



# Business Strategies

## You Can Grow Faster

The mortgage market is moving a mile a minute so you have to keep up. The smarter you are in how you keep up, the more you'll be able to grow.

By Michael Hammond

**A**re you too busy to grow? Sounds crazy, right? But for many service providers, it's true. You're caught in a cycle of activity that makes you feel like you'll never get ahead. Or perhaps your business is thriving, but you have no time to think beyond the here and now.

The truth is that many service providers don't even realize they're stuck. They're simply overwhelmed. I recently read an article called "Are You Too Busy to Grow?" by Joellyn Sargent that challenges the reader to ask if either of these statements rings true:

Getting **from here** to **where you want to be** is not easy, especially when the change involves choosing among several items you want or even feel you need to do.

First, do you have a solid strategy, but you can't find time to implement it because you're always dealing with more pressing things?

Second, are you so busy with day-to-day, tactical activities that you can't find time to plan?

If you answered yes to either of those questions, it's time to get out of denial mode and do something that will move your business forward.

Although the symptoms of the activity trap appear in two opposing forms, the solution to getting unstuck is the same. Here's what Sargent recommends:

**1. You must commit to making a change.** Getting from here to where you want to be is not easy, especially when the change involves choosing among several items you want or even feel you need to do. If you're going to break the bonds of the activity trap, you need the fortitude to say no

to some things in order to open up new possibilities. Be prepared to let go of activities, projects, commitments, and customers that don't add value so you can focus on what is really important.

**2. Give yourself breathing room.** Many service providers equate busyness with productivity. They are not the same. I know activity can feel like a safety net. It's discomfiting to some people to stop doing things that have become routine. Seeing an empty inbox or a clean desk makes some of us squirm. Get over it and take some time (ideally a day, but a half-day or even an hour can help) to step back and assess where you're spending your time.

Is e-mail eating up hours every day? Are you chatting on social media without getting results? Some tasks can be delegated or outsourced, while others should be dropped altogether.

**3. Look at the big picture.** Now that you have the physical—and mental—space, take a deep breath, step back, and take in the view. Whether you have a strategy that hasn't been executed or you simply haven't taken the time to create one, you need to think about where you're going. Where do you really want your business to be next month or next year? This step is not about spending hours creating a new strategic vision or writing up a long list of goals and priorities. It's simply a checkpoint. Can you see where you're going? If you can't visualize your destination, you're not ready to move.

**4. Get real.** We all tend to kid ourselves about how much we can accomplish and how fast we can do it. Success requires realism as well as optimism, and you must be honest with yourself to break the activity cycle. Once you know where you want to go, you'll see there are certain things you absolutely must do to get there. We know intuitively that hitting a big goal means completing these steps, like executing on the strategy we mapped out for our business. But that doesn't guarantee we do it.

**5. Set priorities.** What's missing for many service providers is the connection between the big goals and the small choices that either move us closer to where we want to be or take us off course. Establishing clear priorities gives us a lens through which we can test our choices. Checking frequently to be sure what we choose to do is also the activity we need to do provides course correction and focus.

Here's a simple way to balance your efforts:

Draw three columns on a piece of paper and make a list of things that you: 1) must do, 2) should do, and 3) want to do.

On the left, put the must-dos. These are non-negotiable. They might be paying bills and meeting new clients, but this column should also include things like building thought leadership through speaking and writing. Most important, the list needs to incorporate the key tactical activities to support your strategic vision.

The must-do items should be planned out in advance as firm commitments around which you'll build your schedule for should-dos and want-to-dos.

In the center, your should-do list will consist of things that are important but not critical to reaching your goals. Lots of these may be items someone else



placed on your list, and you'll need to determine if their priorities are really yours as well.

Finally, your want-to-do items on the right side can be used to fill in the gaps and add a little fun to your day. These might include updating the décor of your office, creating an extra piece of collateral, or sponsoring a charity event.

If this little exercise results in a page that is too heavy on the left or has an endless list on the right, that's a sign your priorities are out of balance. Work through each column and be sure you're honest with yourself. When you're done, you should have a much better perspective.

Simply put, in today's society everyone is moving

a million miles a minute. Why? They have to get the kids to school, pick-up their dry cleaning, get the kids to their special events like ballet, gymnastics, football, or soccer. They have to update their social networks on facebook, LinkedIn, etc. That's all before they get into the office and face a flood of meetings, conference calls, internal meetings, etc.

When we **focus on our priorities** and take care of the things that matter most there is **still time** in the day to accomplish **all of the other things**.

But you can translate being busy into being productive. Here's how:

First, let's start with a metaphor so you can picture what I'm really getting at. During a number of our training sessions with clients we do an exercise called: magic beans. We have a jar that will hold 1,000 beans. Those beans represent all the things we do in life that make us busy (kids, work, travel time, meetings, etc.). We also have five golf balls that represent the five most important (priorities) things that you have to do.

Each bean that you drop into the jar represents one of the things that makes your life so busy, filling the jar with the 1,000 beans. What happens when you allow life and all of these busy items to control your day, is that when it comes time to focus on your top priorities (i.e. the golf balls) they simply do not fit into the jar. Much like never having enough time to focus on what truly matters and produces results in your life.

Next, we empty the jar and instead of letting the busy items control our life we start by focusing and prioritizing on those things that matter most. We drop the five golf balls into the jar first and then we proceed to drop all of the 1,000 beans (busy items) into the jar. That's when the magic takes place. All of the golf balls and beans fit into the jar and we can screw the lid on tight.

The point of the visual is to represent that when we focus on our priorities and take care of the things that matter most there is still time in the day to accomplish all of the other things. ❖