

Service With A Smile: When What You're Selling is You

By Michelle Megna

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The benefits of owning your own home-based business are obvious: no commute, no cubicle, no gossip, no dress code, no boss. And, if your business is service-based, there's also no overhead and inventory to manage. So it's no wonder that a recent home-based business trends report sponsored by [Homestead Technologies](#) reveals that service businesses are poised to thrive in 2007.

Justin Kitch, founder and CEO of Homestead, expects aspiring entrepreneurs to turn to the Web to launch their service-based enterprises.

"One of the most exciting, and untapped opportunities on the Internet is people turning their skills and services into small, Web-based businesses," said Kitch. "Service businesses traditionally have much lower start-up costs and are primarily very local in scope, so they're impervious to national competition and outsourcing. Of course, many of our customers successfully sell physical products, but most people don't realize that almost 80 percent of small businesses are service based."

He says that his company is striving to do for small service businesses what eBay has done for product businesses: allow them to create a thriving business from home by leveraging the power of the Internet -- except that your garage won't be filled with boxes of inventory.

But working in the realm of the intangible can be challenging since it's not obvious what content should be posted at your site and it's difficult to know how to market something people can't necessarily see in a product shot. Still, that doesn't mean that you can't be successful at it.

Show Off: Include Shots of Your Work

Manvinder Saraon, vice president of marketing and business development for Homestead, offers this advice: "With product sites, people want to know that the payment transaction is secure, that the delivery is reliable, but in the service business it's more about the owner showcasing his or her expertise. If it's landscaping, you need to show specific things the company is very good at by posting pictures of previous projects, for instance. And you must have customer testimonials."

Wedding planner Kristin Vining, who with partner Ce Ce Mason owns [Weddings and the City](#), said putting up a Web site was one of the very first things they did when opening their business about two and a half years ago.

"It is an extremely effective marketing tool because with a little bit of money you can reach a massive amount of people," said Vining. "And I can't emphasize enough how much people look to the Internet before picking up the phone."

A visit to their site will show that they use stylish photography, with a sassy-yet-sophisticated shot of the partners on the home page. "We feel that pictures tell the story. In this business, you are really selling yourself because it's about your talent and what you as a unique individual bring to the process that a client can't get somewhere else."

But setting up a service site is not all mugging for the camera. Like Saraon, she advises service-based site owners to use photography to show specific examples of

past work. "In our case, it's all about the details. Brides are looking for different ideas, they want to see pictures of that so we show how you can stay within an

affordable budget but still have a lot of nice touches and the way to do that is through photography."

Other tips from Vining, who says they receive an average of 50 to 100 hits a day on their site:

- Do keep the home page simple. It's the K.I.S.S. theory, you don't want a bunch of flash and other stuff that might take a long time to load or obstruct the viewing process on the home page. However, you want to grab the viewer right away, so be sure to put any new marketing or publicity you've generated on the first page they see.
- Don't overwhelm with too much information. Put who you are, what you offer and be sure to make it easy to find the phone number or your e-mail. The goal is to give enough information to incite them to pick up the phone or come into the office.
- Don't cheap out on the photos; if you can afford to get professional photos do it.
- Do spend money on some local print advertising that includes your site address because everybody goes to the Web before they contact you and it makes it easier for them to find you.

Organize Search in a Database

While this is sound advice, some businesses need to focus more on how they track jobs, paperwork or listings rather than on how they portray their particular expertise. These types of ventures include those in the medical, legal and financial fields, among others. If that's the case, your site will need to be built around a database. Web designer and IT consultant Cory Roesse recommends [Caspio Bridge](#), a hosted database platform with point-and-click set-up, because it costs only \$40 a month compared to other database software priced at \$5,000 to \$10,000. (A new SOHO version of Caspio Bridge is now available.)

"It's unromantic, but businesses want to make money, owners need to make a living, and small businesses usually have limited budgets so I absolutely back Caspio because it's the perfect solution for those ventures," said Roesse, who with partner Steve Hiersche owns the tech firm [CSRI](#). He said Caspio worked well for his client [First Trac](#), a company that tracks the status of mortgages in the process of being released from banks when homeowners pay them off. This "release" is then recorded on the land record and is a crucial step in real estate transactions primarily overseen by attorneys.

Names of homeowners, property information such as addresses and attorney names are put in the database, and once a bank sends a letter with the stamp from the municipal office saying the mortgage is released, it's scanned and posted in the database. This way lawyers can look up the status of the release, see if it's pending,



closed or even print out a PDF of a scanned final document. "I created a Web site for them with this database in four days," said Roesse.

Linda Egan, co-founder of First Trac, said she just knew she needed a search capability and realized it was appropriate for a database application once Roesse explained how Caspio worked. "The Web site has helped our business tremendously,"

she said. "because we had clients who wanted to see the search capability before signing with us."

One thing that is important for any service-based business is the capability to be able to make changes or input information at the site quickly. In Egan's case, she

also uses the Caspio database to enroll subscribers, which is updated in real time and saves manual data entry.

Homestead's Saraon says, "People reviewing your proposal or looking at your site want to see what you've done so you'll lose a lot of business if you have to call a designer or IT guy to edit your site or add testimonials. You need to be able to do it on the fly."

Finally, he says service sites need to reflect the passion of the business owner, which is effectively done in biographies and "about us" pages that tell the story of "the journey."

"People can pick up the Yellow Pages to get a listing," said Saraon. "With your site, you have to recreate the experience, have your enthusiasm resonate with their needs, and that will convince them to click on that e-mail link or to call you, and that leads to success."

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