

## How to handle, and profit from, last-minute jobs

As some entrepreneurs have learned, turning down 11th-hour projects can cripple a small business. But making the most of late projects can be a win-win.

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There's nothing like a request from a good client at 5 p.m. on a Friday to wreak havoc on a small business owner. Rustling up employees and contractors when they've made dinner plans or booked a weekend away is never easy. And that's not to mention abandoning your own well-earned downtime.

But more entrepreneurs are finding that in this economy, they can't afford to refuse 11th-hour projects.

"If you're in a service business and you don't go the extra mile, you don't have a chance," said Meny Hoffman, CEO of Ptex Group, a Brooklyn firm that has 27 employees and revenues of about \$3 million. It offers business services that include marketing, printing and website development.

"With all of the uncertainty, tight purse strings and risk-aversion, people are waiting until the last minute" to make purchases, said Bruce Bachenheimer, clinical professor of management and director of the entrepreneurship program at Pace University. Increasing globalization has intensified competition in many fields and destroyed traditional business hours.

"You may have to work on Sunday at 2 a.m. to fill an order going outside of the U.S." Mr. Bachenheimer said.

Being prepared to assist Johnny-come-lately clients can be a good way to boost revenue when growth is hard to come by. A midyear economic report from the National Small Business Association shows that 45% of small business owners expect zero growth opportunities in the coming year. Here are some tips on how to handle last-minute assignments.

**Know your capabilities.** No matter how inconvenient a project, the client will expect you to meet the deadline, as well as your quality standards, once you agree to accept it. Make sure to consider logistical issues before you commit.

"The best practice is to understand the time frames required for each phase of production," says Lori Fields, president of custom clothier Neighborhoodies in Brooklyn. Knowing the speed of the workers or contractors performing the tasks will allow you to determine if you can get a job done on time, she said.

**Be creative in offering options and solving problems.** Co-owner Joelle Obsatz of Butterfield Catering in Manhattan always suggests desirable alternatives for requests she can't meet. For instance, when a client wanted miniature pastries for 30 people the following morning, she explained that she couldn't secure them from the bakery in time and recommended the regular-size pastries already stocked. The client agreed. "We end up accommodating a lot of last-minute orders" that way, Ms. Obsatz said.

Because Ptex outsources printing jobs, Mr. Hoffman typically needs three days to fill an order for business cards. Next-day orders pose a challenge, but he has found that he can get clients what they need for a trade show or meeting by printing a small number of cards at his office. That enables him to fulfill the immediate requirement and provide the remainder on a slower turnaround.

**Establish a backup staffing system.** Rather than burn out their best workers with frequent demands for extra hours, some companies ask for volunteer staffers on late jobs. Ptex Group makes such requests about three times a week. Volunteers are allowed to arrive late the next day, Mr. Hoffman said. "Sometimes, we'll deliver supper for the employees," he added.

Providing a financial incentive can help attract volunteers. Apple Visual Graphics, a printer in Long Island City, Queens, with sales of \$4 million to \$4.5 million, sometimes offers gift cards, according to President Adam Sturm. "We also occasionally get tickets for sporting events and pass them on," he said.

**Stay in close contact with accounts.** Offering TLC to stressed-out customers is often essential to bringing jobs to successful completion. Apple Visual's project management team keeps clients informed at every stage of a print order. "Our best practice is to keep customers from panicking," said Mr. Sturm.

**Make it pay off.** Of course, the big benefit of tackling emergencies is that many clients don't balk at paying a premium. Apple Visual charges from 25% more to twice as much for last-minute jobs, according to Mr. Sturm, and the company prints prices based on turnaround time. "It's implied what the value is," he said.

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