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Episode 25

Conquering Overwhelm: How to Harness Time and Tasks

Janice Hostager: 0:02
I'm Janice Hostager. After three decades in the marketing business and many years of being an entrepreneur, I've learned a thing or two about marketing. Join me as we talk about marketing, small business and life in between. Welcome to MyWidthly Marketing.

0:28
If you were an actual live audience listening to me and I asked you how many of you feel overwhelmed sometimes, or a lot of the time? I'm guessing that every hand would go up. This is especially true if you're a solopreneur, even if you've hired someone or have a VA. That's because, if you're like most solopreneurs, you're bootstrapping it and there is just so much to do all of the time. Because we not only have to deal with the needs that need to be done in our business, such as finances, appointments, travel, emails, landing pages, legal learning, creating new content, new software and so on, but many of us also have to layer our daily tasks cooking, cleaning, grocery shopping, errands, picking up kids from school, paying bills, seeing friends, budgets, laundry, emptying the dishwasher.

So is it any wonder we feel this never-ending sense of overwhelm? Fun fact: Did you know that the word WHELM is a word? It means to be overcome with something, like drowning. So when we say overwhelm, what we mean is extra-whelmed, which is probably an entirely accurate way to describe how most of us feel sometimes.

I was working on this podcast, pulling it together about time management, on the train to downtown Austin on my way to attend a coaching conference with Brenne Buschard. An excellent conference, by the way. At the conference we heard from Natalie Ellis, who many of you know as Boss Babe. She had this great quote that was so spot on for my podcast and she said if you're not consciously creating it, you are unconsciously accepting it. And boom! That one hit home for me, and the reason I love that quote is because we don't have to let our schedule happen to us. We can make our schedule work for us and still be successful. How? By creating a plan that protects your priorities.

2:25

So my first tip on how to prioritize tasks and deal with overwhelm is to identify your priorities. If you're anything like me, my priorities are my family and my health, and also my business, because I need to make money to survive, right? Everything else, I need to either delegate, automate or eliminate. It's not so simple, right? And it seems simple enough to list my priorities, but I had to ask myself, is that what my life looks like? How many days do I have so many things on my calendar that I have no time to eat lunch, so I'll grab a bowl of cereal or make a protein shake, let alone go to the gym or get some exercise.

How about you? Is your health a priority for you? Because, and I know that you know this but if you don't have your health, you don't have a business and you can't care for your family. And your health also includes getting enough sleep. I don't know about you, but I've heard of so many entrepreneurs say I get up at 5am and start my day with a chai latte and run a five mile run. When I personally get up at 5am by about two in the afternoon, I'm so tired that I'm staring at the wall and definitely not producing anything.

3:39
My neighborhood gym and I kind of embarrassed to admit this is literally a block away. I can walk to the gym anytime. I put it on my calendar and 9 times out of 10, I decide to work on something else that feels more important at the time, rather than doing something that will help me stay healthy and feel better. So it truly is important to get really clear on your priorities, including your health, or you will not succeed, you will burn out, or you'll get sick, or your relationships with your family and friends will suffer.

4:11
Another way to sort priorities is by dividing all your tasks in the four buckets, and you may have heard these. Bucket number one, URGENT AND IMPORTANT. These are the tasks that require immediate attention, like dealing with a major customer issue or an important deadline. Bucket number two is IMPORTANT BUT NOT URGENT. These are tasks that contribute to long-term success, such as strategic planning, improving processes or long-term marketing. Bucket number three is URGENT BUT NOT IMPORTANT. These tasks may feel pressing but don't really contribute to your business's success. They might include answering emails or watching a webinar. And bucket number four is NOT URGENT AND NOT IMPORTANT. These are distractions, and they can be minimized, eliminated or automated. Your top priorities, of course, can go in any of these important buckets. It's amazing how much clarity happens once you figure out what your priorities are and once you figure out how urgent and important they are.

4:58
So, tip number two leverage repeatable processes and systems. So I plan these in advance, and I think you can too. What do you do over and over again that you can set to repeat on a sauna trello or even put in a Google Doc as a template? For me, one of them is this podcast. I have a list of things that I need to do every Monday to get my podcast ready to be launched the following week. Some of these things can be delegated, but some of them need to be done by me, so I time block these activities on my calendar, and my Google Calendar makes this really easy to do, and then I have a repeatable checklist set up on asana. So every time I complete

one of these tasks, I check it off and then I have a little unicorn that goes across my screen too, which is kind of a little bonus, and you can set up these systems to perform tasks that need to be done on a regular basis. With all the technology we have now, it's easier than ever to use systems that we already have on our phone or on our computer to automate some really mundane tasks.

6:19

For example, email marketing. We can use our email marketing platform to automate email campaigns, customer segmentation and then follow up emails. Once we get it set up, it's all done and working in the background of our business. Social media posting Schedule and automating social media posts is so easy with tools like Buffer or Hootsuite or others that are out there. Customer relationship management so your CRM. Implement a CRM system to automate customer data, lead tracking and follow up, and all that stuff will be done for you. Appointment scheduling, offering online appointment booking and using scheduling software to manage appointments and reminders makes it so easy. I use an app called TidyCal and I'll put the link in the show notes. You can also automate invoice generation, payment reminders and payment processing, and with Chat Box you can automate customer support and include common customer inquiries and FAQs. I use automation to backup all my data on my website and my computer and even in lead generation.

I use marketing automation tools to capture and nurture leads through email campaigns and landing pages. If you have employees, you can use automation for employee onboarding or for payroll processing so that you don't have to go in every week and figure out all the salaries, taxes, the benefits and that sort of thing. I use automation for email filtering, so in my Google mail I can filter and send things automatically into folders to categorize and prioritize those emails and as appointment reminders. You can send automated appointment and meeting reminders to customers via text or email, and that can certainly happen automatically with just zoom or google meet. Also, if you have an ecommerce business, you can automate shipping, label generation, order tracking and inventory updates.

And you can use automation in your personal life because, let's face it, most of us our personal life and our business life blur together quite a bit. So I love that I can order my vitamins, coffee and grocery items to be delivered on a regular basis from amazon without even thinking about it. I can automate a Roomba to vacuum a room while everybody's out of the house. I can even automate a crockpot or an instant pot or even my oven to start dinner at a certain time, and then money can be taken out of my savings account automatically and allocated to investments or paying bills. I haven't written a check in a long time, thanks to bill paying. Of course, the thing to watch out for is using that time saved to add even more to our life. Right, so we don't want to save time and then throw in extra tax, which we all do, but that is something to watch out for.

9:20

But that brings me to my next tip, number three time blocking. Tony Robbins has this quote: *"If you talk about it, it's a dream, if you envision it, it's possible, but if you schedule it, it's real."* Author Michael Hyatt, who wrote the book free to focus, which I highly recommend, by the way,

talks about creating an ideal week where you block out time for the things that are most important to you and necessary to you. So if dinner with your family is important. Add it to your calendar. Need time to walk your dog in a clear head? Add it, and, as much as possible, stick with the things that are on your calendar. After you prioritize your task, break your day into blocks of time, typically ranging from 15 minutes to maybe a couple hours, and start with your priorities. If your priorities are like mine and they're family and health, get things like family vacations, gym time and other activities that help your mental health down in your calendar first. Then list the tasks and activities you wanna accomplish during each day and prioritize them based on their deadlines. Then allocate time blocks on each calendar for each activity. Be realistic about how long each task will take and try not to overcommit. Avoid multitasking during each time block, so focus only on one task or a related task.

Multitasking can reduce productivity and increase errors, and more on that in a bit. Don't forget to schedule short breaks between your time blocks to rest and recharge. Breaks can help you maintain your energy and your focus. I also recommend including a lunch break and sticking with it away from my desk. Oh! that was talking to myself, I guess. So away from your desk too. And then set boundaries with your clients, with your staff, with your family members or anyone who might interrupt your workday. Let them know when you'll be available to talk or during downtime, and if a client wants to schedule a meeting during a time when you have something else scheduled, then you are not available. Sometimes we just have to set those boundaries and stick to them and be flexible.

11:26
While time blocking helps structure our day, it's important to remain somewhat flexible. Independent events or tasks will come up, so be prepared to adjust your schedule as needed. You can also batch similar tasks together. For example, if you have a lot of phone calls to make during one time, then I try to put those all together or email tasks and avoid distractions such as social media or unrelated tasks during your dedicated work times. I know this can be really hard for us who go ahead and post on social media because I don't know about you, but when I open up social media I am instantly distracted and I kind of forget why I'm there. And then it's important also, at the end of each week or each day, to review how well you stuck to your time blocks and then adjust them in the future and re-prioritize things as necessary.

12:15
Another important question that you need to ask yourself is should I do this at all? And that brings me to tip number four. A few years ago, I took a time management class that I'd recommend you try out too. Not the class, but this process. The instructor had us write out every little task we did each day for one entire week, but instead of just listing them on a sheet of paper, we placed them in one of three columns based on their dollar value. One column header was $10, one was $100, and one was $1,000. So, on this sheet of paper with three columns on my desk, I recorded every one of my tasks, even the little things on this list. In the first column, the $10 tasks, these were administrative things that anybody could do, or really a virtual assistant could do, or an intern possibly could do for $10 an hour. This column would include things such as posting a blog, setting up an email, creating an invoice, making phone

appointments, going through your inbox and maybe some social media tasks. The next column, the $100 tasks, were more of what an assistant could do, or maybe a VA if they were more focused on some bigger projects. So they were things such as editing website changes, seo, research and project management. And the third column. These were the $1,000 tasks. These were the things that only you could do or only I could do things like writing blog posts, speaking, coaching a client or other jobs that you alone can do. I was amazed at the number of $10 and $100 tasks I spent my time doing. I would highly recommend you try this for yourself so you can see how much money you're leaving on the table every time you take time away from your day from a $1,000 task and focus on a $10 task. Then ask yourself do you need a VA or an intern to help you out?

14:19
Now you may not think you're ready to hire a VA, but many are affordable and you can hire a VA for less than $10 an hour. Even. There are many agencies who work with VAs in other countries, such as the Philippines, but I've been able to find a lot of them in Facebook groups and through other resources. Most VAs I've met have excellent English and their skills vary. So if you're posting to a Facebook group, make sure that you're specific about what you're looking for. So recently I posted an ad in a group of VAs on Facebook and I included a link to the job description, and then, in the job description, I included a link to an application that I just created on a Google form where I have a candidate answer a number of questions related to the position that I'm looking to fill. That way you won't have to deal with people DMing you. Also keep in mind the time zone difference. If you need live interaction with your VA, then make sure they know that they may be working in the middle of the night.

15:20
So that brings me to my last but in no way least important tip for time management, and that is quit multitasking. My sister likes to tell me that multitasking makes you stupid, and she's actually right. Multitasking can reduce your IQ as much as 10 points, cause mental blanks and reduce your productivity by 40%. Isn't that crazy? And if you're anything like me, especially if you're a mother, if you think that women have the special ability to juggle tasks like a circus performer, know this. Not a single study shows that women did better at multitasking than men. Bummer right? Because the study did show that women were more likely to multitask than men. So if you're head down and writing something and you turn your attention for a quick second to look at an email that just came in, it can take you up to 15 minutes to get yourself back into that same degree of focus.

There was a study done by the Institute of Psychiatry in London which followed more than a thousand workers and found multitasking caused a temporary 10 point increase in IQ worse than smoking marijuana or losing a night's sleep. So I recommend keeping your email turned off or turn off alerts, or, if you have your email on your phone, check it there on your breaks. If you work on a Mac or have an iPhone, you can put it on focus mode and not get any alerts. I absolutely love that feature. So I'm a self-diagnosed ADHD person because I have always struggled with focus since I was in first grade. I seriously at that age thought I was stupid, but I got pretty good grades. But I was always distracted and I'm sure multitasking had something to

do with it even back then. But a tool that really helped me with focusing is simple and free. It's called a Pomodoro timer. They have them for free, a free download on your computer or on your phone. The Pomodoro technique is a time management method that involves breaking work into 25 minute intervals, separated by short five minute breaks. After four sessions you're rewarded with a 15 to 20 minute break. So I've been using this for a while, and especially with more and more intense writing projects, and it has really helped me. So that's a few time saving ways to reduce overwhelm and make you feel like you're a little more organized in your business, so you can spend your time on the things that are most important in your life. I hope so much that you find these strategies valuable so that you can achieve greater success.

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