

Simple Steps to Project a Professional Home-Business Image

By David A. James

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One of the more difficult tasks to deal with when starting a home-based business is to decide how to establish your pathways of communication in such a way that you appear organized and professional, yet don't have to break the bank to get started.

I have found three methods of communication that I use on a regular basis: e-mail, telephone, and fax. These could probably be considered 'the basics' for most businesses, large or small, and these are the ones we'll discuss.

As a side note, with technology, of course, there are many variations on these tools. For example, you can now use a cell phone with a built-in camera to take a picture and instantly send it to a friend or business contact. This is pretty spiffy indeed, but this really falls into the category of e-mail or telephone communications, depending how you want to look at it. This probably isn't going to be a main communication method for most businesses, unless you're an interior designer or an artist and in need of constant visual communications with your clients.

E-mail – I'm assuming you already have an e-mail account or know how to get one. Many people have what are known as free e-mail accounts such as Yahoo (<http://mail.yahoo.com>) or Hotmail (<http://www.msn.com>, click Hotmail). While these are easy and free, they don't portray much of a professional image. Instead, you should take the name of your business, for example Home Income Digest, and purchase what is known as its 'domain name'. In this example, the domain name would be 'homeincomedigest.com'. Now you have the ability to correspond using djames@homeincomedigest.com, info@homeincomedigest.com, or whatever name(s) you prefer. This is usually coordinated with the web hosting company that hosts your domain name. There are many topics to discuss with e-mail, but let me hit another one very quickly: autoresponders

An autoresponder automatically responds to a person who has just sent you an e-mail by sending a message that you have previously composed back to them. Sounds great, but many people take this as a sign that you really aren't serious about your business or are trying to automate everything to the point that you don't have to do any work. Others say autoresponders show you ARE serious and want your customers to know you'll be in touch as soon as you can. I think you see the dilemma here. My advice is don't use autoresponders if you can generally get back with people promptly (within a few hours, or one business day at the most). However, there are situations where autoresponders are perfect, for example sending receipts, since most people don't expect personal interaction for this type of correspondence.

Telephone – In most cases, you really should get a second phone line. The problem with using your

personal phone line is that there is no greeting you can give that will sound correct for all situations. Sure, your friends will get used to you saying, "Hello, this is Jenni's Interior Designs" but it's pretty cheesy. Caller I.D. may help, but still. Also, there is really is no appropriate way to compose a voice mail greeting. You could get voice mail with multiple mailboxes, but recording a greeting of "Hello this is Jenni. For Jenni's Interior Designs press one, to leave a personal message for Jenni press two" doesn't really impress either. Opt for the second phone line, and make sure you use it strictly for business. Also, try to keep the phone in a quiet room or where you can shut the door if necessary.

One great tip is to record a new phone message each day with the date included. For example, "Hello, today is September 17th, this is Dave with Home Income Digest. I'll be out of the office from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. today, please leave a message and I will get back with you as soon as I can. Thank you for your call, have a great day". Immediately your customer knows you're still alive and actively in business. They are also more likely to leave a message because it's obvious you're serious about keeping your customers informed. Do this every single day; it will pay off.

Fax – With the rise of e-mail, which can use attachments, faxing isn't as common as it used to be. However, not everyone is handy with creating and using attachments, and there are still situations where fax machines are still the better choice, such as sending a document with a signature. Since a fax machine is dormant the vast majority of the time, there really isn't a need for a separate phone line for your fax, unless of course it's your primary means of communication for some reason. Most likely, it's better to get a phone feature called 'multi-ring service'. For a few dollars a month, this allows you to have two separate phone numbers and ring patterns on one phone line. You set the fax to pick up on a double ring, and you know to pick up the phone yourself on single rings. If you have yet to buy a fax machine, I would recommend getting a multi-function laser unit that does faxing, printing, scanning, copying, and attaches to your computer as well. This will give you a lot of options for storing and editing documents, along with options for communicating with your customers. But always remember the most important thing about a fax machine - keep it full of paper!

Above all, the most important, and simple, thing you can do to impart a professional appearance is to physically be in your office at all times during business hours. In the end, no one likes getting passed to an answering machine. But more importantly, there is no way to calculate how much potential business you are losing simply because you're not there to answer the phone.

About the Author:

David James is the editor of "Home Income Digest", a publication, updated quarterly, presenting more than 40 of the best home-based businesses currently available in the country. Located at <http://www.homeincomedigest.com>, Home Income Digest includes only well-researched, established, small business opportunities. For more information on the author, visit <http://www.homeincomedigest.com/aboutus.htm>

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