

Looking out for Number One

By Laurel Douglas, CEO
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Women running their own businesses often say they start because they're seeking a personal challenge and they're often after the autonomy that comes from being the boss. A business may offer an exciting way to gain control of your life and provide some needed income.

But success comes with a price. Running a business can be a stressful journey to independence. As your business thrives, the juggling act between home and office gets tougher. It can rob you of your energy and your joy. If you don't want to burn out, it's in your best interests to place yourself first.

Brenda Palmer's advice is to set boundaries and keep them.

Brenda was a single mom in Cranbrook with three children and a baby when she began her business. She'd been hand-making antipasto for friends and family and decided to take that skill commercial. Her business has evolved from the kitchen to a 3,000 sq.ft. facility where the staff at Mrs. Palmer's Pantry, Inc. now produce over 15 varieties of gourmet food products. She supplies major food stores and even an airline today, but reaching that level of success took a stressful toll.

"I was stretched in so many directions when I started the business," she says. "I couldn't take on any more." Brenda recruited her kids to help and hired staff, but still felt she needed to oversee everything at once. But "you'll never get ahead if you are always going back," she says.

Brenda found that with every success, her level of stress grew until one day she realized she couldn't assume the responsibility for everything. She saw she had to set boundaries for herself and clearly communicate performance expectations for her staff. It was the only way she could move forward from being a 'do-er' to a manager and strategist.

"Expect people to do the work that you are paying them to do." Brenda says she now manages her boundaries carefully. Each day creates an activity list to help her stay focused. That way "it's easier to say to someone, I'll put it on the bottom of my list and get around to it when my other priorities are done."

Brenda says she writes down her activity list every day. "If you don't write them down, they are wishes; when you do they are goals."

Staying on top of your priorities takes organization, especially if you're among the one-third of women who run a business and nurture a family at the same time. Here are some strategies to manage the inevitable stress:

- A "don't do" list. Identify what tasks you can delegate. Think of the people, time and money involved and decide how long you'll give up the duty. You may decide to give up

an activity temporarily or permanently. Keep your 'don't do' list with you and refer to it often as a reminder about your priorities when business demands pile up.

- Trade-offs. Every time you add something to the list of things you need to do, decide what you will give away.
- Weekly planning. Take some thinking time. Reconnect and realign your activities for the week with your vision.
- Relentless focus. Stay focused on the heart of your business. Ask yourself: "Is this the best use of my time right now?"
- Examine expectations. Do reality checks. Is what you expect realistic in the timeframe you allow?
- Perspective. Try to stay flexible. If your priorities changed today, would you know what to let go?
- Weekly play-date. Take time for fun and reconnect with your creativity. You can do it alone, with your spouse or buddy. The important thing is to step away from the stress for a little while.
- Guard family time. If you need family time, protect it. Define the boundaries between your work life and your family life. But remember it's a two-way street. Communicate the importance of business time to your family as well.
- Discover the joy of saying "no". If you feel guilty for saying "no" it can be a terrible energy sapper. So prepare yourself. Do a mental dress rehearsal for situations where you need to protect your boundaries so you're ready. And don't cave-in to pressure for immediate decisions either. If you aren't sure about doing something, take the time to decide.

When you find yourself facing the need to do something always ask yourself if this is the best value for your time right now. Even if you have a phenomenal level of energy, the chances of running out of steam as you add new activities and expand your business are greater if you don't identify what you can drop from your list of tasks.

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