly accessible at any and every moment to every client and prospective client to prevent that client from dialing the next number and doing business with whomever answers instantly: if you are that interchangeable, that mundane and ordinary a commodity, you've got big, big problems, far bigger than you can solve by answering your cell while you're on the can. Turn off the thing long enough to read my *No B.S. Sales Success* book. *That's* urgent.

Maybe this will help: picture the poor fellow walking around with cell phone in hand or on belt, or worse, with headphones on, is like a big, dumb dog with collar and leash. Tug, tug, tug. Yap, yap, yap. Pant, pant, pant.

If you walk upright, you ought to behave better than this. And resent the leash.


Your "Steel Curtain" Telephone Defense

If you buy into this tactic at all, you will obviously need a good screening system. What will protect you from the telephone? If you have a live person, a receptionist or secretary or a receptionist plus a secretary, that's probably best. (If not, you'll have to use voice mail or an answering machine.) Your receptionist or secretary needs a continually updated "VIP list" of people from whom you will almost always take an incoming call, regardless of what else you may be doing. This prevents you from missing calls you really want, and it allows your assistant to screen all the other calls with great confidence.

Keeping this VIP list up to date helps prevent screening faux pas, however, even when a faux pas occurs, you must never sacrifice your assistant to the cause. You must support the person

doing your screening 100% of the time. A screener can only do the job if she has complete confidence in what she's doing.

If you want staff to consistently put up a "Steel Curtain Defense" comparable in strength and reliability to the famous Pittsburgh Steelers' steel curtain defense of their glory years, you have to give them the right tools, equipment, and support.



You might wonder who's on my VIP List. I'll appease your curiosity. At any one given time, there are a dozen or so key private clients on that list—people paying me sizable sums of money. I have several very close associates on the list. A few very close friends. And that's it. I'd say that a VIP list with more than two dozen people on it is not a VIP list at all. In my case, even the VIPs can't get through to me immediately, because I'm not there, but they will typically get a return call the same day or the next day. On a given day, a client might be given a direct line to where I'm working, under extreme circumstances, but for one-time use only. Oh, and even at the office, my staff person only answers "live" one afternoon a week, which is published and known to clients. Otherwise, they get my voice mail. I really do have a steel curtain defense.

You have to decide on the severity of the screening to be done. In my case, on any given day, I'll get a few VIP calls and up to two dozen calls from other people of unknown priority, including prospective new clients, book reviewers, media contacts, and salespeople. If I were in my office for the whole day and took these calls as they occurred, and each one averaged only three minutes, I would have let loose of an hour. But much more importantly, I would have been interrupted 24 times! The three minutes given each call would have cost me another ten minutes added, required to get back in gear after each interruption; 13 minutes times 24 calls equals FIVE HOURS of lost time.

However, because I travel and am rarely in my office, most of each day's non-VIP calls accumulate, so after a week, I may have as many as 120 calls to supposedly return. Considering all this, I have a very tough-minded policy. First, all callers are asked for their reason for calling. People refusing to provide good information about their reason for calling NEVER gets a return call; in fact, they never even get entered on my call log. My staff person is asked to throw them into the trash; this eliminates a lot of junk.

Second, prospective clients are asked to send information in writing, by mail or fax, so that I can look at it at my convenience and have the flexibility of responding as I judge best: calling, writing, sending information before calling, delegating, or referring elsewhere. If they won't do that, they NEVER get to me. Salespeople are told pretty much the same thing. If they won't play by my rules, they NEVER get through. The "tone" is polite but firm. I tend to return calls only once or twice a week, more often than not via pre-arranged, back-to-back, time-limited phone appointments.

I know, you're mumbling about the 52 reasons *you* can't do such things in *your* business because *your* business is different

and *your* clients won't tolerate it. Pfu. It's not like I'm the president or the pope or J-Lo or anybody like that. I'm basically a self-glorified salesman. I've simply done the following three things anyone can do:

1. Decided.
2. Deliberately positioned and marketed myself in a manner conducive to controlling and limiting access.
3. Trained clientele. And they are trainable. When I was a kid, I had litter-box trained pet rabbits that hopped back to their cage to go to the bathroom. I once had a racehorse trained to walk down the barn aisle and turn off the light switches with his mouth. If you can teach a bunny rabbit to go back to his cage to drop doody or a horse to flip light switches, you can train humans to respect you and your time and operate within a few simple rules.

You may or may not want to be as tough as I am. You may not even want to be as tough as many of my clients and Inner Circle Members who've adopted modified versions of my approach. But I will bet you the biggest steak in Texas that you *can* benefit from a tougher screening process than you have now. Think about it.

Fix the Fax

Next, we've got to gain control over and productively use the fax machine. Now let me start by telling you that I'm *not* the world's greatest fan of technology. But I really *love* the fax machine. I think the fax machine is terrific. It's just about my favorite "appliance." (I have no earthly idea how the darned thing works, by the way. It's amazing to me: I stick in a document in Phoenix,

push a button, and a fax machine in New Zealand spits it out minutes later. And I thought the self-stick tab on the FedEx envelope was high tech!) Anyway, there are two really good ways to use this magic box to enhance your personal productivity. But, before I tell you about those, let's tackle "the dark side" of this thing—and yes, the fax machine definitely has a "dark side," which I hate.

The Dark Side of Instant Communication

Here's the problem. People who send you faxes think that they've instantly communicated with you and that they should get an immediate response from you. Incredibly, they have this illusion that faxing a document is exactly the same as plunking it into your hands. I guess you're supposed to be sitting there, right next to the fax, watching and waiting. Or that when a fax arrives, everybody's supposed to drop what they are doing, snatch up that fax, burst into your office, interrupt your meeting with the president or the pope, and make you read that fax right now. This attitude was at its worst when faxes were new, but it's still prevalent.

This was and occasionally still is a big problem for me. On a typical day, there will be 20 to 30 to 50 "overnight faxes" waiting, and, during the day, another 20, 30, or more will come zipping in. And remember, I'm not there anyway. So, my beleaguered staff person takes care of the ones she can. The rest get separated into those she judges to be urgent, which get forwarded to me by fax, and those she believes can wait to go in with my week's mail. Even when I was around, I refused to let people pressure me by faxing, I refused to have my day's plan disrupted by faxes, I refused to be controlled by someone else's priorities. So, we have to educate clients about all this.

Since I first penned those above paragraphs about fax, we've added e-mail. Well, I haven't; I won't use that any more than I'll use a cell phone. But *you've* added e-mail. Everything I just said about faxes goes quadruple for e-mail. Listen up: you are not obligated to respond to inbound e-mail instantly, quickly, or ever. I don't need to tell you that if you don't stick a cork in this widening hole, you'll drown trying to handle e-mail. Get tough or die.

With each easier, faster means of communicating, the quantity of dumb, junk communication has multiplied. Because sending an e-mail is so easy and doesn't even require the labor of walking over to the fax machine, people send e-mails any time they have a brain fart. One consultant friend of mine was getting 8 to 20 different, separate e-mails each day from one of his clients—each time the client had a thought or question, zap went the e-mail. In the corporate environment, the individual e-mails have become another Time Vampire trick, a less laborious equivalent of just popping in, standing in the doorway, saying “Got just a minute?”

Again, you may or may not want or need to mirror me. But if you're like many people, and you jump up every time the fax machine beeps, you can't possibly be productive. If somebody runs in to your office every time a fax arrives for you, you're destined for low productivity. If you're checking your e-mail constantly, compulsively, or worse, if you're responding to messages as they arrive—you're headed for an early grave.

For somebody in an office, I think a good system is to take the hour after lunch to look at the morning's faxes, e-mails, and phone calls, deal **ONLY** with those that are genuinely urgent, and set the others aside. Then, take the last hour of the day to look at

the afternoon's accumulated incoming messages, quickly deal with these most urgent and integrate all the rest into your next day's plan. For road warriors, a strategy more like mine may be appropriate.

For far too many people, the phone, the fax machine, e-mail, FedEx—heck, for some people, the mail—invokes a Pavlovian, jump up and instantly respond reaction. If it has never occurred to you before, you ought to look at this now as weird behavior. Who's in charge here anyway? Get a grip.

Finding Power in the Fax

Now, back to ways to use the fax to enhance your productivity. First of all, if you can train your clients, customers, associates, vendors, and others to communicate with you by fax rather than phone, that's a huge productivity advantage. It stops phone tag. It reduces your return call burden. It gets information to you in a more organized way. Often, as people jot out faxes they clarify their own thinking, even answer their own questions. You can deal with these inbounds at your convenience, after hours, while traveling, whatever. When I come home—or if traveling, when I arrive at my hotel—I'd much rather have a stack of faxes than a stack of phone messages. Have you ever gotten a phone message—"Call Bill as soon as you can"—then not been able to reach him and had indigestion after dinner and a sleepless night worrying about what Bill wanted? If Bill had been trained to communicate with you properly by fax, that just wouldn't happen.

Forcing faxes rather than e-mail will also be more productive for you. I've looked at the e-mails people get and compared them to the faxes I get. More thought goes into the faxes. People tend



Incidentally, if YOU want to communicate with me, you can fax me at (602) 269-3113. Just don't sit there holding your breath, waiting for my response.

to cluster multiple items into one fax vs. a stream of single item e-mails. They are more inclined to resolve some things themselves when they must put them into a memo to be faxed than when they can e-mail. The e-mail is more casual, and you really don't want people feeling too casual about consuming your time.

Come to your own conclusions about it all—fax, e-mail, cell. But be the master, not the slave.

Set the Timer on the Bomb

If you do take an incoming call, when you get on the phone with someone, it's a smart idea to set up the exit time first. For example, I'll often say:

Tom, I have a conference call starting in just 15 minutes, but I wanted to take your call—I hope that will be enough time for our discussion. Do you agree—or should we set up another telephone appointment?

Tick, tick, tick.

When someone “drops in,” and you decide to go ahead and see them, then, when you bring them into your office, it's a smart idea to set up the exit time first.

Bob, it's difficult these days for me to see drop-in visitors, but it's good to see you. We'll only have half an hour, though, but no longer, as I have an important conference call set for 4:00 P.M. That's OK, isn't it?

Tick, tick, tick.

You may not win any awards for being sociable, but you'll have shorter, more purposeful telephone conversations and meetings. Drop-ins will gradually get the message. Callers will gradually learn to call ahead and set up a phone appointment, or at least, to prepare and be efficient when calling. I call this "setting the timer on the bomb." I even have a clock that looks just like six sticks of dynamite wired together, with a timer on it, and the timer has a flashing red light. This gets a lot of attention plunked down in the center of the conference table. If you're not going to do this physically, you at least want to do it verbally.

You see, *most people will suck up about as much time as you let them.* Salespeople feel productive and satisfied as long as they're talking with customers, and will even extend conversations with a friendly customer as a means of avoiding the risk of confronting new prospects. Employees will dawdle in conversation; it beats working! Conversations have a way of stretching to fill whatever amount of time is available for them.

Be Busy and Be Obvious About It

Obviously busy people are interrupted less than unbusy people. Just like burglars pass up some homes in favor of others, looking for the easiest, safest targets, those who steal and suck up time by interrupting others tend to cruise the office looking for the best opportunity and the easiest target. If you are sitting at your desk,

comfortably, appearing relaxed, you're it. Of course, you might be contemplating a formula for disarming a nuclear warhead, but that won't matter, because it's not obvious.

When you are visible to others, it's best to be visibly busy.