

[Do I Have Your Undivided Attention?](#)

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The other day, I called a former colleague to get some advice. I really value his opinion and he is someone I know I can count on to be frank. Unfortunately, he is also someone who likes to multitask (and someone who is easily distracted.) In fact almost every telephone conversation that I have with him ends the same way: “Oh, I’m sorry Steve. I really need to take this call.”

This time, I decided to nip the problem in the bud. I needed an uninterrupted block of time to get his feedback on something so I asked him when I could have his undivided attention for 20 minutes. He quickly wrote back and said “sure”. He also said that he would be driving to New York and that I could reach him the next night after 7 p.m.

I wrote back to him and pointed out that talking in the car means that he would be dividing his attention between me and all of the other cars on the road; nonetheless, I decided to take what I could get.

The following night, I called him at the appointed hour and he answered right away. As we began our conversation, I was able to put aside my own bias (i.e. that talking on the phone while driving means that you are not fully engaged in either driving or talking). But a few minutes into our phone call, it became apparent that we were not alone. He was driving to New York, yes; but he had his whole family in the car. When his daughter needed to throw up, that was the end of the call.

Giving someone your undivided attention is not easy in our wired world. We are surrounded by many sources of distraction throughout the course of our work day and e-mail has changed our expectations about how quickly we must respond. Before the internet, the phone was a potential

interruption for meetings that took place in the office. Now cell phones, blackberries, laptops and other digital media constantly vie for our attention wherever we are.

The up side is that we don't have to finish our conversation before we set off for our next destination. But we are fooling ourselves if we think that the person on the other end of the line is getting our full attention when we check our e-mail, look at our blackberry or get in a car to drive somewhere.

This may not always matter. Sometimes, a conversation is simply a chance to quickly pass along some information. And as a self employed individual, I greatly value the flexibility that comes with being able to leave my office without having to risk missing an important phone call or e-mail message.

But this has to be done with balance. We harm our relationships when we refuse to give them our full attention. In contrast, we really strengthen our relationships when we listen with no interruption. And it is by being a great listener that we build our referral networks.

So what is a busy professional to do? For starters, try turning your blackberry to silent when you meet with your clients and referral sources face-to-face. Setting the phone to vibrate will be less of an intrusion if you happen to receive a message during the meeting; but in all likelihood, a little buzz in your pocket is still likely to distract you.

If you are speaking on the phone and don't need your computer, then don't face your computer. Turn off any audible alerts that tell you e-mail is waiting in your in box.

There is great power in giving other professionals your undivided attention. Good relationships are not based on efficiency; they are based on trust, something which can only be built when you make the necessary investment of time.

Try giving one of your professional contacts your undivided attention and see what happens. Ask open ended questions and listen. Let the other person do 80% of the talking. You'll be amazed at what you uncover and how it helps your practice to grow.