

Earning credibility for your home business

12 August 2002. Heather Douglas

Do your clients take you seriously? What can you do to make sure they do?

One of the biggest disadvantages of working for oneself from home has traditionally been that home businesses have been seen as something less than a "real" business. However, that perception is changing to such an extent that more and more people, in a wide variety of occupations, are giving up the unnecessary overheads of premises and moving their businesses back home.

This world-wide trend has been fuelled primarily by rapid advances in technology, coupled with a significant drop in the cost, compatibility and ease of use of computers, communication devices and - of course - the Internet. It's also been driven by a more universal desire for individuals to meet lifestyle goals while taking into consideration their need to earn an income. Home business really has come of age, but it still has to shake off the last of the legacy of misconception that surrounds working from a home environment.

It's up to each individual home business operator to build credibility for his or her business - and while this may initially be a disadvantage, the astute home business operator can also leverage it to create a distinct advantage. Once that rapport is established, the solo operator is often in a better position to maintain the trust and credibility he or she has earned, than a larger organisation which relies on many individuals to perform to a required standard or to have intimate knowledge - despite staff turnover - of a client's history, requirements and other details.

So how, then, does a home business create - or rather, earn - credibility? It's usually the small things that count.

Self-image

How you think of yourself and your business will pervade every aspect of your business and have enormous impact on your credibility. Be proud of running your own home business. Many of your clients will envy your ability to be your own boss, write your own salary cheque and attain lifestyle goals they may also aspire to. Project a positive self-image and most others can't help but believe in you too.

Think big from day one

Hand in hand with believing in yourself is having a vision for your business, and accepting the reality of it right from the start. Behave - from the very first day - as if you are successful, and you will earn credibility. Define what your business will be like, think and talk about it as if it is already like this, and behave as you will when your vision is fulfilled. No-one does business with a business that is "getting there" - your customers want to deal with you in the here and now. Having and projecting a clear vision for your business, and creating systems and processes from the beginning are powerful ways to enable your business to grow to meet your ideals.

Image

Every business card, letterhead, email message, presentation, brochure, document, etc., reveals to your client how you view your business. So get rid of ink-jet letterhead, have a good quality business card designed and printed, keep free email accounts to personal mail (and better still use your business domain name in your email address). If you have a web site, make sure it is clean, uncluttered and professional. In short, if anything bearing your branding is not up to scratch - don't use it. Cost is a factor, but spending money on your image is a necessary and worthwhile investment.

Professionalism

Answer the phone in a businesslike manner, dress appropriately, be punctual for meetings, return calls and emails, honour promises and deadlines, and don't badmouth the competition. Customers judge your business by your actions, not just the product or service you deliver

Keep family and work commitments separate

Kids squabbling in the background of a business call, discussing a project with a client with the breakfast dishes on the table, or driving into a customer's premises with piles of unwashed laundry on the back seat of your vehicle don't instil confidence no matter how good your product or service.

Quality of work

Be your own quality controller! Hone your expertise, if necessary. Many home businesses pay lip service to high standards but, driven by a desire to please customers or earn a little more income, get too busy and find their standards slipping or deadlines slipping by. Take on work you can do - don't get talked into doing something you can't. Turn down work if you are too busy, or find a way to involve others to provide a timely, high-quality, complete service.

Charge what you are worth

If you undercharge, customers will not necessarily value your product or service, and you could potentially be killing your business. It's preferable to add value so your customers are happy to pay more but feel they are still getting a

good deal. What you charge will reflect on your business too - a business which is thought of as "cost-effective" or "offering value for money" - or even "dear, but worth the investment" - will be much more credible than one which is "cheap".

Build relationships

Above all, your relationships with your customers will contribute to your credibility. Honour the old adage about under-promising and over-delivering, share your expertise with your customers, inform them of pros and cons of various choices, address their concerns, let them know about problems that crop up and what you are doing to minimise the impact of these, be pro-active, be a player on their team.

These are just some of the factors which will help you earn credibility with your clients - and of course, your suppliers, associates, contractors, staff (if you have them) and even your competitors.