

Tips for Maximizing Your Home Based Business

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Are you taking advantage of all the options for your home based business?

Home businesses have many more options today than they did when I started my business 18 years ago. In 1991 having a computer for a home based company was normal, even if it did have a 'black and white' screen; having a fax machine was a bit more unusual. They were usually large and clunky and could cost a small fortune. And I remember purchasing my HP black and white laser printer for over \$800! However, much to HP's credit, I only disposed of it a few years ago.

Today's home businesses have many options for running efficiently. Fast desktop computers can be had for \$500 and laptops can be found for as little as \$350 if you read all your newspaper flyers and e-mails and check Pricegrabber.com. Color printers can be obtained for \$150 and fax machines are nearly obsolete as they are now just a software add-on for your computer or a click a way at myfax.com.

What else can you do to make sure you home office is running efficiently?

Take a good look at your computer. How old is yours? While old doesn't necessarily mean bad or even slow, is yours running as quickly as you would like? If not, consider adding RAM instead of buying a whole new machine. While my computer is six years old, I'm not nearly ready to trade it in. In fact most people are impressed at how fast it is.

A year ago I increased my RAM (around \$120) to bring it up to 1.5 gigabytes (visit crucial.com and the site will automatically tell you what memory you have, what you can upgrade to and what it will cost) and I recently purchased a 22" flat panel monitor \$199 from Acer); at the same time I traded out my video board for a digital video board (purchased on Ebay for under \$50) and the speed increase was significant!

I added a 250 GB harddrive about 6 months ago for \$80 and won't have to worry about running out of space for a while. I also recently added a new network card for \$33 and the difference in speed to the Internet is noticeable. In fact when my "Geek" recently showed up he couldn't believe it wasn't a new computer.

A fresh install of Windows XP pro a few months back cleaned out any registration issues that were slowing it down and now it runs like a new computer. In addition, I constantly run virus protection software from AVG and keep it up to date (AVG also has a free version and is recommended by geeks everywhere!).

Don't forget to back up! A few years ago I purchased an Iomega external harddrive for backup. It has 250 GB of memory and software which automatically backs up in the middle of the night when it won't bother my work and it can back up my daily work each evening at whatever time I set. At \$150 it provided great peace of mind and was easy to install and set up. But recently I discovered Carbonite. If you haven't tried Carbonite, I HIGHLY recommend it. Carbonite is about \$50 a year or less if you purchase several years of service at one time. Once you set up the

software (which takes only a few minutes), Carbonite works in the background to back up the files you choose while you work. It is effortless and so is restoring files when you need to.

If your computer isn't upgradable and is running slow and you find yourself frustrated by it, either wipe it clean and start from scratch or donate it and purchase a new one. Over the years I have learned to order as much computer as my budget will handle. They will last longer as the CPU will keep up with computer software enhancements and upgrades and any new hardware you want to add down the road.

Oh, and if you need a new laptop, try getting one through Ebay. I recently purchased an IBM T40 with built-in wireless for \$320. It is a light-weight machine that I take everywhere and you can't beat the quality.

Before I forget, what do your print outs look like? Are you still running out to the printer to get color copies done? If so, consider a color laser printer. Again, look for deals and you may be surprised. I purchased a Minolta color laser printer two years ago for \$400 and never looked back. Minolta was offering a large rebate and the savings from my other color printer for cartridges has been substantial.

On to your telephone... Every 3 or 4 months I contact my current carrier and ask if I am on the best plan. About twice a year, they say "no" and offer me a better deal than what I have. In 2000 I switched to a Centrex plan (the plan that makes you dial 9 first to get an outside line – yes, I did this for my homebased business). While I don't use the Centrex options often, it actually ends up saving me money on my two lines just by having it. I signed on for the second longest length of time to increase the yearly savings. Every six months I ask if that is still the best plan and so far so good. Plus it provides me with some interesting options, such as the ability to transfer a call to one of my independent consultants while the caller is still on the line.

Oh, and if you are still hurting your neck using a regular handset, consider purchasing a Plantronics headset for your phone. It is one of my favorite home office items that enables me to work hands free throughout the day.

Fiber optic is finally here! Verizon recently installed fiber optic cable throughout our area. By switching from Optimum Online internet service to Verizon and switching over my landline phones, I was able to save approximately \$40 per month and the service is faster and more reliable. I also have the ability to upgrade to even faster service should I require it at some point in the future.

Need printing done inexpensively? Try Vistaprint.com. Through this very customer-friendly company you can print just about anything you might need for your business at prices you won't match anywhere. From letterhead, to business cards, to pens, t-shirts and car magnets, Vistaprint has you covered. While setting up postcards for a client recently, I needed support and got someone on the telephone nearly immediately. They were courteous and efficient and had my ordered handled in a matter of minutes.

For organization, try popping in to Office Depot or Staples and check out some of the organizations tools such as shelving options, storage components, and filing tools. There are many new ones out there that can help you better organize the often crowded To Do area of your desk.

My last tip is to keep a notebook on your desk at all times. It can be a 5 x 7 size or try one of the terrific Moleskine notebooks that you can find at Barnes & Noble. Keep it on your desk at all times and take notes while on the phone (be sure to put the date at the top of each new page!), jot down messages and keep updates on your To Do list. You can refer back to past days and weeks and find information that would normally get lost on sticky notes or single pieces of paper. You can also throw it in a bag to take with you to meetings or refer back to on the train ride home. I have used this system for years and often find myself referring back to notebooks from a year ago to find telephone numbers, names, etc.

And if you prefer an on-line, easy to use, To Do list, try Tudumo.com or my more recent favorite Stickies! <http://www.zhornsoftware.co.uk/stickies/> Tudumo is a little, but highly efficient To Do software that helps you organize your day (free). Stickies (also free) works flawlessly as an on-screen sticky program which has a zillion ways to customize your stickies to help you work more efficiently. You can even store and save them or, better yet, send sticky notes to other computers in your house, on your network or to anyone else that has the program. Truly a masterful program.

Risa Hoag founded GMG Public Relations, Inc. in 1991. She is a past president of the Westchester Association of Women Business Owners and before starting GMG was the Director of Public Relations with Ernst & Young in White Plains. She has presented numerous workshops and seminars on public relations You can reach her by visiting www.gmgpr.com, calling 845-627-30000 or sending an E-mail to risa@gmgpr.com.

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