

Ask SCORE

Running my commercial printing business is more than a full-time job, and I often feel like I'm out of touch with what's happening outside the business. How can I keep current on business- and industry-related developments in an efficient manner?

Efficiency is the key to maximizing small business profitability, productivity and potential. But in devoting so much attention to processes and people, however, small business owners often neglect to optimize their most important asset—themselves.

Whether you're a novice or veteran entrepreneurs, every day also offers the opportunity to learn something that can be applied to improving the quality of your business—perhaps right away, or maybe sometime in the future. It's simply a matter of being aware of what's going on outside the walls of your store, factory or home office.

Search engine technology has made staying abreast of business-related news easy thanks to systems such as Google Alerts. Simply enter some basic search terms for topics of interest—your industry, locations where you do or want to do business, competitors' names, technologies, etc.—and you'll be notified when relevant content appears on the web. Alerts can be set to be issued as they happen, or on a daily or weekly basis.

In addition, RSS feeds and customizable news aggregation websites such as alltop.com bring news headlines, blogs and podcasts together in a single location.

But don't omit "traditional" news sources such as trade journals, national news publications or your local paper. While it's great to get web news tailored to your needs, you may spot something in a story on a seemingly unrelated topic that could benefit your business or, perhaps more importantly, influence your customers and their needs.

And just because you've finished school doesn't mean your career as a student is over. There are always new skills to learn, new technologies to master and new ways to do things. Local colleges and universities regularly offer classes and seminars on timely business topics, both on campus and online. Local chapters of professional associations, the Chamber of Commerce and other groups also have meetings with speakers and presentations, giving you a chance to double your time investment by both learning and networking. Plus, your local SCORE chapter's workshops are an ongoing resource on key small business-related subjects.

You may also want to consider attending multi-day conferences sponsored by an industry group—either yours or those representing your customers. Though registration fees, travel and lodging may be involved, the long-term payoff in visibility, education, and networking will likely more than justify the expense.

Finally, the best way to maximize your personal efficiency is to take care of your health. Take some breaks during the day, and set business aside completely when you leave work—especially if you spend most of your time in a home office. Exercise regularly, eat right and don't put off regular medical exams or vacations. After all, if the boss isn't operating at 100%, chances are his or her small business won't either.

This column is brought to you by the Merrimack Valley Chapter of SCORE, with nearly 70 current and former business executives available to provide free, confidential, one-on-one business mentoring and training workshops for area businesses. Call 603-666-7561 or visit merrimackvalley.score.org for information on mentoring, upcoming workshops and volunteer opportunities. SCORE is a national, non-profit organization and a resource partner of the U. S. Small Business Administration.

Have a question you'd like answered in this column? E-mail it to info@score-manchester.org, with "Ask SCORE" in the subject line.