

THE BACK STORY

The art of masterful inactivity

On slide eight of Michael Wolf's epic 'Tech and Media Outlook 2016' presentation to the *Wall Street Journal* a few weeks back, the ex-Yahoo and McKinsey tech-strategist-guru-uberlord analyses the daily habits of the average American. His header may freeze your blood.

Now, we know that we live in a fast-paced world; that if you're not pushing your proposition 24/7 in real time across multiple channels, you're toast.

What you may not have realised, until Wolf's *Alice in Wonderland* slide, is such levels of endeavour are laughably, nay despicably, lame. In fact, if you're only giving it 100% 24/7, then you should be ashamed of yourself. Nul points, zero followers, you are a pinprick on Google's 330,000th page.

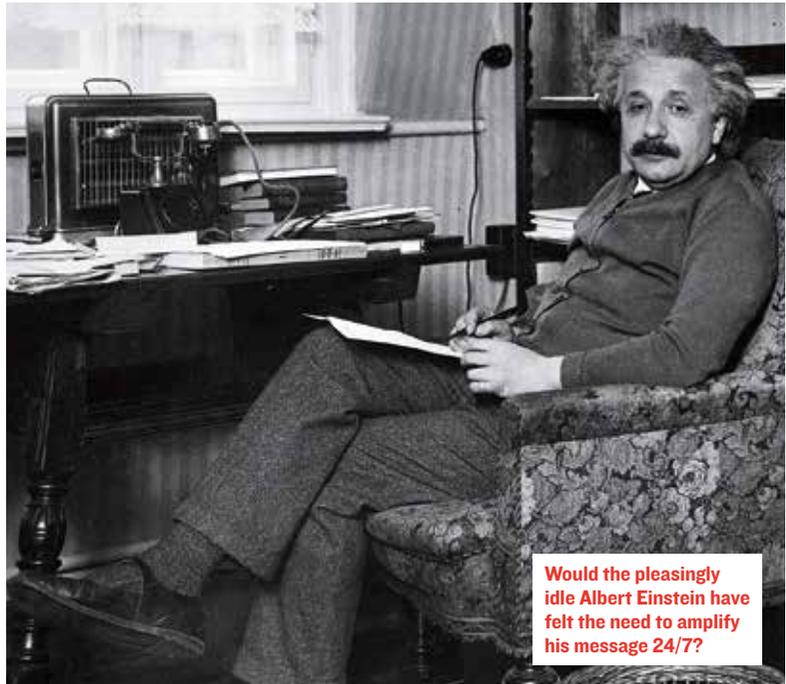
For Wolf's revelation, drawn from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, is that "the average American has over 31 hours of activity in a day."*

Yes, you read it right. So action-centric and productive is the average modern American that she can actually add more than seven hours to each day. New research is expected to show that by 2020 the most efficient consumer will compress a week's activity into just a few short hours.

How did we get so obsessed by doing stuff? I met an old contact recently who's global head of comms at a major bank. I asked him about how he counsels strong-willed bankers who have little understanding of communications. A man in his early fifties, my friend explained that, while his besuited bonus-junkie colleagues may squawk about the absolute necessity to respond to that day's post, comment, tweet, or news story, he has earned the right to advise "masterful inactivity".

It's a brave game, doing nothing. Informing a board director that, based on a careful analysis of the different scenarios, your strategy is to take no action whatsoever may not seem like a ticket to the top table. Exit multiples are pretty soft for agencies with such a minimalist attitude to billable hours.

But in a world where mindless activity is the norm, the art of masterful inactivity may just be the strategy of the wise. When was the last time you saw payday lender Wonga in the news? Since its annus horribilis in 2013 when even God had a pop at them (okay, he did it via the Archbishop of Canterbury), the online loans business has muttered barely a word. I would put my money on the



Would the pleasingly idle Albert Einstein have felt the need to amplify his message 24/7?

“
We live in a world where mindless activity is the norm

company which, beneath the gruesome headlines, still has a formidable tech engine, re-emerging into public consciousness in a year or so with a somewhat fresher aroma.

Quiet public relations, built around off-the-record briefings, has been the making of many a sustainable enterprise. Did David Bowie give interviews?

Of course, if you're running a start-up, you'll grab any opportunity to pose with a carefully coiffured labradoodle or loudly picket some unsuspecting institution. All publicity is good publicity when you're in a fight for visibility.

But at a time when the public is cynical about the motivation and rectitude of people who crave the limelight, you may find you can build lasting credibility and trust by staying schtum.

Albert Einstein was famously indolent. A "lazy dog", one teacher called him. The great man described himself as a "respectable federal ink pisser" when working as a clerk in the patent office in Bern, Switzerland. Still, he gave himself time to think. And devising the general theory of relativity is a pretty good advert for the benefits of downtime.



Matthew Rock is a business journalist who has been writing about entrepreneurs for the past 25 years