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SAY NO!

You can't say YES to everything but, it's important to decline with finesse.

By Hedy M. Ratner

When you reach a certain level of success, they come after you in droves. "They" are those folks impressed with what you've accomplished, who want you to help them with their businesses, their election, their jobs and their charitable endeavors. How do you choose the causes you want to support, and say no to the others without hurting feelings? We spoke to Maureen Beal and Nely Galán about the art of saying no.

MAUREEN BEAL

"I pick my favorite charities and issues close to my heart, and I stick with them," says Maureen Beal, CEO of National Van Lines, Inc., whose Broadview-based company is one of the oldest and largest in the nation. Maureen is also the Women's Business Development Center's 2008 Entrepreneurial Woman of the Year. "I receive so many invitations that sound compelling that it's not easy to do."

Maureen's charities of choice are the American Cancer Society, Aspire, Humanitarian Project and Benedictine University. A cancer survivor, she's on the board of the American Cancer Society's Chicago chapter and regional board in DuPage County, as well as a member of its Distinguished Giving Cabinet.

Concerned about the proper care for a developmentally disabled daughter, she chose to become active in Aspire, headquartered in Westchester, because they have group homes and work to help the disabled and their families. She's involved in the Humanitarian Project because, in addition to being a worthy cause, it was founded by her cousin. "I'm one of her board members, and she's one of mine," says Maureen. She's also a trustee at Benedictine University. On the profes-

sional side, she's active in the Executive Breakfast Club of Oakbrook because they have excellent monthly meetings with topics of interest.

So much community involvement may not be for everyone, but Maureen says, "I'm able to free up my time because I learned a long time ago to know your strengths and weaknesses, hire the best staff possible and learn to delegate. A sign of a good manager is that when you're not around, everything still runs smoothly."

Maureen says having a good "gatekeeper" assistant is important, and generally, she and her assistant ask for every request to be put in writing. She enjoys speaking engagements and will do them whenever she can, knowing that most people are interested in learning all they can about business success. She has also made changes in her lifestyle to free up her time. For example, she shortened her commute by moving her residence to the second floor of her office building. And she now orders her groceries through an online service.

"The most important advice I can give is to be organized," she says. "I won't schedule too many things in one week. If I overdo it, I begin to feel the stress. I know how much I can do at any given time."

NELY GALÁN

"Saying no is the easiest thing to do," says Nely Galán, president of five-year-old Galan Entertainment in California. "'No' is a beautiful word. It means you know yourself and your worth."

Nely, who juggles a television career with her entertainment business, has been accused of spreading herself too thin. She's been plagued by the image of being someone who has too much on her plate. Friends say this could impact her chances of having the necessary discipline to excel at one thing, but Nely has found a happy balance.

"I used to have a hard time saying no because you're essentially giving up an opportunity," she says. "The real gift is to not care if you can't be at every dance. I take a look at my life's mission, and that's how I make my decision of what to accept and reject."

For a period of time, she said yes to everything but didn't follow through on her commitments. "I heard many people were mad at me because I said 'yes' and didn't execute everything I said that I would."

An incident at work underscored how serious her saying yes had become. Nely's staff came to her with a complaint from someone whom she had kept dangling for five months. "When people dangle you, it can be very painful, especially if you say no eventually. There's a way to say no gracefully. 'I'm so flattered that you asked, but my plate is full right now. I would do you a disservice if I said yes.'"

Turning down dinner invitations is another way she has learned to manage her time. "There are only so many hours in a day," she states. "Before, I'd schedule dinner knowing I wanted to cancel. That's not the case anymore. I have a mate and a son, and most of my after-hours activities are going to revolve around them." ■

ABOVE: Maureen Beal (standing) meets with her corporate support staff.

Hedy Ratner is co-president of the Women's Business Development Center in Chicago. Maureen Beal and Nely Galán will be speakers at the 22nd Annual Entrepreneurial Woman's Conference at Navy Pier on September 3 and 4. Visit www.wbdc.org.