Once a year at a banquet during the holiday season, my wife and I see a couple we know casually. At the end of the evening, the husband invariably says, "We have to get together for dinner at our place." He smiles at his wife and she smiles in agreement. Then we all smile, and I always say the same thing: "Great, just pick the date and we're there."

We part and the next thing you know a year passes and we're back in the same routine. He's just as enthusiastic about getting together as he was the year before, and we leave again knowing we won't see or hear from them for another year.

And although his promise to get together is legitimate at the time, he's among the millions of people in this world who make small promises without really expecting to follow through.

Although this example relates to a strictly social situation, the same phony promises are made every day in the business world. How many times have people said, "I'll call you for lunch", or "Let me get the name of that book for you," or "I'll touch base with you in a week," and never followed up?

My wife Mary and I remember the last two Realtors who sold our last two houses said on settlement day that they would call us for lunch. We commented at the time that we wouldn't want to bet on it and, what do you know, we never saw them again.

One of the big problems in making these little promises is that we make too many of them and can't possibly stay on top of all of them.

I remember many years ago when I attended my first American Society of Association Executives convention. When I returned home I sorted through the cards of prospective buyers I met to see which ones required follow up. To my dismay, I realized I had promised about 150 of them that I would call them for lunch when I returned.

This went on until I realized that I shouldn't promise more than I can deliver, even though almost everyone I know does the same thing. "I look forward to seeing you soon" has replaced "I'll call you for lunch," except in those cases where lunch really is an important next step in the solicitation of a particular account.

At about the time that I stopped making promises I couldn't keep, I realized that one of my peers began to view small promises to be just as important as big ones.

When he said he had some tickets for a ball game that your son might enjoy, you'd find an envelope on your
desk the next day. He would often promise clients to send them articles or recipes in which they showed interest and would always follow through. If he said he would call next month to make a luncheon appointment, he would call on the 15th of the next month. Whether the promise related to a business or social situation, you always knew he would call.

Make a resolution to be thought of as one of the small percentage of people who always follows up on the smallest promise. Clients soon realize that how you handle small promises is a good indicator of how you will handle bigger, more important ones in the future.

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