

The Paper Clip Strategy – from *Atomic Habits* by James Clear

In 1993, a bank in Abbotsford, Canada, hired a twenty-three-year-old stockbroker named Trent Dyrsmid. Abbotsford was a relatively small suburb, tucked away in the shadow of nearby Vancouver, where most of the big business deals were being made. Given the location, and the fact that Dyrsmid was a rookie, nobody expected too much of him. But he made brisk progress thanks to a simple daily habit.

Dyrsmid began each morning with two jars on his desk. One was filled with 120 paper clips. The other was empty. As soon as he settled in each day, he would make a sales call. Immediately after, he would move one paper clip from the full jar to the empty jar and the process would begin again. “Every morning I would start with 120 paper clips in one jar and I would keep dialing the phone until I had moved them all to the second jar,” he told me.

Within eighteen months, Dyrsmid was bringing in \$5 million to the firm

Good Habits That Stick vs. Habits That Fail

When asked about the details of his habit, Dyrsmid simply said, “I would start calling at 8 a.m. every day. I never looked at stock quotes or analyst research. I also never read the newspaper for the entire time. If the news was really important, it would find me from other ways.”

Trent Dyrsmid’s story is evidence of a simple truth: Success is often a result of committing to the fundamentals over and over again.

What makes the difference? Why do some good habits stick while others fail? Why did Trent’s paper clip strategy work so well and what can we learn from it?

The Power of a Visual Cue

The “Paper Clip Strategy” works because it creates a visual trigger. People use various triggers. One woman shifted a hairpin from one container to another whenever she wrote a page of her book. Another man moved a marble from one bin to the next after each set of push-ups.

Making progress is satisfying, and visual measures - like moving paperclips or hairpins or marbles - provide clear evidence of your progress. As a result, they reinforce your behavior and add little bit of immediate satisfaction to any activity.

Here are a few reasons visual cues work well for building new good habit:

- **Visual cues remind you to start a behavior.**
- **Visual cues display your progress on a behavior.**
- **Visual cues can have an additive effect on motivation.**

As the visual evidence of your progress mounts, it is natural to become more motivated to continue the habit. The more paperclips you place in the bin, the more motivated you will become to finish the task.

Creating Your Own Paper Clip Strategy

There are all sorts of ways to use the paper clip strategy for your own goals.

- Hoping to do 100 pushups each day? Start with 10 paper clips and move one over each time you drop down and do a set of 10 throughout the day.
- Need to send 25 sales emails every day? Start with 25 paper clips and toss one to the other side each time you press Send.
- Want to drink 8 glasses of water each day? Start with 8 paper clips and slide one over each time you finish a glass.
- Not sure if you're taking your medication three times per day? Set 3 paper clips out and flip one into the bin each time you swallow your pills.

Best of all, the entire strategy will cost you less than \$10.

1. Grab a box of standard paper clips
2. Get two standard paper clip holders
3. Pick your habit and start moving your clips from one side to the other.

Trent Dyrsmid decided that success in his field came down to one core task: making more sales calls. He discovered that mastering the fundamentals is what makes the difference.

The same is true for your daily goals.