



The Distribution Team

We wrote THE BOOK on Distribution Inventory Management

Taking Time to Sharpen the Saw

By Jason Bader

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Have you ever wished that there were two of you? The primary you would spend hours considering the strategic vision of your company; while the secondary you would endure the daily onslaught of phones, email and employee concerns. For most of us, the firefighter helmet goes on the moment we open the front door. We become so consumed with solving the challenge in front of us that we are unable to look at solving the underlying issues. Since cloning ourselves isn't yet possible, we must force ourselves to set aside time to improve the foundation of our business.

There are several different business enhancement opportunities available to the modern distributor. The first of which is staring right at you – the trade publication. With all the publications that grace your desk, it is a wonder that any article is read at all. The fact that you are reading this collection of thoughts is by some accounts miraculous. When readers send me notes about some article I have written, my first response is, “Thank you for taking the time...” Because I am truly amazed when someone has carved out the time to read an article; then, think about it long enough to make a comment. Have these folks learned to make time stand still? Probably not, they have simply learned how to take time for professional development.

A wise gentleman once told me to “make time to sharpen the saw”. What he meant was, carve out some time in your day to educate yourself about your business, and the opportunities available. His suggestion was to take an hour at the end of the business day. Turn off the cell phone, shut down the computer, and close the door to your office. Take that hour to read something educational. Look through a trade magazine. Read an association newsletter. Flip through your local business journal. You will inevitably run across something pertaining to your work.

During this hour, you might find yourself breaking out a book. I have a rule about business books: Don't read business books before going to sleep. This may not be true for you; but it rings true in my household. Once the wheels get started, no amount of sheep counting is going to allow me to get some shuteye. Take notes on what you have read. The goal is to create your own little “Cliff Notes” version of the book. If you want to refer back to something quickly, you just have to look at your notes. I know a consultant who fills books full of sticky notes, highlights sections and scribbles in the margins. Whatever floats your boat.

Don't overlook the possibility of gaining inspiration from an autobiography. There are several business entrepreneurs, coaches and politicians who have written very effective

motivational tools. I was always taught to look for the similarities with these figures, rather than the differences. For those of you with a little extra windshield time, take a look at the audio versions of these books. It sure beats the pundits grandstanding for air time.

I am always shocked at the number of distributors who don't take advantage of their association meetings. Are you really that tied to your day to day operations that breaking away for a meeting isn't possible? If this is the case, you probably stopped reading this article after the second paragraph. I have one word: delegation.

Industry trade shows provide a wealth of educational opportunities. There is the latest and greatest from the manufacturing community, workshops presentations on a whole host of business challenges, and the opportunity to network with your peers. The network of friends I developed over my years in distribution has helped me tremendously. I have called on them for business advice, trading dead inventory and to suggest a local golf course. I would also recommend looking into the user groups and conferences hosted by your distribution software provider. Again, the educational opportunities are endless. Remember, you all use the same software. This is a place to pick up tricks and tidbits that didn't quite make it into the user manual. Don't be afraid to share good ideas. Some folks like to play their cards tight to the vest; but it has been my experience that a little open sharing will come back like a tidal wave. Get involved with your local community. Perhaps you can join a local chamber of commerce. I have found it beneficial to join customer trade groups like the local contractor association. Either you get in the game, or stand on the sidelines and watch the heroes pass you by.

A great way to recharge your business is to get some formal training. Attend a seminar on a specific aspect of your business. Take a class in Excel from a local community college. Study a second language. This suggestion may sound a bit self serving; but I really believe in the premise. When I would do an annual employee review, one of the requirements was to attend some form of outside education. Part of my responsibility as a manager was to help people develop their skills, whether they close to stay with me or not. The positive contributors to the organization will see this as a benefit rather than a burden.

We all know that our businesses would be far better off if we spent some time on strategy. Taking the time is the hard part. It may only be 30 minutes to start; but do your best to make this a daily discipline. If we don't take time to sharpen the saw, even the most routine business challenges become more difficult to cut. Good Luck.

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