

Dry-Erase Office Organizer

by Rick Stacy

A missed appointment, cash flow snags, a small job that is inadvertently overlooked, a window that never got ordered — it's hard to avoid these kinds of problems when you're operating a small business. If you wear all the hats in your company — estimator, mechanic, and office manager — it's a challenge to keep a firm grip on day-to-day operations.

Whenever I develop a system to organize my business, I follow three rules: Keep it simple, keep it concise, and keep it in view. For me, the one tool that serves all three of these goals is a color-coded dry-erase board. On it I list all of the information necessary to operate my business, including job names, cash flow projections, estimates due, and materials on order. It's a planning tool I review and update daily. With a quick turn of my head from my desk chair, I get a bird's-eye view of my business sta-

tus. I can see which items need immediate attention and which I need to be preparing for.

Job Lists

In the upper left corner of the board, a list labeled "Jobs" itemizes all my contracted work in black. Each notation is brief — for example, *Burzynski - basement (early Dec.)* — showing the customer's name, a one- or two-word job description, and the date when I committed to do the work. This list gives me an overview of my backlog. I use a separate calendar to pencil in a rough schedule for the jobs so I can give customers an idea of my lead time.

Below this comprehensive list, I arrange two additional columns, also in black. On the left are "Current" jobs — jobs I am working on this week — along with the day of the week I plan to complete the work. I may also add

notes for tasks that must get done during the week — for example, *Wed. - order window - Hayes* — to prepare for upcoming work.

To the right of the Current jobs list is a column labeled "Next." This is a list of work that is scheduled to be done after current jobs are completed, and it helps me to think ahead to set up material deliveries, to special-order items, or to call the customer with a revised start date. This list also contains small jobs I am looking for an opportunity to squeeze in. If I'm rained out or otherwise delayed on a job on the Current list, a quick glance at the Next list shows me what fill-in jobs are available. I update both lists weekly.

Cash Flow

In the middle of the dry-erase board is the "Cash Flow" column, appropriately coded in green and red. The "Incoming" section of this list shows accounts receivable, with the customer name and the amount due in green. I also record payments I expect soon for current jobs, as well as any advance payments for special-order items. By scanning this list and doing some quick addition, I can not only see how much money will be coming in the door, but I can also keep tabs on any tardy payments that may require a second billing.

Under this list of cash in are two lists of cash out, labeled "Subs Owed" and "Materials Due." Both are coded in red, and include all subs and all major and minor suppliers. At the end of each day, I add any purchases made that day to the appropriate account. Sometimes I erase the old total and replace it with a new one; alternatively, I simply add the new amounts alongside the old ones, depending on how much detail I need to see. The occasional credit is recorded



Figure 1. The author color-codes critical business information on this dry-erase board in his office. Scheduled work is listed in black, and a section for receivables (green) and payables (red) shows him his cash flow position at a glance. Additional listings (in blue on right) keep him up to date on estimates due and material delivery dates.



Figure 2. After critical information was replaced by his young daughter's artwork, the author installed a separate dry-erase board for her underneath his own.

here as well, in green.

With a quick look at the Cash Flow numbers and my current checkbook balance, I can anticipate any cash flow problems. I can also figure out whether any surplus in my checking account is committed to outstanding bills, and whether or not I should put off new purchases, such as tools or office equipment.

Estimates


At the top right-hand side of the dry-erase board is a list of "Estimates" that are due. I record the customer's name and the date he or she originally called, whether or not I've agreed yet to give an estimate. I don't erase a customer's name until I put the estimate in the mail. The date helps remind me to respond in a timely manner — usually within one week.

On Order

In the lower right corner, I list any items that are on order. I include the

job name and the date of the order so I can follow up on each item and the expected delivery date. Also included here are any anticipated job-site material deliveries, such as roofing or siding. I include the date and time so I am reminded to notify the customer and arrange to meet the delivery truck.

This system can be altered or expanded, depending on your business size and the kind of information you need. It has worked wonders to help me keep organized, and I no longer have to rely on my failing memory or various independent lists.

But beware of one drawback to this system: Multicolored dry-erase boards are a magnet for little hands. More than once, critical information was erased by my two-year-old daughter. I solved the problem by giving her a dry-erase board of her own, underneath mine. 

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