

The Nine to Five Home-Business Tug Of War

By Elena Fawkner

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Creating A Corporate Office Image From Your Spare Bedroom

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Like it or not, there is still a segment of the population who will erroneously conclude that you and your business are less than professional and competent just because you run your business out of your home.

Dumb? Obviously! Narrow-minded? Yes! Wrong? Absolutely! Unfair? No question! Want their business? Well ... yes. OK, then you're going to have to play the game and beat them at it. Here's how to do it. It's a little sneaky, but hey, all's fair and they did start it.

INCORPORATE

First off, incorporate. Nothing screams "CORPORATE!" to our friend the dumb, narrow-minded, wrong, unfair Potential Client as an LLC, Pty Ltd or PLC (depending on where you conduct business) on your letterhead and business card.

Not only does this appease Potential Client, there are some very good tax and other advantages to incorporation which are well worth the modest cost. Talk to your attorney or accountant about this.

OFFICE ADDRESS

The next problem you have with Potential Client is that you don't want your home address to give you away. What do you think looks more professional in Potential Client's eyes: 123 Cherryblossom Way, Apt. 103, Suburbia

or 123 Major Blvd, Level 37, Big City?

The answer is a serviced office. These don't have to cost a lot of money if you use them pretty much as a post office but they CAN give your business all the big-city prestige your Potential Client is looking for.

An additional advantage is that you can use your serviced office to meet with Potential Client. After all, the last thing you want is to have him coming to your REAL office! Heaven forbid! Most serviced offices will make meeting rooms available for a flat fee.

TELEPHONES

This is probably the trickiest part of all. How do you know it's safe to answer the phone in your home office even though the sounds of your young children playing just outside your office door will be heard by the caller? You simply don't.

There is a simple way of dealing with this. Only give your home office number to existing clients. They already know you are professional and competent and should therefore have no issue with the fact that you work from home.

For anyone else, give out the number of an answering service that will answer the call in your company name and can tell callers that you're in a meeting with another client and take a message. Your serviced office will offer this service as well.

You can then return the call at a time when you know tell-tale background noise won't give you away.

In fact, a trick some people who work from home use when returning calls is to run a tape of office background noise. This both gives the impression you are working in a large office AND it masks any slight tell-tale household noises that may, despite your best efforts, give you away.

Once Potential Client becomes an actual client and you've proved to his satisfaction that you are professional and competent, you can tell him that you've decided to start working out of your home to reduce unnecessary overheads and give him your direct phone number.

No matter how enlightened your client-base is as a general rule, it is imperative that the telephone be answered in a businesslike manner. I don't care how sympathetic, supportive and admiring your clients are of your decision to balance your work and family commitments by running a successful business from home, there is nothing cute about a five year old answering your business line. It's

unprofessional, not to mention downright annoying.

Speaking for myself, I also find it annoying and unprofessional for a spouse to answer the business line. I'd much prefer to leave a message with your answering service than your wife or husband, thank you very much. At least I can be sure you'll get the message. But that may just be me ... decide for yourself.

So have a separate phone line for your business and lay down the law to your household that no-one, NO-ONE, is to answer it but you (unless, of course, you're employing your teenage children in your business in which case they should be instructed on how to answer the telephone in a professional manner). If you're away from your office, divert your calls to your answering service.

EMAIL

Something else to think about is the image of your email address. Which is Potential Client to consider more corporate/professional: maryann@isp.com or m.entrepreneur@mycompanyllc.com?

It's worth spending \$35 a year on your own domain name just for the professional email address, even if you never intend to create a website. Mind you, if you're going to have your own domain why NOT create your own website? But that's another article ...

STATIONERY AND PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS

It goes without saying that your stationery, business cards and other promotional materials should reflect a professional corporate image. If you have incorporated your business, this is a good start. A company name on letterhead and business cards can't fail to convey a professional image provided they are professionally printed on quality stationery stock.

OFFICE EQUIPMENT

There's no point having quality stationery if you're going to use a cheap and cheerful inkjet printer for your correspondence. Invest in a medium quality laser printer instead. They don't cost a lot of money these days and you can get a unit that triples as a fax machine and photocopier for only a few hundred dollars.

So, what do you think? You may be thinking "I wonder whether it's really worth the effort to try and please just a small number of potential clients". Is it worth it? Maybe. But look back over the suggestions I have made. Are they really anything more than basic, common sense, professional business practices? Regardless of what your potential and existing clients may think about the concept of businesses run out of their owners' homes, first impressions do count. Wouldn't the above approach be a good one to take with ALL your potential clients whatever their personal disposition? Just something to think about.

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