

What Message Are We Sending When We Say, “We Are Busy?”

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Have you been busy lately? I've been busy. We've all been busy. Everyone, it seems, is really busy—super busy, incredibly busy—so, so busy. It's become something of a greeting, in fact:

“How are you?”

“I'm all right—really busy.”

“How's work?”

“Oh, you know, work's been busy.”

“How's your family?”

“Well, with school, and the kids, and the dog... things are busy!”

Frequently, we're not just busy but “swamped” or “crushed” by our daily activities and obligations. It's almost as if we take pride in how out of control it all seems or how overwhelmed we feel. And yes, busyness is a feeling.

So, why do we frequently tell others we've been “busy” or “swamped?” If I had to guess, I think we use these terms as a means of communicating success. No one wants to say they have no work or no clients—or no life, for that matter. Busyness also (conveniently) obfuscates the choice to prioritize one thing over another. Consider how often “I've been busy” follows “I'm sorry.”

But just as “sorry” loses meaning with repetition, “busy” can't insulate us from the consequences of our decisions. Nor can it affect how our words are received by others. If you're not careful, a client may hear “I'm busy” as “I don't have time for you” or “I can't give you my best effort.”

I'll give an example. A few weeks ago, I approached a landscaping business. I knew the current season—late spring, early summer—would be a busy time for the company, but I figured they would be prepared for it and happy to take my business. The company was too busy to take my work. So, I went with a competitor. I wonder how the owner of the first business will feel when January comes around, and the business is not so busy.

Missed opportunities are one of the many risks the always-busy face. I recently heard about a company that lost a multi-million dollar award because the would-be customer thought the organization lacked the time and capacity to handle the work.

Employees had transmitted the company's busy status to the prospect—a couple of offhand remarks was all it took.

Of course, if you run a business, there will be times—many times—when your company is unable to meet a certain deadline or deliver results within a given timeframe. In these circumstances, the wise move is not to turn clients or customers away or stunt the conversation with a blanket “I’m busy” but to manage expectations. Take a moment to think past your current feelings of stress and consider the other party's needs: Can the project wait a week? Would the client be willing to pay rush fees? Use that busy period as an opportunity to negotiate, consider your boundaries, learn, grow, and establish better lines of trust and communication. You should never promise what you can't deliver, but that doesn't mean you always have to say “no.”

The old saying holds true: make hay when the sun is shining. When there is business, work harder and work longer. There is no guarantee a customer or client will come back if you turn them away now. Every relationship is important, and work arrives when it arrives—not always when it's convenient.

And remember: words have meaning. The next time someone asks how things are going, try something besides “I've been busy.” How about “business is good?” It is the truth, after all.

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