

By Willy Campbell

Lay a Strong Foundation Before Opening Your Home Office

Ah, the luxury of having a home-based business. No office leasing costs, no frustrating daily commute and no disturbances from noisy co-workers. Although these and other advantages have enticed many people to start their own businesses, your home office should reflect the same level of commitment, professionalism and dependability customers would expect if you set up shop on main street.

These eight tips will get your home office started on the right track:

1. **Legalize it.** Check with your local zoning office about zoning regulations. Some communities, neighborhoods and apartment complexes may have covenants that restrict certain types of businesses. Requirements for licensing vary among jurisdictions. Some require a fee or tax based on income, while others simply want to know that your business exists.
2. **Establish a business address.** Not all customers look favorably on a business with an obviously residential address. Many home-based business owners rent a post office box and use that address on their business cards and stationery.
3. **Get the right equipment.** You need to consider devices such as an all-in-one fax machine, printer, scanner and copier. Make sure your home computer resources can accommodate the demands of your work and communication needs. Cable modems can provide continuous internet access without the need to tie up a phone line.
4. **Emphasize professionalism.** Install a separate telephone line for your business calls. Voicemail is a must. If you expect to use email frequently, set up a separate address from your personal or family account. An email address containing your name or your company name is best. Most email users today regard unfamiliar addresses with suspicion or to guard against viruses.
5. **Create a professional office space.** Make it quiet, comfortable and organized.
6. **Establish contacts.** Working from home can limit your ability to network. Make an extra effort to connect with potential clients and colleagues by joining a professional association. Join a trade association to get exposed to new ideas, advice and contacts.
7. **Keep careful records.** The IRS tends to audit home-based businesses more frequently, especially when they claim business expenses such as writing off a portion of the mortgage payments for the home office. Discuss thoroughly with your accountant.
8. **Practice self-discipline.** With many distractions in a home such as children, pets, delivery people, etc you must be strictly disciplined to get your work done efficiently. Time away from your office for personal chores and errands is time and money lost!

To discuss home office or other business issues, contact the Sandhills Chapter of SCORE “Counselors to America’s Small Business”. SCORE is a nationwide nonprofit association of expert business counselors who provide free and confidential business counseling to small business owners. The Sandhills Chapter is very active in counseling, mentoring and presenting free business seminars. It is currently expanding these activities and is seeking motivated volunteers. You can reach the Chapter via the web at www.sandhillsscore.org or at 910-692-3926.

Remember – send your business questions to me at www.contact@sandhillsscore.org and don’t forget to provide a way to contact you. I may not be able to answer all of them in this column but every one will receive a personal answer from one of our Sandhills SCORE counselors!