

Stretched too Thin?



Managing a real estate career with family and personal time can leave you a harried mess. We offer you tips from the experts and talk to three associates to find out how they figured it all out.

by Heidi Russell Rafferty

Scrambling to score sales in her new career as a real estate associate, Grace D’Onofrio, of Canaan International Realty in Pompano Beach, was working 12-hour days, plus weekends, and losing time with her three teen-aged sons and her husband. Just three months into her foray, she was ready to call it quits.

“I told my husband, ‘I’m not going to renew my license for next year. I don’t want this kind of job,’” D’Onofrio says. But while she yearned for more family time, she also dreaded giving up a job that she immensely enjoyed.

Real estate professionals like D’Onofrio know that finding a balance between work and home may seem like an unattainable dream. Whether you have a family at home or are single and trying to balance work with workouts and a personal life, a real estate career can quickly take over, leaving you skipping workouts to meet a buyer and cutting a dinner date short to ensure a transaction goes smoothly.

Bob Losyk, consultant and author of “Get a Grip!: Overcoming Stress and Thriving in the Workplace” (John Wiley & Sons, 2004), notes that the insane schedule is the nature of the Realtor’s job.

“They’re out of whack! They’re out of control!” says Losyk, of Greensboro, NC. “They [run out] all the time when people want them and are trying to figure out how to meet the demands of the customers.” But, there is hope. With some schedule adjustments and a firm resolve, you can figure out a way to balance your career with your life and still make money.

Here are three Realtors® who took charge of their lives along with advice from personal career coaches on

how you can reclaim lost personal time. While all three of these Realtors are married with children, the advice they give can apply to anyone, single, married with or without children or empty nesters.

The Calendar Master

Courtney Silverman, of the Keyes Co./Realtors in Weston, knew it was time for a reality check when her 9-year-old twins, Cydney and Sam, started telling their friends that their mother liked real estate more than she liked them. And that was after only doing one, \$1.3 million, transaction that whole year. Most of her time was spent chasing listings and sales.

In January 2005, she made a New Year's resolution to take charge of her calendar. Since her New Year's resolution, she's done \$6 million in closed sales, with another \$2 million pending.

"I make the calendar the 'bad guy,'" she says. "I just say that I'm booked. When you're new, you don't want to turn anything down, but then you end up booking something before you're prepared to do it. I think it's important to book time to be a human being!"

Silverman schedules time for yoga, her daughter's cheerleading, her son's basketball practices — and Saturdays are always off days. She maintains an office schedule of 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., too.

"Folks who are interested have a life too, so they understand," Silverman says. "To get a property on the market, they'll knock off work early to do a listing presentation with me."

Silverman works through her day in "activity blocks." She has a routine time for cold calling, for example. Denise Landers, owner of Key Organization Systems Inc. in Houston, recommends uninterrupted periods to do important activities. "Eighty percent of your work will get done in 20 percent of the time if you eliminate interruptions. It's not just the interruption, but it takes 20 minutes for you to get back into the flow after an interruption," Landers says.

If you're worried about missing phone calls, give the names of the VIPs to your receptionist and ask him or her to take messages from everyone else while you focus on the task at hand, Landers says.

Silverman also works from one calendar in her DayTimer™, which she carries with her. "I look at it every hour. I refer to it to direct me on how to spend my time," she says. "I'm very organized and have set up systems for myself."

Barb Friedman, a former Wisconsin Realtor who now is a professional organizer and owner of "Organize IT," in Milwaukee, says you can save three to four hours a week by creating a master checklist/chart that lists to-do tasks: listing dates, expiration dates, inspection dates, financing, code compliance, closing dates, etc. Keep one copy posted in your office and another one with you in the car. Also list pertinent phone numbers on one sheet.

"You don't have to go to every single file to find information. It's all in one place — an at-a-glance type of thing," Friedman says.

She once put together a "car kit" for a sales associate that contained the different pieces of contracts and other supplies needed on the go. "All the listing pieces were filed in red, and all the offers to purchase in yellow. We had a miscellaneous area (envelopes, stamps, fax sheets) in Army green," Friedman says. Use a Rubbermaid container with a file lip and file everything legal-sized, she suggests.

"A lot of people don't want to take the time to get organized, but the fact is that once you have the system in place and are somewhat organized, it supports you so that you can focus on being the people person — which is what you wanted all along!" Friedman says.

The Efficient Diplomat

Felix Fudge of Bridgeport South Realty Advisors Inc., a commercial firm in St. Petersburg, was a 24/7 associate as a young bachelor. Now he's married to defense attorney, Donna, and has two boys — 3-year-old Felix Preston and 1-year-old Felix Edwin (Trey). "Having children makes you focus on efficiency," Fudge says.

He's learned to say no to requests that take time from his areas of expertise at work and his family at home. "When I first got the ability to say no, my income went up dramatically," Fudge says. That's because Fudge took the time to focus only on the serious transactions that would give him the most satisfaction.

"Not chasing after every deal [also] enabled me to have a better quality of life. People in this industry will let you waste as much time as you let them."

Losyk agrees that Realtors should make a personal commitment to balancing work and life. "You can't make your family secondary all the time or forget about them," he says. Plan a balanced day that includes worthwhile activities to bolster your family values. "When you're creating a to-do list, also include a to-do list for your family and schedule in some things for them, too," he says.

To carve more time into your day, plan appropriately for each activity, he says. "Most things take longer to do than you think they will — about 25 percent longer," Losyk says. Cushion extra time for traffic — or for the homebuyer who takes more time than normal to look over a property.

Fudge, who's been in real estate since 1985, says his current clients are "exceptional people." Time-demanding issues are not as frequent as they once were, because of the quality of clients he serves, he says.

"I'm blessed that although our clients expect first-rate service, they are generally the type of people [who] also place family first. I truly believe that service is not compromised when I place my family first," Fudge says.

Losyk suggests compiling a "time control log." Keep records of how you're spending each waking minute for about two weeks. "You discover who is wasting your time — where the interruptions are. You'll have anecdotal evidence of what you're doing and [with whom] you spend your time. It helps you get focused and organized," Losyk says.

Fudge encourages clients to meet during normal business hours and handles conversations via e-mail or cell phone during family time. He also has a personal policy of returning calls quickly, to keep them from mounting. "It just doesn't take a lot of time to answer a phone call or return one," he says.

Fudge also has three personal assistants. "The hardest thing for me was delegation. ... I'm the kind of guy who takes fewer deals but is more hands-on," he says. And efficiency at home is just as important to him as efficiency in the office. He employs two nannies and a maintenance person.

"It enables us to not have to worry about the household when we're supposed to be worrying about our clients," Fudge says. "I have guys at the office who help me, but what good does that do me if I'm worrying about what's going on at home? That is a big part of what keeps the machine moving and in an efficient way."

He says he's glad he has aggressively set time apart for family. "Cherish every moment. Don't ever catch yourself wishing or looking forward to when they're out of diapers or when they can walk or talk. That will happen soon enough," he says.

The Battle Picker

D'Onofrio, who started her job in April 2005, was afraid to lose a sale if she didn't adhere to clients' schedules. As a result, "in just three months I was working with 23 clients," she says. She was missing out on important family time, particularly a weekly Saturday morning brunch with teen-aged sons, Filipe, Lucas and Daniel. She and her husband, Eddie, had always set aside that time for family since her boys were babies.

"I found myself losing that connection, and I didn't like it. We want to raise a family with values. I thought to myself, 'This is not right,'" she says.

She had to learn to choose the "battles" that were more important and leave the rest of the work to a personal assistant and a housekeeper. As a new real estate associate with just three months of experience, she didn't know whether she had the money to hire them.

So, she got creative. Her assistant at work handles administrative paperwork. D'Onofrio pays her only when she sells a house, but the assistant receives one-third of the commission.

"I told her, 'You'll make money when I make money.' I have more time to do my work and concentrate on my job in the daytime," she says, adding that she only shows houses in the middle of the day now. "Before, I was going around showing houses, and I couldn't do my job well. Now I have time to farm and do the follow-ups."

Ironically, business picked up after she took on the extra help.


At home, D'Onofrio has hired a housekeeper/cook three days a week for \$80 per day, which enables her to spend more time with family. "I have more time to dedicate to my clients, follow-ups, advertising, negotiations and agenda before the closings, and most important: my family," she says. She's found that clients understand her structured schedule, because she also treats them with respect. "I keep in touch with them. I don't have to lie or say that I have another appointment. When you don't treat people as just another number, you'll have a positive return," she says.

Maria Gracia, owner of the coaching firm "Get Organized Now!" in Watertown, Wis., notes that new Realtors should distinguish between "battles" that will grow their business versus those that can wait or be delegated. Choosing the battles depends on your goals, she says. "If it's selling three [homes] a month and you're happy with that, then you could say no to some things. But if your goals are to sell six a month, you have to determine if that's what you want to do," Gracia says.

Newer real estate associates can also negotiate time with their families until business picks up and becomes steadier, she adds. "You do have to put in a little overtime to get a business going," Gracia says. "Schedule at least an hour a day for yourself and family members, and work on business the rest of the time," she says.

But, she adds, your goals should not be open-ended. "If you say, 'I'm going to work extra hours until I have sold X amount of houses, then that's a definite numerical goal to look towards. It's very measurable. But if you leave it in general terms, you'll never know where you are.'"

So, take a deep breath, get out your calendar, practice saying no and start looking for a personal assistant. With some organization and some help, you can have a long, fruitful and manageable career.

>> *For more ideas on how to take charge of your schedule and find more time for your family and personal needs, check out "6 Tips from Realtors Who've Been There" *

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