

Organize Your To-Do List into These 4 Categories by Tory Johnson

Don't let busyness derail your business—prioritize your tasks and weed out distractions.

» **I'm busy as heck but not getting anywhere. What am I doing wrong?**

» Entrepreneurs say that staying focused is a huge challenge. So it's crucial to have an ongoing plan to keep you on track, a written outline that stays within reach and states what you intend to accomplish every day.

I set aside an hour or so every Sunday night to map out my week ahead. What will I focus on first thing Monday? Then on to Tuesday, and so on. Whom do I contact and why? What are my top priorities—no more than three—for the week, and what activities could distract me? The more detailed my calendar, the more prepared and focused I am. Committing my priorities to words focuses me mentally.

Despite that, distractions can still derail you. I often find myself pulled in too many directions—reacting to phone calls, email and other stuff that pops up. The triage method below—touching things only once and then moving on—keeps me from being overwhelmed.

1. Do immediately. If a task feeds my priorities, my time is justified.

2. Delegate. Someone else can and should do these to save me time. Even micro-business owners can benefit from an intern or temp.

3. Drop. I ask myself, *Will this make money for me right now or anytime in the future? Does it fulfill my current priorities?* If the answer is no, I dump it.

4. Defer. Some items might appeal but aren't time-sensitive or high-priority. Delay them to a more convenient time.

Jenn Lee, an Orlando, Fla.-based small-business coach, says her biggest time-drain involves dozens of mini-projects each week. "I used to try and squeeze them in between phone calls, emails and posting on Facebook, but there were days when I'd leave my office without accomplishing anything. Something needed to change."

So Lee sets aside 25-minute blocks of time each day, one for each of three key tasks she must accomplish. "I look at everything I need to do and assign them one of my blocks of time dedicated to that task. I set up three a day, usually two in the morning, when my brain works best on creative things, and one in late afternoon to finish up.

Knowing that I have dedicated time to each task means I don't fret all day over them, and I get better results because I'm focused."

Another time-sucking aspect of Lee's business was trying to help clients who, for whatever reason, couldn't be helped. One client "never did what I advised her to do," she says. "As a coach, a good part of what drives me is seeing entrepreneurs succeed after gaining clarity and guidance from me. But when I work with someone who isn't moving forward, it drives me crazy."

Ultimately Lee told the client she could no longer work with her. "Since then, I am very careful who I work with," she says. "Before I take on clients, I ask a series of leading questions. Their answers help me see if I will like working with them. Working with the right client saves me time, and time is what we all need to get it all done."