

Take a Break!

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Americans are notorious for working long hours and not taking time for vacations and relaxation. Personally, I'm not going to let this summer sneak by without taking time to de-stress. Use the tips in this article to make your escape wisely with minimal impact on your bottom line.

One of the supposed perks of being a small business owner is that you're in charge of your schedule and you can decide how much time you want to take off. Of course, most business owners never take a break, and there are complicated practicalities to consider before you can bail out for a few weeks.

First, you have to decide when is the best, or most convenient, time for you to be absent from the office. Most businesses have seasonal rhythms and you can take advantage of the natural slow times. For example, the wedding industry is busy in the summer, while tax professionals are swamped from January to April 15th. Contractors and landscapers know that the winter months will be slow, and retailers expect to work long hours in November and December to drive holiday sales. Your business most likely has its own unique pattern, and by looking ahead and planning for a vacation consciously you can arrange to be gone during a convenient time for everyone. You'll have the staff to cover your workload, your customers won't miss you, and you can take your mind off your career for a week or two without losing your sanity.

Second, you'll need to determine how you'll manage your customer's needs when you're away. Some professionals make arrangements to spend a few hours a day in contact with the office via phone, fax and email so that while they are 'on vacation' they can still keep the lines of communication open. Individuals who provide professional or personal services, such as computer consulting or massage therapy, can often work out a trade arrangement with a colleague who can cover for them. Even though technology makes it possible for you tele-commute while on vacation, it's really best to limit the amount of time you devote to work each day, or you'll find you're really not getting the break you wanted after all.

If you are really planning to relax, you have to make yourself totally unavailable and that requires planning. You must take the time to share information with the people who will be substituting for you during your absence. Always make sure you empower trusted decision-makers to act in your stead while you are gone and to supervise other team members. Notify your clients, customers and vendors well in advance that you will be inaccessible, and make it very clear who they can go to if they have a need while you are out of touch.

Lastly, you need to actually decide what to do with the time you've carved out for yourself. I suggest that you take into account what type of vacation you truly want or need. Most of us lump all vacations together, but there are actually different kinds that serve different purposes:

Adventure vacations stimulate and challenge you, making you stretch your abilities and remove yourself from your normal environment.

Obligatory vacations are usually family related, and may involve making a yearly pilgrimage to visit relatives or go to Disney Land with the kids.

Relaxation vacations - such as a cruise, a spa getaway, or a trip to the beach - give you a chance to mellow out and refresh your soul.

While some people try to pack all three vacation types into the same few days, that usually doesn't work. If your chosen vacation doesn't meet your needs you won't feel like you've been on vacation at all, and you may even be more exhausted and stressed than when you left. If you have many needs to fulfill, you might want to consider taking several smaller vacations (even long weekends) targeted to the kind of break you desire.

So... what if you need to take a break but you can't afford a luxurious vacation? Here are a few suggestions of things you can do on your own or with family members:

1. Take off early in the afternoon to go for a walk, go out for coffee, get a facial or drive in the country.
2. Join a gym, go swimming or jog in the morning – focus on yourself a little bit everyday.
3. Set aside one night each week for a "private escape" or "family night" when you go to a concert, a movie, a sporting event or dinner - whatever will help you relax.
4. Take a Saturday night every few months, and go to a nearby resort or hotel. Many hotels and B&Bs have special Saturday night rates to draw in non-business travelers.

Whatever you do, don't neglect your vacation time. The average American has 12 paid days per year to take a break, but they only use 9 of them! That's less than 2 weeks away from the daily grind. To be at your best, both personally and professionally, you have to invest some time and energy in rejuvenation and relaxation.