Simple strategies to reignite your business

Practical ways to get over that hump
If you hit a wall... take solace in the fact that you're not alone. Nearly every agency owner reaches a point at which work becomes extremely frustrating. Often, that's because the agency hits a particular level of business and can't seem to move any farther. At other times, the daily challenge of growing a business appears to have become a boring daily grind.

Owners usually brush those feelings aside and push ahead. But at times, their frustration and boredom brings the business to a halt. That's dangerous, because if your business isn't moving forward, it's falling behind. Your competitors aren't standing still, and your lack of activity is giving them an opportunity to carve away at business that should be (or already is) yours.

If that alone isn't a cause for concern, think about your personal health. Recent medical research has determined that burnout increases the risk for heart attacks, heart disease, stroke, and sudden cardiac death as much as familiar risk factors such as smoking, high cholesterol, and high BMI. It also heightens your risk for type II diabetes and sleep disorders.1 The doctors at the Mayo Clinic note that burnout can also lead to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and a greater vulnerability to illness in general.2

Fortunately, there are ways to reignite your business, and regain your energy and positive attitude. Most of them are remarkably simple -- and you may already be doing them. In this white paper, we'll examine a variety of very practical ways to get your agency moving in the right direction.

Get away from it
While no two agency owners are exactly the same, it's a safe bet that nearly all of them are workaholics to some degree. That's not necessarily a bad thing, because keeping a business viable requires drive and determination.

One of the best ways to recharge your batteries and keep burnout at bay is to spend time away from the agency by taking a vacation. Doing so regularly may be critical for your health. Consider a pair of recent medical studies. In one, doctors followed 13,000 middle-aged men who had some risk factors for heart disease. Those who failed to take vacations for five years were 30 percent more likely to suffer heart attacks than those who took a week or more off every year. Even men who missed just one year's annual vacation saw an increase in the risk of a heart attack. Another study of 1,500 women found that those who vacationed at least twice annually were less tense and depressed than women who did so less often. Plus, women who took fewer vacations reported markedly lower levels of marital happiness.3

Another important point about taking time off: the benefits extend beyond the actual days away from work. The process of planning builds excitement and anticipation that can make it easier to tackle the daily grind. “You can feel the effects up to eight weeks prior to your trip,” notes Dr. Mark Smith, adding, “And when you’re done with that retreat, start planning the next one. Simply having something to look forward to can be rewarding.”4

Even short breaks can help you clear your head and restore your energy. Include a half-hour walk or a workout in your daily schedule, and you’ll also build up your physical strength. Commit
to taking one afternoon off each week to do something you enjoy, whether that’s golfing, fishing, seeing a movie, or taking part in community activities. You can even use your time off to do good things, such as volunteering at a local school or food pantry.

Just be sure that you include your stress relief in your schedule and protect that time. Otherwise, it’s far too easy to say “I need to get that report done, so I’ll skip today’s workout.” Entrepreneur Annie Wang recommends a 90/10 rule, in which you promise yourself that you’ll spend 10 percent of your workweek on something other than your business, whether that’s a hobby, a project, or even coming up with ideas for another business. She notes that shifting your thinking elsewhere can reactivate parts of your brain that you’ve been ignoring, and may even get you to look at your business in new ways.

Take an honest look

If that sense of frustration is resulting from being unhappy with your agency’s present situation or the direction in which it’s headed, it may be time to stop and take a candid look at where you’re at and how you got there.

Most business owners think of a business plan as a document that’s appropriate only when starting a business. Actually, the thinking that goes into developing a business plan for a startup is even more important for a going concern. That’s because developing a business plan makes you examine every aspect of your business.

To do that effectively, you have to be able to detach your emotions from the process and remember that you're examining your agency, not yourself. You also have to be completely honest with yourself. Insurance agents and others involved in sales have a tendency to force themselves to emphasize the positive aspects of situations, but this process won't work unless you're honest and objective.

That's why you may benefit by bringing outside advisors into your review. They may spot things that aren't readily apparent from your point of view, and they can ask the tough questions that will help you get to the root of the problem. Those advisors include professionals like your accountant and your attorney. Another great source of help is an organization known as SCORE, or the Service Corps of Retired Executives. They have representatives in most areas who will sit down with business owners and help them take a fresh look at their companies. SCORE’s website (score.org) also has a variety of helpful templates and tools.

One simple exercise is to look back to the last time you really felt that you were enjoying your work. What changes took you from that to your present situation? It may be that your carrier’s expectations changed, that you faced aggressive new competition, or that your community’s economic health has declined. If you can identify the factors that have affected your attitude, you’ll be better able to choose the strategies that can turn things around.

Most entrepreneurs thrive on challenges, and a sense that their businesses are stuck on a plateau may actually be a signal that they are craving a new challenge. Perhaps you need to expand your agency’s efforts into a new market or coverage area that will create those challenges for you. Or, you may be able to find things outside of work that can satisfy that
craving. Maybe you’ve always wanted to learn to fly, go rock climbing, or take up sailing. Give them a try, because a lack of challenges can lead to a lack of motivation.

**How do you spend your workday?**

Perhaps you’re unsatisfied because you’re not doing the right things or you’re forcing yourself to do work that you don’t enjoy. For example, you may love to spend time sitting across from clients, but dread the process of setting appointments. Or it may be that you’re continually being distracted from sales activities by the minutiae associated with running a business.

Failing to use your time efficiently can trigger burnout, because you’ll have the sense that you’re not accomplishing as much as you should. You’ll end the day with a frustrating list of unfinished tasks, and end the month well below your performance targets.

The key is to be honest about the strengths you bring to your business, and then to refocus your schedule so your time is concentrated there. If sales calls are the best use of your time, you may want to invest in an administrative assistant who can schedule appointments for you and handle the paperwork you detest. If you think that you can’t afford such help, consider how much your commissions would increase if more of your time was devoted to sales.

Delegating tiresome tasks doesn’t necessarily mean having to hire an employee. You may be able to outsource those tasks to other businesses in your community. As large companies have downsized, entrepreneurial-minded folks have recognized the opportunity to start their own service businesses. In addition to small companies focused on specific tasks such as payroll management, there are so-called virtual assistants who can handle nearly any administrative task on your behalf — from setting appointments to managing your marketing efforts.

Business blogger Elke Schmidt suggests that effective outsourcing requires that you know exactly what you’re delegating, have clear expectations for what you’ll receive in service and deliverables, and be able to document and measure results so you know whether it’s been successful. “If you can delegate something to someone who can do it faster, better and cheaper, then you’ll be better off.”

When you devote 100 percent of your energy to what you enjoy and what you’re best at doing, your productivity will improve, your profitability should grow, and you’ll find yourself looking forward to getting to work each day.

**Try a new direction**

Have you ever redecorated a room in your home and felt an immediate burst of energy (at least once the hard work was over)? There’s a feeling of satisfaction when you make some simple changes, and they often motivate people to make other changes.

It may be time to renovate your business and practices. That doesn’t mean simply redecorating the office (although that can boost your team’s morale). Instead, it involves changing some aspects of how you do business.
A good way to start is by taking a long look at your customers’ needs. That’s especially important if your agency has been in business for a long time, because your market may have changed. Often, communities and customers change slowly over time, and those changes happen so subtly that businesses may not notice them. When you started your agency, most of the households in the surrounding area may have been established families with children nearing college age, but 20 years later, those families have been replaced by younger couples whose kids are getting ready for kindergarten. Or perhaps your area has seen an influx of immigrants from another country or region with different needs and values. Business author Mark Henricks says, “When that happens, changing your offering to reflect the needs and desires of your new demographic could not only revive sales but raise them higher than ever.”

If your products and services are still working, you may want to consider exploring new marketing opportunities. Perhaps direct mail or cable television will help you reach out to new prospects. Or you may want to plan an active role in networking groups or community organizations such as service groups and the Chamber of Commerce. The opportunities are endless, so identify those that appeal to you and try one or two. Be sure to pay attention to the results, so you know whether the time you’re devoting is productive.

Another way to get ideas for your agency is to look at successful businesses outside your industry. You can identify a company that impresses you and study what they have done to achieve their success. You can get to know agents in other markets and learn from what’s worked (and what hasn’t) for them. When your carriers hold events or meetings for agents, make a point to seek out agents you’ve never met and swap ideas with them.

You can also get great ideas from talking to business owners in other industries. Sitting down for lunch or playing a round of golf with an entrepreneur in some other field may trigger concepts you’ve never considered. Those individuals can even serve as sounding boards for your own ideas. It’s easy to become too focused on how things are done in the insurance industry, and someone who runs a car dealership, a tool and die business, or a distribution company may be able to provide a fresh perspective.

Some companies head off burnout by trying to inject more fun into their businesses, both for customers and employees. “Business is supposed to be enjoyable,” says Franklin Phillips. “Keeping an easygoing environment is also crucial for keeping your employees happy. Experience and statistics show that employees who enjoy their jobs are more productive and will stay with a company far longer than employees who do not enjoy their jobs.” He says that making a workplace fun doesn’t have to involve anything elaborate. Even an hour or two of social activities each week can lighten the mood. “Attracting customers is easier in an environment of hospitality. A fun workplace is not only more productive, but it attracts customers and profits.”

**Consider Combining Forces**

Sometimes, frustration and burnout are the result of recognizing the limitations of our own resources. The simple fact is that there are only so many hours in a day and only so many places we can be in the course of the week.
If you feel that your agency can’t move past those limitations, it may be time to consider bringing your business together with others. One obvious example with that is a merger with or acquisition of another agency in your community or a nearby town. By combining forces, you can increase your potential for revenue while taking advantage of economies to trim your operating costs (for example, paying rent for one office instead of two).

Another approach that may be worth examining is combining or aligning your agency with another business that is not a competitor, but that actually provides services that are complementary with yours. Examples of those businesses include financial planners, attorneys, accountants, and Realtors. You may be able to trim operating costs by sharing office space and administrative staff, and to build revenues by developing relationships with the other professionals’ clients.

You do need to be careful when selecting a prospective partner or ally. It’s important to be confident that you share business philosophies and practices, and that nothing about the potential partner’s approach or history will have a negative effect upon your hard-earned reputation. If you choose to take this route, move solely and carefully. It makes sense to bring a neutral third party in to help with the process and negotiations.

**Bring in new blood**

Most savvy business owners are wary of “throwing money” at a problem, and even more hesitant to “throw people” at needs by adding to their companies’ staffs. However, bolstering your team by hiring the right people can give your agency a powerful shot of energy and resources.

For some agents, that may involve hiring additional customer service representatives or administrative assistants (or even hiring their first employees). For larger agents, it may mean bringing a proven salesperson from another business (or a competitor) on staff.

Bringing new blood into an agency tends to pay off in two ways. First, there’s the additional productivity or revenue that the new employee tends to generate. But just as important is the emotional impact that someone new can create. That person’s enthusiasm tends to be contagious, bringing renewed energy to everyone else at the agency (including you).

How can your business attract the best employees in town? By being the best employer. “It doesn’t matter if you hire actual employees or contractors, if you are a good business to work for, talent will naturally be attracted to you,” says Elke Schmidt. Generous wages and benefits are part of that, but a supportive, friendly workplace is every bit as important. Employees like to know that they’re playing a critical role in an agency’s success — and it’s only fair to ensure that they share in the success they create. 

**Being able to afford change**

As an agency owner, one of the first considerations whenever you think about changing something is whether you can afford to do so. For example, even if you know that it would benefit your productivity and profitability to hire an administrative assistant, you may look at your current income statement and wonder how you can make that possible.
The key is to shift your thinking so that you view such moves as investments in the long-term value of your business, rather than as short-term expenses that hurt profitability. It’s true that making a significant change (or doing something like finally taking a vacation) may cause you to tighten your belt for a few weeks or months, but the long-term benefits should more than reward you for making the change.

Just be sure that you monitor and measure the results of your change so that you can verify that you’re receiving the boost you were after. If you’re not sure how to do that, an outside professional such as your accountant can help you determine a set of measurements.

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