



Training to be a leaner, meaner distributor

BY PHIL SASSO

In some ways, running a mobile distribution business is much like running a marathon. (In many ways, it's harder.) Successful marathon runners invest a lot of time training for an event that is only a few hours long. Conversely, distributors invest a lot of time in the day-to-day operations, but just a few hours annually in strategy and planning.

To win the mobile distribution marathon, it's important to be focused on continued improvements. It's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day drudgery of working in your business to not work on your business. But just as the top runners in a race train hard and have a plan, top dealers have to do the same. As we come into the home stretch of 2009, take time to assess and reassess your plan. It's been a tough race this year. But don't stop now. You haven't made it to the finish line quite yet.

October 11 is The Chicago Marathon. If you planned to run, you should have started training in June. (See the 17-week training program at chicagomarathon.com.) In fact, elite marathon runners, the professionals who take home the money, train all year long. Most elites even have trainers to help them refine their skills. They don't just go out and run like mad every day and hope to get ahead. They work hard on specific areas to enhance their performance, refining their stride, improving their cadence and even cross-training.

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I've never run a marathon. In fact, running from my car to the mall in a rainstorm is a stretch for me. But I'm inspired by the marathon runners. Beth, PJ and I usually tune in to watch TV coverage of the runners from around the world here in Chicago pushing through the last leg of the race and crossing the finish line.

Here's what you might draw from these runners in running your business better.

Train, train, train

You can't just wake up one morning and decide to turn-around sales any more than you could decide you're going to run 26.2 miles today. Improving your sales is the result of implementing a series of small but meaningful improvements. Big success comes from a lot of small changes. Take it one step at a time. Have a plan and work the plan.

Elite runners don't just look for ways to move faster, their training includes finding little ways to shave off seconds: cutting close corners, drafting off the competition, staying with the lead pack and things like that. In the same way, make time to assess the small details of your business to make you more competitive. Don't just ask yourself what you can do better. Ask yourself what you can stop doing. What's wasting your time or money and not yielding a return on investment?

You'll notice runners glancing at their watches. It's not that they have a lunch date; they're checking if they're on track. You should be glancing at your daily sale journal to be sure you're on track, too. Are you making unprofitable stops? Improve sales or cut the stop. Use the time you gain to stop at a new shop.



Cross train

The best runners don't only practice running. They lift weights, cycle, swim and do flexibility training as well as working on their core muscles. In the same way, you shouldn't just work on improving your core

sales but you should also be finding ways to add sales of more diagnostics, consumables, personal gear and other areas.



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The best runners don't have the strongest legs. They're agile, lean and firm, too. Successful dealers don't just sell the same core tools, they branch out and keep an eye out for the newest products on the market.

Rest before the race

Marathon runners don't just know how to push themselves. They know when to rest. They realize they need to give their mind and body a break to let it recharge. Do you?

When was the last time you took a vacation? If it was when "Seinfeld" was in prime time, you need a break. As counter-intuitive as it seems, getting away from work can improve your performance and profits. If you feel you can't take a few weeks away every year, double up on stops and take a few long weekends. You'll find yourself more relaxed, more focused and more efficient when you return.



Keep hydrated

Beyond just charging up with time off, runners need to keep water and electrolytes in their system during the race. In the same way, you need to keep energized by staying up on the latest distribution and tool and equipment trends. There are several ways to do this.

- **Get the industry trade journals.** Reading up on the best practices of other dealers and keeping up on new tool trends is important. (Check out ProfessionalDistributor.com and PTEN.com to get print or digital subscriptions to our industry-leading magazines). Readers are leaders.

- **Attend Industry Week.** If you've been to Las Vegas the first week of November, you know the buzz. There's lots of inspiration and education at the AAPEX, SEMA and NACE trade shows. If you haven't been there, you're missing out. Walking the floor of these shows can be a marathon in itself, but one well worth your time. (If you go to AAPEX, stop by the PD/PTEN booth.)

- **Talk to other dealers.** Don't be an island. Stay connected to dealers who fly the same flag — and even some that don't. You can trade tips, war stories and sometimes even inventory.

In 2006, I watched in horror as the first place Chicago Marathon runner tripped and fell at the finish line. On official review, his torso crossed the finish line and he was declared the winner. More than 45,000 runners will line up in Chicago this year. One will get the top prize. But everyone will be a winner. What about you? ■