

ARTICLE REPRINT

Don't Bother Me – I'm Too Busy

Our business development director, Gary Tarolli, recently told me a story that reminded me of a cartoon I had seen on a customer's wall over twenty years ago:



The army leader in this cartoon is so focused on fighting a battle, and so unwilling to allow any distractions, that he misses an opportunity to grasp the decided advantage a machine gun would give his army against an enemy carrying swords and shields.

Gary's story involved an executive named Bill who must have been a medieval general in a previous life. Overwhelmed by phone calls, voice mail messages and emails, Bill decided to erect a fortress around his office and slam his office door shut. He appointed his trusted, capable assistant Mary as gatekeeper to guard his time against all intruders, including customers who might want to talk to him for any reason.

Armed with a short list of people whose calls or emails Bill would accept, Mary developed a routine designed to discourage even the most persistent callers who were not on Bill's list. When someone would phone to speak to Bill she would ask, "Who is calling?" This was of course followed by "What company are you with?" And that question was followed by the inevitable "May I ask what this is about?"

It quickly became clear to most callers that getting past Bill's gatekeeper would be a formidable, if not impossible task. Most callers gave up the attempt, and many were annoyed and offended by Mary's intrusive grilling.

Bill's new fortress protected him from interruptions, just like he envisioned. Except for his boss, his wife and a few other business associates, no one got through the gatekeeper to distract Bill from his important work. Bill was one happy camper.

One day while Bill was having lunch at his favorite restaurant he ran into Dave, an old customer. After exchanging the normal pleasantries, Dave mentioned that he was sorry Bill couldn't bid on the largest order for product Dave's company had ever placed.

Shocked, Bill said "What order?" Why didn't you tell me about it?" "I tried to contact you," said Dave, "but I couldn't get past your assistant. She didn't know me, or my company, and she didn't think you'd be interested. I would have called you at home, but I didn't want to bother you."

"But why didn't you call someone in our sales department?" asked Bill. "I tried," Dave replied. "Navigating their voice mail system was almost impossible, and when I finally reached a secretary she wouldn't let me talk to anyone. She told me someone would get back to me, but no one ever called."

Visibly shaken, Bill offered Dave a meek, embarrassed apology, vowing to get to the bottom of why his people failed to respond to a great business opportunity with Dave's company.

Is there any way for busy executives like Bill to keep distractions to a minimum while ensuring that they don't miss out on great opportunities or ideas and solutions that might help them manage their businesses better?

We think there is a simple solution: Busy executives can arm their administrative assistants with a tool that allows the assistants to efficiently manage solicitation calls and voice mail messages without disturbing their bosses.

When the executive assistant answers a call from a salesperson, the assistant could forward the caller to a recorded message that provides instructions for leaving a voice mail message. The simple recorded message might sound something like this:

"Thank you for contacting us. We are always interested to hear great ideas and learn about solutions that can help us manage our business. Because there just aren't enough hours in a day to talk with everyone who calls us, please feel free to leave a voice message if you have an idea or solution that might help us 1) increase revenue, 2) reduce costs, 3) improve efficiencies, 4) impact our business strategy or 5) enhance our brand.

If your idea or solution can help us, please clearly explain how your idea or solution might impact one of these key areas. Be assured that we will respond to all messages that offer ideas or solutions for which we have an immediate or future need. If you aren't able to help us at this time, please feel free to contact us again when you have information you would like to share that might help us with our business."

A competent, trained administrative assistant could sift through voice mail messages, forwarding only those messages that might impact issues of concern to the executive. It is possible for busy executives to limit outside distractions while reducing the risk of missing out on the next, great idea or solution that might help them better manage their businesses.

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About the author: Steve Chriest is the founder of Selling Up™ (www.selling-up.com), a sales consulting firm specializing in sales revenue improvement for organizations of all types and sizes in a variety of industries. He is also the author of *Selling The E-Suite*, *The Proven System For Reaching and Selling Senior Executives* and *Profits and Cash – The Game of Business*. You can reach Steve at schriest@selling-up.com.