

# METROWEST BUSINESS MONDAY

## Clear calls to action get results

Summer in New England serves as a reminder of how precious time is.



**Maureen Condon**  
NEWS COLUMNIST

Pools and beaches are bustling, air conditioners and fans are powered up, and entertainment means baseball games, bestsellers and blockbusters. But before we know it, the chill in the air will return. Now is the time to savor moments, not waste them away.

I'm guilty of wasting time now and then, and I get over the guilt pretty quickly – we all need to be useless and unproductive occasionally, like when there's a sappy Lifetime movie on television and a pint of Ben & Jerry's in the fridge. I also know I'm not alone in time wasting.

According to a newly released Salary.com study, U.S. employees waste an average of two hours per day at work. The top two time-wasting activities? Surfing the Internet and socializing with colleagues. The top two time-wasting states? Missouri and Indiana. (Just some useless facts to carry with you today.)

Apparently we all enjoy wasting time now and then. But when someone else wastes our time, most of us are not so forgiving.

When you're communicating to a group of employees, prospects, clients or colleagues, it's important to demonstrate that you value their time. Salespeople who drone on during a presenta-

### [ WRITE ON THE MONEY ]

tion, bosses who hold endlessly long meetings and colleagues who include irrelevant stories and background facts during project updates are inefficient and ineffective. This means that you have to get to the point quickly and deliver a clear call to action.

Without inviting your audience to do something specific with the information you've given them – giving them a call to action – you've wasted your time and theirs. A call to action is a critical tool in sales communications, but it is useful in all types of communications. When you call a meeting, send an e-mail or phone a prospect, it's important to clarify what you want to result from the interaction. What do you want your audience to do?

One salesperson I know sets expectations for prospect meetings ahead of time. When scheduling the meeting, he tells the prospect what he hopes they can accomplish during their conversation. The prospect has a clear idea ahead of time what the call to action will be and he can decide before the meeting whether he's willing to consider it. It prevents a wasted appointment for both the prospect and the salesperson.

Here are some qualities of successful calls to action that you can start using today in all your communications.

#### Be specific

Ask for what you want in detail. Do you want your depart-

ment to deliver their status reports by 3 p.m. every Friday? Make it clear. Do you want your prospects to bring a coupon to your business for 20 percent off? Ask them to do it. People like clear requests.

#### Be time-sensitive

As natural time-wasters, we all need a deadline. When does your offer end? When is the project due? I've had clients give me projects with a "whenever you get a chance." I've learned from experience that I never get the chance if I don't have a deadline. Asking someone to get back to you by Wednesday puts your request top of mind and may even trigger an entry in a calendar.

#### Be succinct

Ask for one thing and you increase your chances of getting it. Ask for more and your odds decrease. Too many calls to action dilute your request, so figure out the most important thing you want and go for it. I've experienced this firsthand with my daughters, especially when they were younger.

If I asked them to brush their teeth, put on their shoes and get their coats on, it began an endless dance of dillydallying and repeating the requests. But if I just asked them to brush their teeth, they usually cooperated quickly. Even as adults, we all do better when we focus. Ask for one thing at a time – you'll have other opportunities to ask for other things.

#### Get an answer

If possible, find out immediately if your audience can or will fulfill your call to action. This is easier to do when talking live to someone. After you've asked for what you want, a simple "Is this something you can do?" or "Can I count on this happening?" works well. I saw a sales presentation once where the speaker suggested stopping at several spots during a sales call to confirm that your prospect is hearing what you say and willing to hear more. This sounds like a good strategy for business meetings as well.

Calls to action are a valuable tool for business communications and many personal interactions. But it's wise to know, too, when no action is necessary – just a friendly ear. Sometimes we want to vent or share something and don't need our listener to do anything.

Often when I tell my husband a story about a challenge at work, he'll jump in with a "Why don't you just..." or a "You should. ..." I've learned that this desire to fix things is ingrained in many individuals, so I now preface such stories with "I just want to tell you this, I don't need a solution."

Sometimes the best action is no action – especially in the summer. Enjoy it.

*Maureen O'Grady Condon of Framingham is president of Condon Communications, a writing and editing firm that gives businesses the words they need to sell their products and services. Her e-mail address is [maureen@condon-communications.com](mailto:maureen@condon-communications.com).*