



by Marc Bluestone

Bluestone's Retail Strategies

Slow & Steady Wins the Race

How doing things slowly helps to get more things done

Picture the electronic flash that accompanies most modern cameras. It is capable of producing a brilliant and powerful flash. However, it only lasts for the smallest fraction of a second. Now picture a candle. Although not nearly as bright as a flash, a candle can produce light for an extended period of time. You can work for hours with the light from a candle, not a flash.

Have you ever attended a trade show? You take a couple of classes, visit a bunch of vendor exhibits, talk to a few peers, and then come home charged up to make a difference.

What happens next? If you're like most people, you explode with a huge burst of energy for a short period of time. You accomplish some of your goals, but not all. Then, you stop. The energy is gone. You are the flash and your light is gone as quickly as it came.

What would the candle do? The candle would come home and consider what it would like to accomplish based on what it learned. Then the candle, realizing that its output is limited, sets about producing change in a planned

and orderly manner that allows it to meet its other work obligations while at the same time making progress each day.

The candle is not as exciting, but it provides

light for much longer than the flash. The candles get their job done by giving themselves permission to steadily "chip away" at projects while the flash waits and waits until the time is just right to explode in a burst of energy to get the job done quickly. Unfortunately for the flash, the right moment it is looking for rarely comes and the candle ends up accomplishing things while the flash

Another way to look at this is that "slow and steady wins the race." Every busi-

ness-person has things he or she needs to do to get better. The following is a list of ideas that incorporates lessons we can learn from the candle.

Mailing to Your Customers

The Task: You can make the case that there is no better use of advertising dollars than to communicate with your customer base by contacting

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them periodically. Surprisingly, many of us don't do this often enough.

The Challenge: It is expensive to mail to thousands of customers at once.

What the Flash Does: Flashes don't mail to their customers unless they have enough money to mail their whole list (which might never happen without the very mailing they are saving to do). Flashes also tend to set their sights on complicated mailings that never get done because they require too much time.

What the Candle Does: The candle breaks its list into manageable pieces and accomplishes the mailing. Customer lists can be organized by alphabet (mail A-D this month; E-H next month, etc.). You can also mail by last purchase date (mail to those you haven't seen in a year; or, mail to only those you have seen in the last year). How about sales volume? Send to your biggest customers first, then work down.

Framing Displays in Your Store

The Task: To have beautifully designed and crafted examples showcasing all of the types of framing projects you are an expert in creating. For example, if you want to sell shadowboxes, custom mirrors, stacked mouldings, fillets, and complex collages of photographs, it helps to plant the seed with the customer by having examples on display.

The Challenge: If you make a list of all the samples you would like to create, it could add up to 30 or more. Who has the time to do all of that and still get the existing work orders done? If you have the time, then you probably don't have the money to buy all the materials it would take to make all of the samples.

What the Flash Does: The flash makes a list of every sample it needs, gets overwhelmed, and stops. A powerful flash might actually get as far as buying all of the materials and then never find the time to do the work.

What the Candle Does: The candle makes a list of every sample it needs and then schedules it on the calendar to complete one or two samples each month until the job is done. (One or two samples each month

may not make an immediate and dramatic change, but think about how great your store would look today if you started doing one thing each month three years ago.)

Window Displays

The Task: To create a window display for your gallery that attracts customer attention and causes people to consider your business next time they need something framed.

The Challenge: It takes a huge amount of time to create a great window display. Then, once you're done, you need to start thinking of doing it again because they get stale so fast.

What the Flash Does: The flash views the task as an "all or nothing" project. It waits until it has the sufficient time, energy, and resources to get the whole thing done in one giant burst. It rarely happens.

What the Candle Does: The candle changes one or two things in the window each week. By keeping the task manageable, the candle succeeds in creating an everchanging display.

Policy and Procedure Manual

The Task: Create a policy and procedure manual that clearly explains to your staff the rules, policies, and procedures related to all of the things they will do related to their job.

The Challenge: A policy and procedure manual is a daunting thing to write. It may have 50 or more sections and can take seemingly forever to write.

What the Flash Does: The flash sets out to create this project and works under the assumption that it must be fully completed before it is introduced to the staff. The flash keeps "meaning" to do it but never seems to have the time.

What the Candle Does: The candle buys a binder and sets about writing a table of contents for the manual, listing every topic it intends to eventually cover. Then,

it commits to writing one or two topics each month until the task gets completed. Sure, it may take up to three or four years to get done, but the flash is still “meaning to get around to it” long after the candle is done.

The single most important thing a small business can do to assure its long-term well being is to accomplish steady improvement. Yet too many of us fail to accomplish steady improvement because we set our sights so high that we create projects for ourselves that are not readily accomplished using the resources of time, money, and energy that are available.

By adjusting our expectations to allow incremental improvement, instead of massive projects, we are giving ourselves permission to succeed. We are betting that many small things done well beat one huge project endlessly deferred.

But with this permission comes the responsibility to conceive, plan, and organize a neverending series of smaller projects that we accomplish without any excuses, ever. Remember, slow and steady wins the race, but only if you never stop running. ■

Marc Bluestone is president of FrameGroup Incorporated, located in St. Louis, MO. With a staff of more than 50, FrameGroup operates 10 custom framing stores, a mobile custom framing gallery, and a commercial framing division. Before starting his own business, Marc held retail management positions in sales, merchandising, and operations and was vice-president of a publicly held retail company.