Resolve to boost your sales and increase productivity this year with the help of our expert-curated 30-day challenges.

By Crissa DeBree and Theresa Hegel
A quick internet search will tell you it takes 21 days, 30 days, 66 days or even 148 days to form a lasting habit, but experts say it’s not that simple. “There’s no quick fix,” says Mark Reklau, author of 30 Days: Change Your Habits, Change Your Life. “You have to repeat the wanted habit until it sticks. This can be difficult in the first seven to 10 days, but it gets easier.”

So, how do you get started? Turn out, one of the major roadblocks to good habit formation may be hardwired into our brains. “The mind doesn’t do a very good job of staying focused on what we consider important,” explains Steve Levinson, a clinical psychologist who specializes in helping people change their habits. “What deserves attention isn’t necessarily what gets it. Normally, the gaze goes to the unimportant, not the smartest wheel. This is the trouble with the human mind. We don’t deserve our incredible, awesome resources in direct relation to how important we think something is.” If you’ve ever lost an hour to Candy Crush Saga or a whole weekend to aimless internet surfing, you’ll know how true Levinson’s statement can be.

One key method of combating this tendency is awareness, finding a way to direct your attention to the desired behavior or action, so you can correct yourself in real-time. “The fundamental thing about habits is that the advantage goes to the old habit, rather than the new one because the old one doesn’t take any effort,” Levinson says. “You need to have the lights shining brightly on the change you want to make whenever there’s an opportunity to make it.” Perhaps that involves setting a reminder on your phone to buzz at regular intervals, to jolt you back into your desired behavior—whether it’s a personal goal like better posture, or a professional one like filling out and filing your paperwork right away, rather than letting it pile up.

Many behavior experts recommend building morning and evening rituals into your daily routine. The morning ritual helps you set your priorities and focus on your day ahead. It’ll keep you focused as your day begins and things get crazy. “Experts also advise people not to focus too much on their end goals. When it comes to habit formation, it’s better to concentrate on the individual actions performed each day, rather than the desired outcome. “It becomes demotivating if you keep looking at the end goal and you’re not seeing it get any closer,” says Martin Steller, a former cloistered monk turned business coach. To stay focused, he says, “Become the person who has the habit, rather than the pawns of the important things to do in the morning at the office. It’ll keep you focused as your day begins and things get crazy.”

This is an “embarrassingly simple” device that researchers recommend building morning and evening rituals into your daily routine. The morning ritual helps you set your priorities and focus on your day ahead. It’ll keep you focused as your day begins and things get crazy. “Experts also advise people not to focus too much on their end goals. When it comes to habit formation, it’s better to concentrate on the individual actions performed each day, rather than the desired outcome. “It becomes demotivating if you keep looking at the end goal and you’re not seeing it get any closer,” says Martin Steller, a former cloistered monk turned business coach. To stay focused, he says, “Become the person who has the habit, rather than the pawns of the important things to do in the morning at the office. It’ll keep you focused as your day begins and things get crazy.”

**GOOD HABIT HACKS**

**Having trouble getting a new habit to stick? Here are some sneaky ways to trick yourself into success.**

1. **PROcrastinate on your procrastination.** In other words, as soon as you feel like skipping your new habit, tell yourself “I’ll skip tomorrow.” It sounds strange, but business coach Martin Stellar says it really works: “Neurologically, when you tell yourself you’ll get a break tomorrow, the pleasure center in your brain receives the same impulse as if you’d actually skipped the habit today. It’s subtle, yet powerful way to make sure you don’t break the chain.”

2. **Stack your habits.** In essence, use one habit as a trigger for a second habit. After making a sales call, for example, go right to your spreadsheet or customer relationship management (CRM) software and update it, rather than waiting until the end of the day to input the accumulated information.

3. **Use visual cues.** Post a calendar in your office, and mark off every day you complete the desired behavior, “Can be the thing that moves you into action,” he adds.

4. **Take the path of least resistance.** “Make the good habit as easy as possible and the bad habit as difficult as possible to achieve,” Reklau says. For example, if you want to read more books and watch less television, keep a book or two on a table close at hand, and take the batteries out of the remote control.

5. **Don’t be afraid to rock out.** Music can be a powerful motivator, Stellar says. He shares the story of a psychologist training a sales team in New Zealand. As an experiment, the psychologist played loud, energizing music in the office (after first investing in noise-cancelling headphones), and closing rates went up significantly. Steller notes, “Just by creating a context where you get fed energy, you become more productive,” he explains. “TH

6. **Did you take the challenge?**

If you committed to taking one or both of our 30-day challenges, we’d love to hear about it. Send a summary of the changes you made to Wearables Executive Editor Theresa Hegel at thegel@asicentral.com, and we may publish it on ASIcentral.com or in a future issue of the magazine.
Even the busiest of decorators should make time to evaluate procedures and make production as efficient as possible.

THE EXPERTS
A panel of apparel decorating veterans helped us compile this action-oriented challenge.

BEING MORE EFFICIENT IS THE GOAL OF ANY BUSINESS OWNER, yet day-to-day demands often detract from taking a deep look at operations. “We all live in a crazy world,” says Rob Dubois, owner of Dubois Textiles (asi900107) in St. Cloud, MN. “The decoration world is a crazy, busy, multitasking world for everybody. Sometimes we get lost in the forest.”

So, for the next 30 days, this challenge will help you focus on the trees by giving specific activities you can either do or start in one day to improve productivity.

TAKE A STEP BACK
Do you know how your shop works? How jobs are set up and broken down? Where the problems are? This is a good time to find out.

1. Do nothing. Don’t throw away your whole day, but spend a few hours watching the flow of operations. Observe the entire process, from receiving orders to sending completed projects out the door. In essence, be your own consultant.

2. Map your core processes. Look at each part of the production process. Map out the steps involved. This can help pinpoint breakdowns, as well as give you a roadmap on how to train employees.

3. Create a spaghetti diagram. Follow a decorator around and map out where he or she goes for the day, or map out your own day.

4. Look for bottlenecks. Have your employees record down time, either when they take a break, or every time something isn’t happening the way it should – like when a machine operator has to go to sales with a question. What stops the human side of the formula?

5. Start fixing the bottlenecks. This will be a long-term process, but you can start by identifying a step you can take today to fix the most pressing issue.

6. Talk to your employees. Ask each one: What’s your number-one problem? This will give you an outline for further improvements.

ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE, ORGANIZE
A cluttered shop is an inefficient one. Not having supplies in their correct spaces wastes time. “I’m a big proponent of having a really clean shop,” says Terry Combs, a printing industry veteran and consultant. “That’s a real reflection of who you are.”

7. Declutter. If something for one department is located in another space, move it to where it belongs.

8. Look at your floor flow. Are there items in the way? If there’s a filing cabinet on the shop floor that the production employee has to walk around, that’s wasted time. Move it out of the way.

9. Organize your tools. Relevant tools should be near the machines and employees who need them. Create an area for everything, from inbound goods to threads, inks and more.

10. Create an inventory management program. You can do this with existing software, or your own shop’s system of keeping track of what’s missing and when you need to replace items.

11. Invest in multiples. Having only one tape gun, for instance, means your workers waste time waiting for it to be available, or going to find it with the last person who used it.

12. Clean up. Run a printing shop? Make sure the inks are being cleaned up immediately. Embroidery? Put thread back where it belongs. Task an employee to do this daily.

13. Organize your jobs. Do you make sure employees have everything needed when they begin a job? If not, considering investing in rolling carts, which can be moved around the production line easily.

IMPROVE YOUR SCHEDULE
With customers demanding faster and faster turnaround times, it’s critical to look at your production schedule. It’s not enough to estimate how long a job will take. You need to know for sure. “It’s a constant math problem,” says Marshall Akivon of Akivon Consulting. “And it’s an accountability problem.”

14. Work backward. Start the day with the tenet that every job needs to be produced completely one business day before it’s supposed to ship. Then figure out the schedule from there.

15. Time it out. Spend the day documenting how long each part of the process takes. How long is setup? How long is production? How long is finishing?

16. Set up a chart. Based on yesterday’s timing, create a chart that accounts for how long a job takes, from the beginning of a project to tear-down. Every minute should be accounted for.

17. Create a schedule. Once you have that chart, start dropping in orders. It may not be your ideal schedule, but it’ll help you identify where time might be wasted and help you improve.

18. Look into pre-registration systems. If you have one already, is it working for you? Is it being used properly?

COMMUNICATION IS KEY
Once your shop floor has a better flow, concentrate on the order process. Communication, shop experts say, is critical. “A lot of people are inefficient because they have to stop and ask, ‘What does this mean?’ on the work order,” Akivon says.

19. Examine your work orders. How do you curate them? Do the people who have to do the next step in the workflow know what to do? If not, change your process. Nothing should go on the schedule until everything on the order form is complete.

20. Cross train. Set up a system to cross train your employees on other duties. If your sales department doesn’t know what goes on in your art department, how can they effectively process an order?

21. Use color mockups. Make sure they include the proper information: design dimension, colors, position. Is everything getting properly labeled? This will help cut down on errors and time spent asking questions that can be answered in the beginning.

LOOK ELSEWHERE
Improving operations doesn’t just mean looking at the shop floor. It also means delving into your business practices and performance.

22. Create standard operating procedures. Then write them down. Outline the expectations you have for jobs and how they’re completed. If you already have these, review them to see if they need to be updated.

23. Set performance rules. Do you have a policy for break time? Cellphone use? Outline expectations for employees. If you already have these rules, update them.

24. Write your employee handbook. Or update the one you already have. Make sure every employee gets a copy.

25. Train your staff. Set up some formal training for your employees on these new or updated rules and procedures.

26. Standardize your pricing. Create an official, branded price sheet. This can be shared with customers. If you already have one, make sure it’s up to date.

27. Know your financial position. This isn’t just a one-day project, but it’s important. If you’re financially savvy, spend the day going over your books. If you’re not, spend the day interviewing experts who can help you.

KEEP THINGS GOING
All of the changes you’ve made won’t help if your machinery isn’t working, or if your employees aren’t on board.

28. Schedule performance reviews. Set aside a half-hour to meet with employees about how they’re doing, and what they can improve upon.

29. Focus on maintenance. Set up a meeting or phone call with your machine vendors. Talk to them about maintenance requirements, recommended servicing and any concerns you might have about your equipment. Use these to create a maintenance schedule for each piece of equipment.

30. Get your employees involved. Set up an incentive system that rewards employees who meet certain elevated metrics – such as increased production over time. –CD
Building your client base is an ongoing process, and it helps to have a thoughtful game plan before you embark on it.

The experts
A panel of sales trainers and marketing experts helped us compile this in-depth challenge.

Many distributors and decorators belt on repeat customers and word-of-mouth referrals for the bulk of their orders, but prospecting for new sales should also be an important part of any small business. How do you increase sales successfully? Planning, experts say, is key. “Make sure you have a well-defined game plan,” says Lisa Pekin, CEO of Business Development University, a Philadelphia-area sales consultancy. “Most salespeople wing it every day. They need to understand their business and formulate a well-defined game plan with specific activity goals and result goals.”

This 30-day challenge gives you some targeted activities that can be completed, or at least started, in a day to help boost your bottom line.

Maximize your connections
Finding new sales leads can be a challenge, but your existing customers can be a great resource. Having mutual connections, too, helps ease the pain of sales prospecting. “Prospecting is uncomfortable,” says Dave Mattson, CEO and president of Sandler Training, the nationwide sales training organization. “Everybody likes to get into the pitch part.” Let me tell you about my stuff. “They’re uncomfortable having a business conversation for the most part.”

Perfect your 30-second “commercial.” “If you don’t already have a pitch to introduce yourself and your business, create one.

If you already have one, re-examine it to determine if it’s still what you want to say. A good introduction references other organizations you’ve worked with and have you’ve been able to help them solve their problems, as well as provides a brief description of your ideal prospect.

Set up a meeting. Meet with your top existing customers, either by phone or in person, and ask them for referrals or references.

Use LinkedIn. Pick five customers and look at their LinkedIn connections. Identify people you’d like to introduce or referred to.

Write an introduction letter. Send that letter to the five customers above and ask them to forward it to their contacts.

Attend an event. Find out which associations your customers belong to, then schedule a meeting or attend one of their events.

Schedule a “tele-coffee.” Ask your existing customers who else they do business with, and schedule a “tele-coffee” with these vendors, such as graphic designers, marketing companies or others that you don’t compete with directly. Form a strategic alliance to exchange leads.

Good old-fashioned sales prospecting
While customer referrals are a leading source of new business, sometimes it takes more than that.

 Knock on doors. Stop by and drop off materials to five companies.

 Do some research. Identify another 20 to 25 businesses you’d like to sell to over the next 10 to 60 days.

 Find the gatekeeper. Now that you have the list of businesses, determine who you’ll need to speak with. If you’re targeting a college, for instance, will you contact admissions, or alumni groups? A quick call or Google search can help you figure out who’s in charge.

 Determine your approach. The first contact is critical and will say something about you and your business. Choose whether that contact will be via email, regular mail or a promotional gift.

 Make the first contact. And promise to follow up promptly.

 Note on your calendar when you’ll reach out to each person.

I took the 30-day shop challenge

Kelley Waltz, owner of Sparkly Tees (asi530143) in Las Vegas, spent the month of October trying out the shop-streamlining challenge. Here’s what she had to say about the experience: “This was a fantastic tool for our new store! Looking back, this challenge helped us realize early on that we had some workflow issues. Although I only have my daughters working for me, we each have different tasks and found this worksheet helped us figure out how to streamline those tasks. During the month-long challenge, I reorganized my office (which is the majority of the production area that includes the vinyl cutter, heat press and embroidery machine). We created a system for incoming and outgoing orders, and overall production is at a higher level!”

Why the shop challenge works

Increasing the productivity of your shop isn’t simply a 30-day cash flow. But setting aside time every day to work on a critical task will get shop owners out of their day-to-day duties, experts say. “It’s like taking time to read a book on product management or sales personal improvement,” says Glen Carlos, a national sales manager for screen printing equipment manufacturer M&R. “If you don’t do it, nothing’s going to happen. You’ll just get into a rut, and it’ll take some real personal effort to break yourself out of that. People need to just set time aside to do some deep analysis of what’s going on.”

Taking a deeper look at overall operations will help shops better compete in a world where smaller jobs are becoming the norm. “The time spent in between jobs has to be managed strictly to make sure you’re able to turn four, five, six jobs a day,” Carlos says. “The only time you’re making money is when the press is running.”

Industry consultant Marshall Atkinson says 30 days isn’t a lot of time, but taking these steps will help start the processes. “To me, it’s all about getting over the hump, standardizing things and making an action plan to increase your performance,” he says. “People don’t stop and think how things really happen. How does your shop seem from the customer’s viewpoint?”

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30 DAYS TO JUMPSTART YOUR SALES

The CASE STORY APP KEEPS PRODUCTION ON SCHEDULE

B illy Rivet purchased his parents’ embroidery business in 2015 when the couple was ready to retire. At the time, ABC Embroidery in Seymour, TN, was old-school, tracking orders with a paper-based system. Rivet soon discovered, like many of his fellow shop owners, that they’re marketing to the front, they’re working on the back. “When it’s a husband-wife team using paper and they can read each other’s minds, it works great.”

When I brought in a business partner and hired employees, the paper just wasn’t working.”

He quickly upgraded to a cloud-based accounting program, but that didn’t solve the shop’s scheduling issues. Rivet and other employees had no idea how to keep track of and prioritize jobs, other than picking up a piece of paper balanced atop a stack of shirt blanks. Inevitably, orders began to slip through the cracks. “We promise no more than two weeks to get an order in, stitched and back,” he says. “Sometimes, clients would call after three weeks asking where their shirts were.”

It was especially difficult since neither Rivet nor his partner is at the shop full time. “We were getting our toes twisted in the water with rush orders,” he says. “We didn’t solve the problem. The app links to his accounting software and allows users to schedule individual jobs and easily track their progress: from the blanks being ordered, to the job in process, to completed and delivered. Employees are asked to update the app at the end of each day to record their progress; Rivet and his business partner are able to check on each job’s status anywhere using their smartphones.

It’s already made a vast improvement in the shop. “Before, all we could do was look at bins of clothes and wonder, what do we do next? Now, we just look at the chart and say, ‘That’s due tomorrow,’” Rivet says. “Since we implemented the app, we haven’t missed a deadline.”

I also own a web development firm, decided to build a custom app to solve the problem. The app links to his accounting software and allows users to schedule individual jobs and easily track their progress: from the blanks being ordered, to the job in process, to completed and delivered. Employees are asked to update the app at the end of each day to record their progress; Rivet and his business partner are able to check on each job’s status anywhere using their smartphones.

Jody Mihalek, production manager at ABC Embroidery in Seymour, TN, looks over the shop’s custom job-scheduling app.

on schedule.

CASE STORY

APP KEEPS PRODUCTION

Walter Hollander, head of the Professional Sales Development Group, and Lisa Pekin, CEO of Business Development University.
12 Follow up. Customers might not need what you're selling, but they're more likely to engage if you've impressed them with your first contact.

13 Qualify responses. During follow-up, determine where your contacts are in the buying process. Segment them into the following categories: unqualified (they're not the right person); generally receptive (they like your ideas, but may not be ready to buy); having a specific date or next step in mind; ready to buy; or unresponsive.

14 Plan future follow-ups. For those who have a specific date or next step, put that on your calendar. If they're generally receptive, follow-up regularly, either via mailing lists or some other correspondence. If they're unresponsive or unqualified, remove them from your list.

15 Examine your metrics. Of the people you put through this process, how many are ready to buy? If you didn't find the right people, what did you do wrong? How can you find the right people?

CRUNCH THE NUMBERS

Determining your next steps will require looking at your sales history. Those past successes and failures will give you an idea of where to go. “We have to look back every quarter and say: What did we do well, what should we do more of and what should we change?” Mattson says.

16 Analyze your business. Determine the sources of your sales. Look at the business breakdown and ask: How much is repeat business? Then, identify opportunities for upelling to your customers.

17 Track net new conversations. Don't concentrate on the sale itself, but on the number of unique conversations you have every week. Set a target for the number of new conversations you want to have.

18 Hold a sales contest. Pick a few metrics from the beginning of the sales process. Challenge your team to increase those numbers.

19 Publish your findings. Keep a leaderboard to let team members know where they stand. It’ll get the competitive juices flowing and lead to better overall results.

20 Hold a morning meeting. Set aside 15 minutes to discuss the day's goals and identify any big sales in the pipeline.

OPTIMIZE YOUR SOCIAL MEDIA

Sure, you may have a lot of followers on Facebook, but how many of them do you interact with on a regular basis? “A lot of ‘experts’ tout social media as a numbers game, where more equals more, but that’s not really true,” says Kristine Shreve, marketing director at EnMart. “Ten-thousand followers sound like a big number, until you realize that, unless you’re following strategically and building a follower base that's relevant to your business, you may have one follower who’s interested in what you have to sell, and 9,999 who couldn't care less.” Instead of quantity, Shreve says, concentrate on building quality social media connections.

21 Identify your niche. What markets do you sell to? What’s your specialty? And what would you like to specialize in? Identify this before you do anything else on social media.

22 Profile your ideal customers. What do they want or need? What are their habits? Where would they go online?

23 Follow your competitors. It allows you to see who they’re following and who’s talking to them, both of which may be relevant for your business. It also provides insight on what your competitors are doing and opportunities on outperforming them.

24 Set social media goals. Determine how many engagements you'd like each month, how many new followers you want per quarter, or how many posts you'd like to publish each week.

25 Cut followers. If you have people posting useless or nonsensical items on your page, block them. If you're following accounts that are not useful, stop following them. If you have requests from people who are not part of your target market, delete them.

CHANGE YOUR MINDSET

Sales professionals often put themselves in a position where they’re pandering to a client, which isn't in the best interests of the client or your business, says consultant Scott Edinger of Edinger Consulting Group.

Instead, you need to change your outlook. “Really focus on your mindset of not needing this particular customer or this particular deal,” Edinger says. “When you do that, you’re free to really figure out what's in the best interest of the client and yourself.”

26 Establish a peer relationship. During your next sales call, remember that you’re a peer of the customer. Even if you're not on the same level on an organizational chart, during that interaction, you have something valuable to offer your customer.

27 Create value. Before your calls, think of what you bring to buyers. How can you help them see a problem they didn't know they had, or an opportunity they hadn't considered? This may mean steering them away from a particular product or service they’re asking for into something that’s a better fit.

28 Plan your questions. Don't plan what you're going to say. Instead, plan what you're going to ask. This may require doing some homework on the customer beforehand.

29 Rethink closing the deal. Summarize the content of the conversation and give them options to advance the sales cycle. That could mean signing a contract, or another avenue, such as scheduling a follow-up call.

30 Show some enthusiasm. Get excited about the possibility of a partnership. Be positive. Enthusiasm is contagious. – CD

WHY THE SALES CHALLENGE WORKS

Improving sales should be a daily goal for any business, but it’s something that doesn’t always get enough focus, experts say. Taking small steps – such as following a 30-day challenge – will help instill good habits for the future.

“The whole goal in sales is to maximize your potential and your performance,” says Lisa Peskin, CEO of Business Development University. “If you’re underperforming, how do we get you over quota? If you’re good, how do we make you great? If you’re great, how do we make you a superstar? It’s all about making sure we’re doing everything we can to maximize our results.”

The order of the challenge isn’t necessarily important, as long as sales professionals follow a plan, says David Blaise, a promotional products sales expert and author of several books.

“A lot of people wing it,” he says. “The problem with winging it is that you end up doing different things with different people. If I approach 10 different people in 10 different ways, and one of them ends up buying, I don't know whether it’s the person I approached or the way I approached that person. If I approach 10 people in the same way, and three of them end up buying from me, I can assume if I approach 10 similar people, I can expect three more to buy from me. One of the most important aspects of any customer acquisition campaign is that it is self-diagnostic. You can see where things are going right and where things are going wrong.” – CD

Throughout the month of October, we posted excerpts from the 30-day sales and shop challenges on social media and asked Wearables readers to weigh in on their own experiences. Here are some of the things they had to say.

We asked: What's your best sales tip?
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We asked: How often do you analyze your sales numbers?
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We asked: What kind of “strategic alliances” have you formed?
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