

Make Your Small Business Look Big

By Mario Sanchez

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Our business friendly culture, the improvements in communications, and the abundance of Internet resources have all combined to make it possible even for a garage-based one-man-show to look as professional as the largest corporation. You should take advantage of all available options to develop a professional image for your business.

Even if you are a sole proprietor you can operate under a trade name that relates to your business. You do this by registering a Fictitious Name. This is a relatively simple and straightforward procedure that can be done on-line in a few minutes. The registration of fictitious names is administered by the Department of State or by the County (depends on the state; call your county clerk or your state government to find out what applies in your case). For example, a Fictitious Name will allow a person named John Smith to operate under a name such as Sunshine Landscaping, without the hassle of incorporating, adding credibility and marketability to his business.

Once you have your business trade name, make it a point to get a logo. A logo is the graphical representation of your business; it separates you from your competitors and creates brand awareness. You don't need to pay hundreds of dollars to a professional designer. You can visit your local community college and ask a graphic arts student to give it a shot. Also, you can find on-line companies that can make a logo for as little as \$25. Or, if you're good with a computer, you can download some free click art, open the Paint utility in your Windows program, throw in some text and color, and you can create the logo yourself.

Then, it is time to register your own domain name, such as "sunshinelandscaping.com". The cost of registering a domain name has gone down significantly, to even less than \$10 / year. At those rates, anybody can afford it. For more information and tips on domain names, go to <http://www.accordmarketing.com/tid/archive/033003.html>

Next, you must put up your own website. It doesn't need to be a big production. A three page website, with a main page, a page describing your services, and a contact page is enough. There are many free web hosting services that offer Page Building utilities that can literally allow you to create a website in minutes. They offer all sorts of free templates and web building tools to get you up and running in no time.

If you want more flexibility in designing your website, get Microsoft FrontPage

(<http://www.microsoft.com/frontpage/>). This is a simple yet powerful program to create professional looking websites in a snap, with the advantage that its interface is intuitive to anybody who uses other Microsoft programs like Word or Excel (and who doesn't nowadays?). Once your website is done, you need to find a host. You can find reliable hosts for little more than \$5.00 / month. Geocities (<http://www.geocities.com>) has a beginners package that for \$4.95 / month will give you enough space for a medium size website with no advertising.

Next, you'll have to print business cards. There is a great on-line service that provides you with first quality, full color business cards for free (check it out at <http://www.qksrv.net/click-634431-4992835>). They have a user friendly interface that allows you to create your own business card in seconds, choosing from a wide variety of attractive templates. If you want more customization, like modifying the layout or uploading your logo, you can do so for a small fee.

Finally, by all means, don't forget to create a signature file for your e-mail messages. If you use Outlook or Outlook Express, you can do it by going to Tools Options Signatures. Your signature file should have your name, the name of your company, a link to your website and a catchy tagline or slogan. Since most people read their mail every day, this is an excellent opportunity to market your business for free with every message you send.

Finally, a word of advice. All this will mean nothing if you don't take care of your customers. Never promise more than you can deliver, always keep your word, and follow through with your customers until they are completely satisfied.

Good luck!

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