working smarter: scheduling strategies to help

If you're like most of us, the hope and promise with which you made your New Year's resolutions have already faded significantly. Year after year, our resolve weakens and we fall off the wagon — again.

Whether trying to lose weight or gain control, a poor track record has everything to do with not planning ahead in sufficient detail. A vague promise to get fit or restore order — without a clear understanding of what we're doing wrong and how to do it better — all but guarantees failure. Turning that failure into success requires setting specific goals, identifying the obstacles and figuring out how to overcome them.

When it comes to meeting deadlines, those obstacles typically include competing needs, insufficient resources, inefficient workflows and general disorganization. The good news, though, is that none of these is insurmountable – and the solutions may be closer than you think.

The key to creating schedules that really work is to know what you can compromise on and what you can't, and what constraints are imposed as a result.

A critical distribution date, for example, gives you one fixed point in your schedule; the amount of time allocated to design and produce finished pages gives you another. The trick, then, is to work both backward and forward from those points to establish a comprehensive schedule:

■ What's your target mail or distribution date?

■ When do you have to hand off your files to your printer to make that date?

■ How long can you extend your ad sales closing and still give your design/production team enough time to hit your in-date?

■ How far ahead do you need to start the copyediting/proofing process to have material ready for production?

■ When do you need to make article assignments to allow enough time to get them written, reviewed and ready for copyediting?

While the amount of time required for each of these stages will vary from publication to publication, the one constant is the need to build buffers into your schedule. Plan for at least one crisis per issue — an ad that's the wrong size, a late article, a corrupt file, a sick child — and build in an extra day or two to work around such disruptions.

The next trick is to find those days. They're probably in your schedule right now, masked by a process in need of tweaking. Take a hard look at the bottlenecks in your current workflow and start

outlining strategies to eliminate them.

Are you pulling your hair out trying to find space for last-minute ads without overhauling the entire book? It's easier to accommodate the unexpected if you've built some flexibility into your issue plan from the beginning: filler ads in a handful of likely sizes, images that can be re-sized or eliminated, pull-quotes that can be pulled altogether, even an assortment of "evergreen" pieces in varying lengths so you can swap out a longer article for a shorter one to create more ad holes.

Are you chronically short of content? Keep the pipeline filled by preparing two or three more articles than you think you'll need for each issue.

Are you losing hours or days in endless rounds of proofreading? Establish well-defined guidelines for what sorts of edits are permitted at which stage of the process (for example, no subjective changes once an article is out of copyediting), and limit the number of proofs in play. By having all reviewers read and annotate the same paper or electronic proof — and having the process culminate with the decision maker — you can not only put a stop to back-and-forth edits, but eliminate time spent comparing and compiling multiple versions.

Are you see-sawing between mind-numbing boredom and soul-crushing "rush jobs"? Instead of saving up stacks (manuscripts to be edited, articles to be designed, pages to be proofed), consider a smoother, more continuous flow, in which each piece of content moves through the system at its own pace: formatted as soon as it's edited, proofed as soon as it's formatted, corrected and designed as soon as it's proofed, etc.

As with so many resolutions, it's tempting to put off making changes: too many of us tend to think, "I'll try to get organized when I have more time." In the meantime, though, the costs of disorganization continue to pile up: The magazine's credibility is threatened when content is rushed through the review and copy-editing processes; its appearance is affected when hours or days are stolen from the design cycle; its mail date is compromised when too many changes are left until the last minute; its profitability is jeopardized when decisions made in a hurry lead to costly mistakes.

This year, resolve to make time to fix the process itself, and you'll find yourself in crisis mode much less often.

Sometimes it's hard to know where to start. If you'd like help identifying and eliminating bottlenecks, contact Rebecca Hoeckele, SMS client liaison and workflow consultant, at 703.858.1054.