

Software:
The Benefits of
Electronic Billing
Page 28.

Strategies:
Battling NIMBY-ism
With Better Tactics
Page 36.

Trailers:
Choosing the Best Transfer
Trailer Design to Meet
Your Needs Page 38.

Shop at the MarketPlace!
Page 67.

Recycling/Transfer
Stations/Landfills Section
Page 53.

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The Garbageman's Guide: Improve Your ROI By Tossing Out the Trash

Norm LeMay and Steven Kaufman

When you toss that trash, YOU'LL EXPERIENCE A HIGHER RETURN ON YOUR INVESTMENT and get the incredible results you deserve.

YOU KNOW HOW MUCH EFFORT YOU PUT INTO your day. Whether it's a project at work, family and friends, or your hobbies and volunteer activities, you invest a huge amount of time, money and effort into everything that you do. With all of that energy going out, you have a reasonable expectation that you'll get a benefit in return. Hopefully, those two are in balance with one another. When they're not, that's usually an indication that there's garbage in the system. That's what this article is about: how to improve your return on investment by tossing the trash.

What Is Garbage?

We're defining the term garbage as anything that has no value. That's pretty easy to visualize when you're talking about physical garbage like a broken mug or a banana peel. However, garbage can also include thoughts, beliefs, opinions, and ways of acting and thinking—all of the emotional and intellectual "white noise" that does nothing to further your goals or help you achieve what you really want out of life.

There's another important component to consider. Every department—accounting, sales or marketing—uses tools like paperwork, computers and a workflow. All of these tools form a routine that the department follows in order to get its job done. Unfortunately, there is usually garbage in that routine, like old, outdated

software, employee tensions that kill productivity and teamwork, or conflicting management styles that create confusion and chaos.

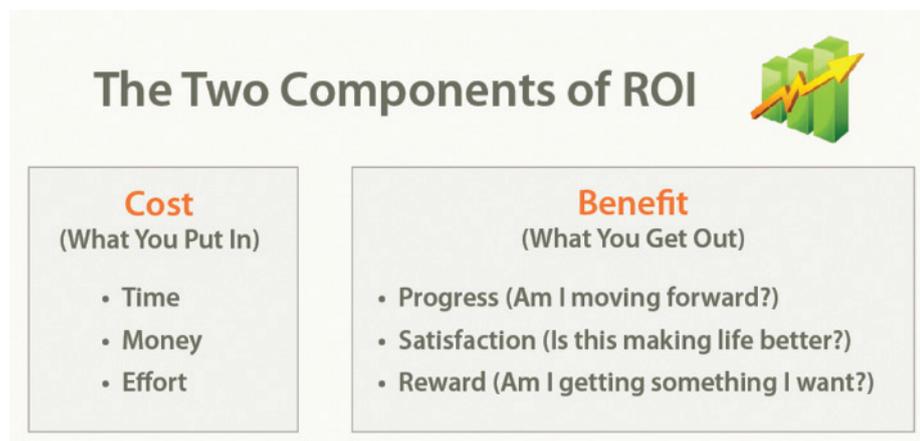
This garbage presents a unique challenge. Consider the saying, "One person's trash is another person's treasure." Beyond its obvious meaning that everyone values things differently, it also means that people won't always agree on what's garbage and what isn't. For example, let's say your company holds a staff meeting every Monday morning that employees can't stand. They see the time and effort they have to invest in the meeting as having no value at all. At the same time, the department manager uses the meeting as an opportunity to catch herself up on all of the projects her busy department is working on. To her, the meeting has real, honest-to-goodness value. It is the same staff meeting, but two completely different experiences of it.

If two people can't agree that there's trash in the routine, the rift between them is going to keep growing because garbage attracts garbage. If an employee doesn't like the staff meeting, they'll grumble about it. Someone else will agree and they'll grumble to the next person. That fuels the fire that the staff meeting is a waste of time. Like it or not, that kind of dissatisfaction goes right to the bottom line. It affects everything around the office in a negative sort of way. In business terms, we'd say that the staff meeting has little or no Return On Investment, or ROI.

ROI is a measurement of balance. Does the benefit you get outweigh what it costs you? Will you get more out in return for what you have to put in? Wouldn't it be great if every new project we started had an ROI label on it?

CAUTION!
78% of the time and 62% of the effort you are about to invest in this project will be wasted!

Labels like this would sure make life easier, wouldn't they?



The two components of ROI: Cost and Benefit. Images courtesy of The Garbageman's Guide, LLC.

Improving the ROI: Search and Replace

Search	Replace
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Break down the flow of the routine• Find the trash—big picture• Examine each step of the routine• What step is creating this trash? Why is that happening?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brainstorm the changes to the routine• Ask: will this change increase the value?• Measure the progress the changes are bringing• Hold people accountable for the changes• Go 3D: look at the problem from all angles

Use Search and Replace to get the garbage out of the routine.

Caution!

Caution!	Can't Clear the Garbage?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't rush to fill the emptiness• Watch out for sneaky garbage• Don't let dominant personalities force changes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Find a work around it so YOU keep moving forward• Make changes that will improve things for you

Tips to manage ROI leaks.

ROI: What You Put In vs. What You Get Out

Most businesses think of ROI in terms of money: for every dollar we spend, how many dollars will we get in return? However, there's more to ROI than just finances. When you look at return on investment from the point of view of value, there are three main costs:

1. Time
2. Energy
3. Money

There are also three main benefits

1. Progress (am I moving forward?)
2. Satisfaction (is this making life better?)
3. Reward (am I getting something I want or I feel I've earned after all my hard work?)

When you step back and look at the routines in your life, look at the balance between the cost you're investing and the benefit you're getting and ask yourself how much value you're receiving. Are you making progress toward your goals? Is the effort you have to put in backbreaking and exhausting? Is it financially draining? Then you measure the amount of progress, satisfaction and reward you're receiving. If you're getting very little value for all the time, effort and money you're putting in, you have a negative return on investment.

If that's the case, what can you change so you get a positive return on investment? An ROI turnaround can be boiled down to two steps: Search and Replace. First, look at how the routine runs, piece by piece and search out the places where it doesn't work; in other words, find the garbage. Then, you toss that trash and replace it with a new way of doing things that has value. Let's use the staff meeting as an example.

Step 1: Search for the Trash

Let's say that you've decided that it's time to get more value out of that meeting. The first thing you do is break down the meeting's routine. It starts with a management update. Then, the group reviews charts and graphs. Then, everyone discusses their projects. List out each of the steps in the routine from start to finish.

Find the specific areas in the routine that you think are garbage. Maybe the meeting is too long, nothing gets decided or people interrupt each other all

the time. You're not trashing the entire meeting. Instead, you're focusing on those specific areas where you see major problems; the parts of the routine that you feel have little or no value.

Now, look over the list of garbage you just made and ask yourself what's generating that trash. The meeting's too long because the updates take too much time. Nothing gets decided because the group never assigns action items. For each piece of garbage, perform a brief cost/benefit analysis. What do you have to invest in terms of time, money and effort? Ask what benefit you think you'd get from that if the garbage were to be thrown out. How much progress would you make? How satisfied would folks be? What new rewards could we reap? This cost/benefit analysis gives you a target to shoot for; a place to say, "Once we do some housekeeping, we could actually get the ROI that we really want."

Asking the question, "Where is there trash in the system?" brings this kind of analysis to the street level and puts it in terms that everyone can understand. It's remarkably effective because we all know what we should do with garbage: toss that trash! Plus, framing issues in terms of garbage means that everyone can have a hand in solving the problem, not just management. The more involved your staff is, the faster and easier your company will be able

to solve problems.

Step 2: Replace the Garbage

After you've finished with the Search step, it's time to move on to Replace. This is where it gets exciting. Once you toss the trash that's been gumming up the system, you're left with wide-open space: the magic zone—the place where you see things differently because the same old trash isn't there to block your view anymore. Now that you know what to stop doing, you use that valuable emptiness to ask, "What should we start doing?"

You start that analysis by brainstorming changes to the routine. If the staff meeting is too long, you might cut the time for updates from 20 minutes to 10 minutes. If nothing concrete comes out of the meeting, you might think about adding an action item review before everyone leaves.

For every one of these changes, ask yourself, "Will this increase value over time?" Keep going back to cost/benefit tradeoff: time, energy and money versus progress, satisfaction and reward. As you think about making a change to the routine, see if the tradeoffs result in a positive return on investment. This time, will you get more out from everything that you have to put in?

Once you start making changes to the routine, make sure there's a way to measure your progress. For example, time the staff meeting and make a graph of how long it's taking. Keep a list of decisions made versus decisions pushed off. The only way you'll know if things are improving is to measure where you're going versus where you've been.

Finally, find ways to make people accountable for these changes in the routine you've just made. Don't just assign action items at the meeting. Assign dates when they have to be completed. Have everyone report on his or her progress in front of the group. Because no one wants to stand up and say, "I dropped the ball," public accountability is a powerful way to make sure things get done.

At the end of the day, we all want to get a positive return on our time and effort. No one wakes up in the morning and says, "I'd love to waste a bunch of my time, energy and money today!" If you truly want to get more value out of a routine—especially one that's been very painful—Search and Replace is a great way to start making changes.

ROI Pitfalls

As you think about throwing out old garbage from a routine, there are three potential pitfalls that could trip you up. The first is not to rush to fill up the emptiness. If you do that, you run the risk of replacing old garbage with new garbage. Change can be pretty unsettling. Once we let go of old trash, but we don't yet have something new to grab hold of, our instinct is to jump on the first thought that comes our way, especially if it feels familiar. Resist the urge to act quickly.

Second, stay focused on the problem itself and how it created the garbage that jammed up the routine. The more you remind yourself of the negative ROI it brought to you, the better the chances that you won't let the same old garbage back in again. Remember: trash can be sneaky. You need to keep a lookout so garbage doesn't find a backdoor into the routine.

Third, watch out for those people who want to impose their understanding of the problem on everyone else and then try and force-feed a solution they feel is right. That's going to fill the emptiness up with more garbage and torpedo any ROI that you hoped to get. In some situations, it's hard to avoid autocratic behavior, especially when there is one person who dominates and controls the department or the company. Wherever you can, fight for a group solution.

One final caution—some garbage can be very subtle and easy to miss, like tolerating, resignation, making excuses or giving in. These are called ROI leaks and they can slowly let garbage back into a routine. Pressure, lack of time, tension in a relationship or lack of a clear goal are also ROI leaks that can skew the way you look at the cost/benefit tradeoffs and inadvertently generate more garbage.

Having Difficult ROI Conversations

By mapping out the routine that's causing you problems, you're trying to increase the value of the time, effort and money that you invest in all the routines in your life. You're doing it by focusing on all the areas that don't work well and tossing that trash. To do that, you sometimes have to sit down and have a conversation about the garbage in the system.

Start by pointing out the garbage you uncovered and what you propose to replace it with. Then, step back and listen. In the case of the

staff meeting, listen to why your boss thinks the meeting adds value, even if she loves those things you think are garbage. What usually emerges is a compromise; areas where you both say, "Yup. That part could be improved."

Here's the beauty. By focusing on value, you take the sting out of the conversation. It's not personal. There's no finger pointing. Talking about cost versus benefit is a totally different conversation than, "I think this meeting stinks" or "I think this meeting is perfect." Value gives you a neutral point of view to start the process of change, of getting rid of the garbage in the routine.

Sometimes, these can be tough conversations that take preparation and thought before you jump into them. However, avoiding and procrastinating just keeps the trash in the system and continues to rob you of the return on investment that you deserve. In the long run, it's worth the effort, even if it's a challenge.

What happens if you can't sit down and have that conversation? Perhaps you've tried to work things out with the other person and they shut you down, or you're not in a position where anyone will listen to you or your suggestions. If this is the case, you'll need to say to yourself, "I'm going to find a way around the garbage in this routine. I'm going to make changes within my limited scope that will improve things for me." In the case of the staff meeting, maybe you're listening for ways to speed up the projects you're working on or you figure out how to work around your colleague who's always in a bad mood when he comes into the meeting. In other words, you're finding ways to sidestep the trash.

This may lead to some unanticipated results. When people ask you why you seem more productive, you answer, "I picked up a few things at the staff meeting" and you explain what you're doing in terms of garbage. Who knows? Maybe that person will listen a little closer at the next meeting and pretty soon, there's more garbage headed for the can!

The Final Word

Don't be afraid to use the word "garbage" when you're thinking about anything that gums up the routine. That word has so much power and it's so potent because it calls it like it is: this has about as much use as a hose with a hole in it. It's not a glamorous term, but who cares? How glamorous is it to dread doing the same thing over and over again? Using the word "garbage" makes it clear what you need to do next: get rid of it. Be careful, though, and exercise some judgment. Don't walk up to your boss and say, "You know, I think your staff meeting has a lot of garbage in it." Make sure you explain what you mean by that first. You want to educate people, not offend them!

You've been dealing with trash your whole life. This is no different. All you're doing is focusing on garbage in a different way. Search out the part of your life or the part of a routine that no longer has any value and replace it with something that does. This is about getting more value out of your days. It's an excellent opportunity to ask yourself where you want to spend your time and energy: on the garbage that holds you back or on the things that move you ahead. When you toss that trash, you'll experience a higher return on your investment and get the incredible results you deserve. | **WA**

Norm LeMay and Steven Kaufman, co-authors of the book The Garbageman's Guide To Life: How To Get Out of the Dumps, share more than 40 years in the waste management industry. These guys know trash, how to get rid of it and how to clear your mind for success. For a free video of this article, visit GG-ROI.com. For a free video on how to have difficult conversations, visit GG-Talk.com. For more information, call (800) 806-0301 or e-mail info@TheGarbagemansGuide.com.

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