

## The Inanity of Immediate Response

March 2011 Newsletter

### Key Takeaways

- ★ Providing excellent service doesn't mean that you have to respond immediately. If all you offer your customers is a fast answer, you'll eventually lose your job to someone in another time zone.
- ★ What your customers really need is *predictable* response, not instant response. On the rare occasions when they do need you immediately, they won't be sending an email.
- ★ If you want to be more proactive and strategic in your work, unplug yourself from email, close your door to interruptions, and focus on your priorities.

I can't tell you how many times I've heard this colossally inane comment:

*"I'm in the service business. I \*have to\* respond to my clients immediately."*

This is probably the most powerful — and most pernicious — myth people labor under. It destroys efficiency, vaporizes productivity, and foments more stress and dissatisfaction than any other.

Am I being hyperbolic? Yes, most definitely. But this myth deserves it.

Clients complain all the time that they feel reactive, rather than proactive. That they're always putting out fires. That they spent 12 hours at the office and despite being too busy for lunch, that they "didn't get anything done." That they're buried in email. That they're always interrupted. And when I ask them why they didn't get to their strategic priorities, they explain patiently (as though to a child) that they're in the service business, and as a result, they have to respond immediately — by answering the phone, sending an email, keeping their door open, etc.

Here's a newsflash for you: we're all in the service business. It doesn't matter who you are, you always have to answer to someone else. To your biggest customers (obviously). To the board of directors. To the SEC. To the voters. To someone. We're all providing service to somebody.

Do you need to be responsive to the people you serve? Absolutely. But providing excellent service doesn't necessarily mean that you have to respond immediately.

Because the truth is that \*most\* of the time your customers don't need you to respond right now. Yes, on occasion the IRS is sitting in their office and asking them to justify cat food receipts as a business expense, and they need your particular brand of accounting acumen. Or their building is on fire, and you really do have to put it out immediately. But those instances are pretty rare. And the odds are pretty good that your customer won't be sending you an email in those instances. They'll call you. And if you're not at your desk (or not answering the phone), they'll find you. I promise.

The vast majority of the time, your clients will be quite happy with a predictable response, not an immediate response. Whether that "predictable response" is 2 hours, or 4 hours, or 24 hours will depend on the nature of your business. But just because they can send you an email or leave a voice mail instantaneously, doesn't mean that they need you to respond immediately.

(Don't believe me? Think about the times you've called people who sell you stuff — your accountant, designer, webguru, carpet cleaner — how often have you needed them to respond to you immediately? Did you fire them when it took them a few hours to get back to you on one of your non-urgent requests?)

Now, you probably have trained your customers to expect an immediate response. And you've probably built your reputation (at least in part) on providing incredibly fast turnaround. But as I've written before, if the only value you're offering is the ability and willingness to respond faster than your competitor, you'll shortly be losing your job to someone in Shenzhen.

On top of that ugly reality, there's an underlying paradox in the idea of responding immediately to your clients' requests. By definition, that means the next thing that comes through the (metaphorical or literal) door is more important than the thing you're working on now. And that's patently false.

Which brings me back to all those complaints I hear about being reactive and putting out fires. Well, duh. Of course you're going to have problems being proactive if you're always responding instantly to whatever lands on your plate.

Look, everything (and everyone) that comes into your office will demand your immediate attention. You're the only one who can push back and enforce some order on the mad rush.

It's up to you to establish your priorities and to stick with them. And the sooner you realize the baleful effects of the myth of instant response, the sooner you'll be able to get the important stuff done. (Now go and have some lunch.)