THE

Productivity
Manifesto

BY NATHAN BARRY

"Productivity is never an accident. It is always the result of a commitment to excellence, intelligent planning, and focused effort."

– Paul J. Meyer

How is it that some people are more effective than others? Not just producing a bit more than their peers, but sometimes accomplishing 10 to 100 times as much.

That question—and the desire to become more successful myself—drove me to try out dozens of methodologies, tips, and tricks. Some worked, many were a waste of time.

Included in this short book are the ideas that have helped me build a business, quit my job, learn to program, and write three books. All in just a few years.

If you are willing to really apply yourself—and these methods—I'm convinced you can achieve similar results.

Nathan Barry

Focus on the right things.

Productivity doesn't matter

The most important productivity tip isn't about productivity at all, at least not in the traditional sense. You see, it doesn't matter how efficiently a task is completed if that task doesn't help you meet your goals. You can spend hours optimizing the items on your to-do list only to realize later that the most effective option would have been to not do them at all.

Start by focusing on the right things: the tasks that move your business forward, help you meet your goals, and really matter to you. The most productive thing you could do, if you implement nothing else in this book, is to eliminate the filler tasks that aren't helping you reach your goals.

You can be incredibly efficient at setting up sales tracking and analytics for a product, but that time is wasted if the product doesn't already sell a meaningful amount.

In the same way, meeting people and shaking hands like a pro at a business networking event won't help you if none of these people are in your industry or can help you with your business.

Make sure you aren't working hard to become insanely efficient at useless tasks.
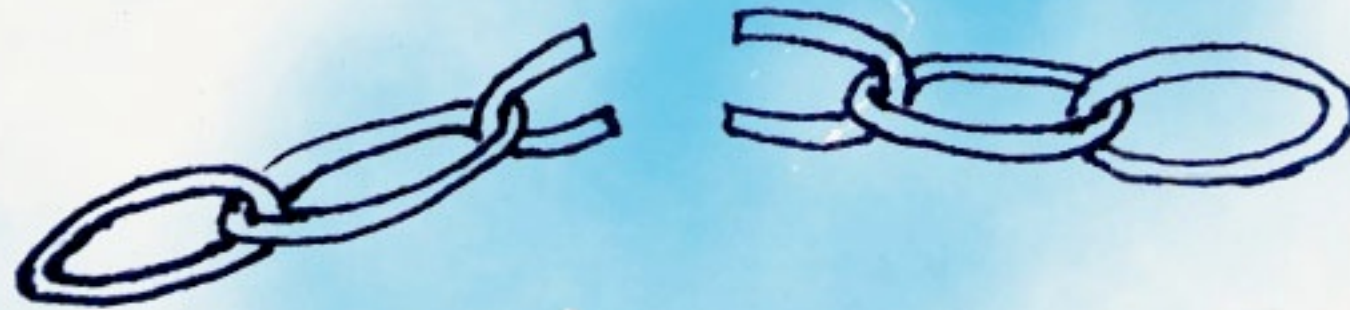
Do something every day.

A little bit each day

The problem with trying to learn new things is that I never get that far before moving on to something else. The trick is to work on it slowly and steadily until you can really improve.

Imagine if each day you spent 10 minutes exercising, 10 minutes learning French, 20 minutes practicing drawing, and finally 20 minutes writing. You wouldn't progress quickly, but a little bit of consistent progress each day would take you really far. Plus, implementing a modest plan is much better than always talking about your dreams and ideas but never acting on them.

In September 2002 Jonathan Hardesty decided he was going to draw and paint every day. He started as a beginner and years later is a professional artist. His journey is documented in this 70 page thread on ConceptArt.org. He spent a lot more than 10 or 20 minutes a day, but his story shows what you can accomplish with consistent progress.
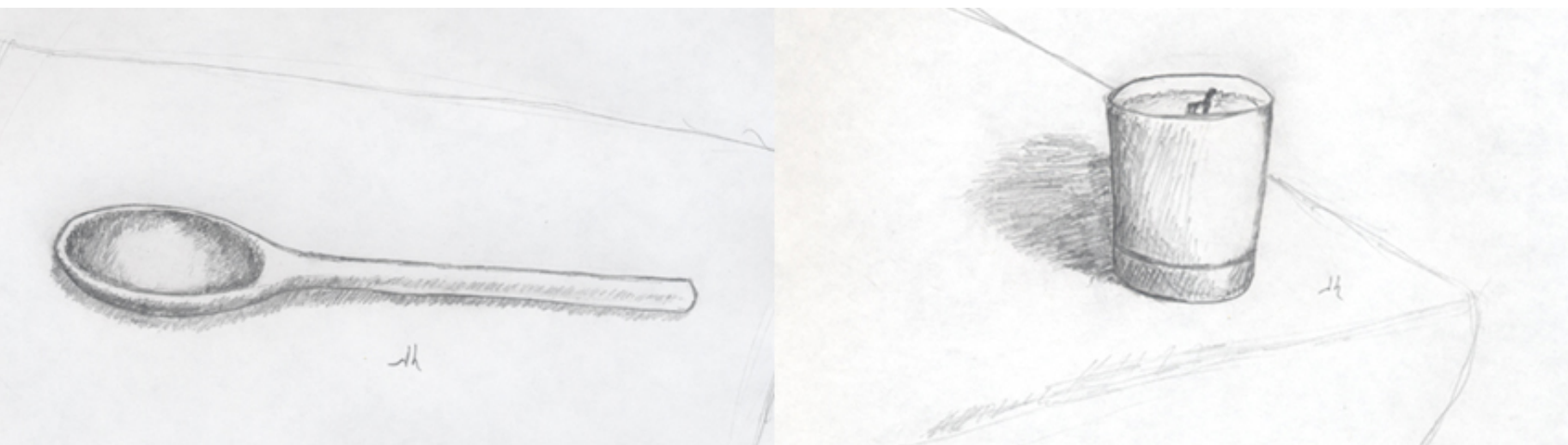
These are a few of his creations. The first post shows where he started a few years ago.

I've been programming almost every day for a little more than a year. In that time I've gone from beginner to having 3 iPhone applications written, all with slow steady progress each day.

If you have a new business you want to start, a language you want to learn, or a new skill to acquire, you should start by doing a little bit each day. You'll be amazed at what you can accomplish. What will you learn by this time next year?

Making a commitment

In order to transform my dream of writing a book into reality I started writing every day. My commitment was for 1,000 words a day, but yours can be much lower (though 1,000 words is just two or three pages).

When I was focusing on programming, I wrote an iPhone app called Commit to help you form habits. When you start Commit, the app has you fill in the blanks: "I will _____ every day," then, "Remind me at (10:00 PM), in case I forget."

I filled that in with "I will write 1,000 words a day." Then Commit keeps track of how many days in a row you complete your commitment. The longer your chain gets, the more motivated you will be to not break it.

My commitment to write 1000 words every day took me a while to get started. At first I built up a chain of 5 days in a row, then I missed a day, breaking the chain.

Later I made it to 15 before travel got in the way, breaking the chain again.

I kept working and eventually built a chain to be proud of. As I write this, I have written 1,000 words a day for the last 243 days in a row.

Here are a few tips that will help you form habits more effectively with Commit:

- **Start with a single commitment.**
  Don't add more until you have turned the first one into a habit.

- **Try to complete your commitment early in the day.**
  Make sure it doesn't get left until late at night. That's just going to make maintaining a streak more difficult.

- **Set your reminder for late at night.**
  That way when your phone does remind you, it means you haven't completed your commitment already, and you need to do it right then. If it's already 10:00 PM you can't put it off any longer.

Create & consume on different devices.

Distraction-free zone

In January I found myself sitting on a plane for four consecutive Mondays, each time writing a blog post to be published the next day. Writing without internet showed me just how often I try to switch from creating to consuming. Every few sentences I would open a new tab and try to check email, Facebook, or my RSS reader, only to be forced back to writing by my lack of internet.

This is a constant issue for me. Rather than spending large amounts of uninterrupted time creating, I switch to consuming content every chance I get.

Here's my solution. My computer is only for creating content. That includes writing, design, programming, or any other creative task. Reading Hacker News, RSS, Instapaper, Facebook, and Twitter all belong on the iPad or phone. Enforcing a strict separation between these two types of computer use will help improve my productivity. Just the act of having to switch devices should be enough to remind me to stay on task.

If necessary, you can even modify your hosts file (used to tell your computer where sites are on the internet) or use a tool like Rescue Time to block some websites on your computer.

Focus for a fixed amount of time.

Pomodoro Method

"Do you do this every day?"

My sister-in-law asked me this question while watching with a slightly confused look. It was 7:00 a.m. and we were eating breakfast after having just gone to the gym together. I was writing down the day's tasks on a piece of paper, with specific times, while eating my eggs.

- 7:15 - 7:40: Write book on self-publishing

- 7:45 - 8:10: Code new software features

- 8:15 - 8:40: Send out interview requests

That's the list she was referring to. Making to-do lists is fairly common, but mine actually has specific times.

This is how I implement the Pomodoro technique. The basic idea is that you focus completely on a specific task for 25 minutes. Checking Twitter, getting water, reading email, or bathroom breaks aren't allowed during the 25-minute work periods.

At the end of each 25-minute session is a five minute break, giving you time to read that article, refill your coffee, or waste time in any way you want.

When the five minutes are up, you are right back to your task, a task that should already be predefined. I write out my tasks, with times, so that I can move from one thing to the next without having to think about what to work on.

Since it's predefined I don't have to make a decision. I just start.

This is how I complete my dreaded tasks that otherwise would carry over from one day to the next on my to-do list. I know that I only have to work on the task for 25 minutes. After that, I can be done.

If I'm writing and can't manage to write any more, I keep trying until I finish the session. That way I make sure to push through writer's block without ever wasting too much time.
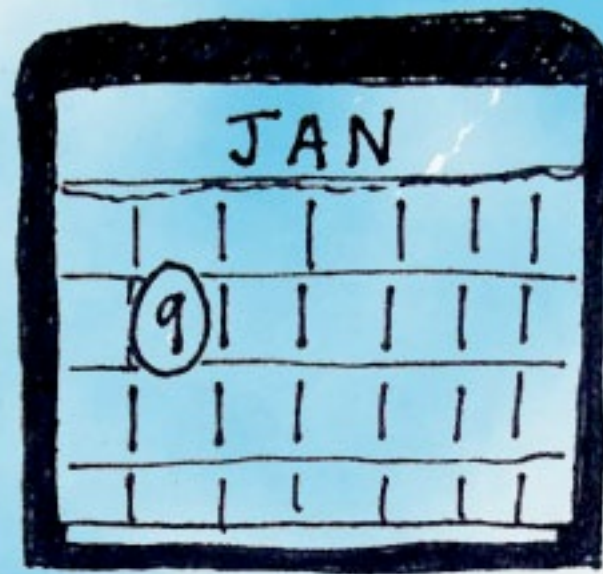
Chapter 5

Never miss publishing a blog post.

Scheduled embarassment

For the last six weeks I have consistently published a blog post every Tuesday morning. This isn't my first attempt at blogging consistently, but it is my most successful. Several times before I have set goals to write on a consistent basis, but have always failed after a few weeks. This time is going to be different. Here's why:

- Each week I create a blog post. I don't add any content and only sometimes do I add a relevant title. At this stage "New Post" is an acceptable title, though I try to have it be relevant to what I plan to write about.

- Next I set the publish date and time for 9:15 a.m. the following Tuesday. Then I click "Schedule."

- Throughout the next week I come back to that post and fill in details and gradually write the post.

That's it.

If I fail to complete a post the deadline doesn't pass by silently; it is marked by a hideously incomplete post for everyone to see. This is a wonderful tool to help me practice consistency.

Spend purposefully.

Money & time

Any personal financial advice will tell you to cut out the daily Starbucks trips, spend less money on shoes, or to eat out a few less times each week. I disagree with that. Partially.

Ramit Sethi in his book "I Will Teach You to Be Rich" (yes, the title sounds spammy, but it is actually really good), talks about how you should spend money consciously. Rather than be frugal in all areas of your financial life, decide what is most important to you, spend on that, and cut back everything else.

I have a friend who spends very little money on his apartment, but a small fortune on his car. Another friend spends an ungodly amount of money at Starbucks. I even had an accounting professor in college who was very financially conservative, but loved to spend money on shoes. All of these people have made a purposeful decision to spend their money on the things they care about.

To really make this work you have to cut out other things that you don't enjoy as much which quickly bleed away your monthly budget. Personally I love to spend money on travel.

So I spend less on cars, a house, and eating out than many of friends, all so that I can go on a big trip at least once per year.

Money is only half of the equation. You also need to spend your *time* purposefully. Just as your money disappears before you realize where it has gone, so does your time. Usually your time is spent in small chunks here and there that add up to an entire day wasted. Now I don't mean that you should make your time more efficient so that you can work more hours and get more done. Instead you should decide what you value most, and do everything possible to spend more time on those things. Cut out the meaningless, but expensive, activities that suck up your time.

This may mean deciding what task you are going to complete before sitting down at the computer or cutting out the TV watching you normally do. Don't let other people decide what you should be spending your time on. If a movie every night is your thing, then watch it. But then don't complain when you run out of time for other things.

Whether on time or money, spend purposefully.

Flip a coin.

Decision paralysis

Should you build that product, pursue a specific venture, or ask out that girl? The decision probably doesn't matter as much as you think it does. But we spend a huge amount of mental energy playing out all the possible outcomes, only to come right back where we started, as confused as ever.

Decisions can paralyze you.

So here's a simple solution to help you go with your gut feeling:

When you are undecided on a difficult decision, *flip a coin*.

Why?

Because when the coin is in the air, you suddenly know which side you really want.

For me this works so well it is incredible. A slight feeling of disappointment after a coin lands is enough to make me choose the other option. When a coin isn't available I assign each option to a letter then ask my wife, "A or B?" her response works just as well.

Yes, it's a gimmick, but it works for me. It might for you as well.

Stop waiting for the perfect tool.

Just start

Do any of these sound familiar?

• I'll learn design when I am able to buy Photoshop.

• I'll start eating properly when the new diet book arrives.

• I'll start exercising when I get an elliptical.

• I would practice guitar more often if I had a better instrument.

• I'll learn to program when I get a new computer.

All of these are just excuses to procrastinate. We think the perfect tool is necessary to complete a task or learn a new skill, but really this is just an easy way to justify our procrastination and desire to spend money. Sure, the new guitar would make it more fun to play, but if you aren't going to spend an hour every day practicing, then the new guitar is just a waste of money. You could probably get just as good (initially) with a $50 guitar from Wal-Mart.

Some friends did something similar for their son who wanted to play the drums. Instead of buying him a full drum set, they bought him a single, inexpensive drum.

If he practiced with that every day for six months, they would buy the full set for him.

He practiced every day, eventually got the drum set, and is now quite talented.

First find the dedication, then put in the time, and finally buy the great equipment you have been wanting.

When you think you are dependent on the tool, most often you will find out that was just an excuse. If you don't have the dedication in the first place, the tool won't make a difference. You will play with it for a few days, maybe even weeks, but then lose interest and move onto the next thing you need.

First prove to yourself that you have the dedication.

Managing ideas.

Clear your head

Being a creative person, I often have ideas for new businesses, software, or other great things to create. On one hand this is a good thing, because I never have a shortage of products to work on, but in practice new ideas can be distracting from what I really should be focused on. I have two software products, a design business, a full time job, and a family. Staying focused is critical to my business success and nothing is more toxic than new, distracting ideas.

So what do to do when inspiration strikes?

Confront it head on. Stop what you are doing (if possible) and spend 15-20 minutes writing down and planning out the idea. For me this usually means getting a sketchpad and drawing out the different screens of the interface, writing down feature lists and planning a name. Everything that comes to mind I put on paper.

You know how when you are trying hard not to forget something it becomes the only thing you think about? That's why it is so important to put this idea on paper. You no longer have to concentrate on not forgetting.

Once the allotted brainstorming time is up I close my notebook, stick it back in my desk, and forget about it. I still have the idea available if I want to revisit it, but it is no longer clouding my thoughts and focus. From there I can resume my previous task with a renewed focus.

This chapter is actually a perfect example. I was distracted from the design at hand by the idea you just read (ironic, I know), so I took a short break, wrote the post, and now I can move on. So, now it is time to go back to Photoshop.

Focus on finishing.

Complete or kill

At any given time I can work on whatever I want. So long as I'm on track to make enough money to cover my expenses for the month it doesn't really matter what I spend my time on.

As wonderful as this sounds it has the unfortunate side effect of many unfinished projects. These are projects that make just enough money that I can't justify shutting them down, but I also no longer have the desire to work on them. Combine this with contract design projects, and I feel pulled in a dozen different directions. So many things require my time and attention that I become paralyzed and accomplish nothing.

So what should I do? Well, today I decided to pick one project and focus. I put my four or five other projects and ideas on hold. They'll be there waiting for me when I have time.

See, that's the thing. Starting is easy. Finishing is the hard part. That's how I ended up with so many separate projects. By allowing myself to move on from unfinished projects I just get further into this habit. So now I am going to focus on finishing.

Finish what you start. Even if that means admitting something is a failure and ending it. Don't let the project dwindle away.

Kill or complete; just finish it.

Minimize efficiency.

What really matters

Blogs all over the internet will tell you how to get the most for your time. Increase your output and maximize your efficiency. Following these ideas, the amount you can accomplish will increase substantially and your life will probably improve. I know many tips have worked for me and I even share some of my own. But not all efficiency is good.

My wife works in retail at Banana Republic a couple days a week. Most of the time while she works I watch our eight-month-old son. From a finance perspective this is incredibly inefficient. Through my software design company I bill out my time for more than 10x what she makes per hour. If money were the only metric that we used to make decisions she would have quit her job a long time ago.

Instead, we look at the big picture and see the benefits beyond only finances. She gets a change of scenery with people at work she enjoys. I get to spend quality time with Oliver, often going to visit my dad or other friends. It is a great time away from all distractions of work and other obligations. My entire focus for that time is my son. Wonderful, but inefficient.

Lately my iOS apps haven't made much progress since I've been busy with contract work. A friend suggested that I hire out the development to get them moving more quickly. Again, this would efficient. I am a very slow programmer and my time is far more efficiently spent on design. Instead, I insist on doing most of the programming myself. It's slow, but I want to learn as much as I can.

Finally, I spend time writing for my blog, which is not an efficient way to make money. Again, I should be working on my backlog of design tasks and billable work. That is if making money was the most important thing. Instead, I've found a balance between activities that make money and activities that make me happy or improve my life.

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