

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

Mono-Tasking 101

We had a wonderful rep back in the 1980s. His name was Herb Holt. He covered the upper Midwest for Currier Pianos and Ovation Guitars. Like so many memorable people who cross our path, Herb left us a lasting lesson. “People can only pay attention to one thing at a time,” he would say. I don’t even remember the the first time he said it. We were probably in a bar having a deep, metaphysical discussion on sales psychology. I lost track of Herb after he retired and I moved to Florida, but I never forgot that little gem of wisdom he gave us. One thing at a time.



‘Only when we break the cycle of letting ourselves be constantly distracted we will be able to focus intently on our clients.’

Today, unfortunately, we pay attention to a lot of things at once. We call it multi-tasking. For example, we might drink coffee, text and eat a sweet roll on our morning drive while listening to the radio and looking at a GPS screen. In Washington for the NAMM Fly-In, we saw not one, but two D.C. policemen staring at their phones while walking their beat and monitoring the little radio receiver on their epaulets. During this year’s recital season, parents seemed content to let one child play games on their iPad while their older sister or brother performed. Recently, in a theater to see Jersey Boys, we noticed several faces reflecting the glow of little screens. Some people consider their ability to multi-task a virtue. But, is it?

In 1956, psychologist George A. Miller of Princeton University, in what has become one of psychology’s most cited papers, argued that the number of objects an average human can hold in working memory is 7 (+/- 2). Whether Miller’s Law predicts an exact number has been debated endlessly, but the point is, there are limits to how much information we can process, and the threshold is pretty low. Another psychologist, Sarah Ransdell, found that just listening to music could reduce students ability to write by as much as 60 words per hour. Simply stated, as we increase the quantity of things we are doing, we reduce the quality of how well we do them.

HARNESSING PERSONAL HABITS

As employers we must ask: Do we really want our employees staring at their phone, their tablet or their laptop during meetings? As merchants we should ask: Do we really want that clerk juggling two phone calls and scanning an email while tuning a customer’s guitar? As customers we will ask: Am I entitled to that salesperson’s complete and undivided attention?

And isn’t that what each customer really wants and deserves — our full attention. There is certainly no virtue to multi-tasking if I am the one being multitasked. Whatever chance we have of establishing a meaningful engagement with a customer can be instantly destroyed by just one glance at our phone.

Becoming a mono-tasker starts with our own personal habits. Can you ignore a cell phone that rings when you’re driving? Or, that beep telling you an email just arrived? Can you watch an entire TV show without a tablet in your lap? How about a movie? When was the last time you had an uninterrupted conversation that lasted 20 minutes? We are not slaves to our electronic devices. Let’s train ourselves to ignore them until a time of our own

choosing. Only when we break the cycle of letting ourselves be constantly distracted we will be able to focus intently on our clients.

Here are a few simple steps you can take to let your customers know that your entire attention is devoted to them:

- Silence your phone and put it in a drawer before you greet a customer. Every time!
- Establish a never-interrupt-a-salesperson-who-is-with-a-customer rule. (My dad had this rule in his store when I was a kid. How we lost it is a mystery.)
- Eliminate distractions in your store and train yourself to ignore the distractions you can't cure. If you don't get distracted, your customers won't get distracted.
- If there is background music, turn it off.
- If there are TV screens with product demos running, get rid of them. They really don't work and your store is not a saloon.
- Don't let customers' kids run wild. Their parents will thank you.
- Demand your customers full attention just as you are giving them yours. If their phone rings, and they are rude enough to answer it, or even if they are just texting, excuse yourself. Let them know where you will be when they are ready to resume.



The first President Bush may have lost his chance for re-election when he glanced at his watch during a 1992 debate after a voter asked a question related to how the deep recession had hurt his family. Bill Clinton took a different approach. "Tell me how it's affected you again," he said as he walked up and looked straight into her eyes.

Our clients deserve that same empathy from us. Let's disconnect from the countless distractions around us and let our client know — for at least this moment — they are the most important person in the world. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Florida. He welcomes questions and comments at greg@steinwaynaples.com.

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