

Expert: Discipline, love key to home business

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CNN spoke with the host of the syndicated radio show, "The Small Business Advocate," Jim Blasingame, to find out what it takes to run a successful home-based business. Jim Blasingame used his home as a tool to save enough money to expand his small business. Blasingame, a small business expert, answers so many business-related questions that he recently launched a new Web site, askjim.biz, which functions as a search engine for people looking for business advice.

CNN: What were the circumstances that led you to work from home?

Blasingame: I've been home-based a couple of times, but I'm not now. The main reason people work from home is it allows them to start a business without having to pay the expenses of an office somewhere else. A lot of people start a home-based business part time. They do their job, they come home and they set up a little shop in the den or the attic or the basement ... and it allows them to literally grow a business one teeny tiny step at a time without making a huge infrastructure decision. The last time I was home-based was in '89, and I started a consulting company.

CNN: What are the qualities of a successful home-based business?

Blasingame: Discipline. First is discipline. You've got to be able to separate your work from your personal life. You've got to be able to set working hours so that when you work, you work, and when you're not working you have quality personal time. You've got to make the decision to turn the computer off and not take e-mail. You've got to be able to say, "This is a job, it's just a coincidence that it's in my home, and so I'm going to work 8 to 5."

But also you can time shift. You can say, "I'm an early morning person who has to pick my kids up at 3 o'clock from school." So you can work 5 till 7, get up and take the kids to school, come back and work till 3 and go get your kids and come back. You don't have to work a full shift like a regular 8 to 5 kind of thing.

But whatever you're doing, you have to have regular hours, and you have to have the discipline to stick to those hours, otherwise you wind up not really getting a lot accomplished.

CNN: How does telecommuting fit in with being home-based?

Blasingame: I've been a teleworker too. In fact I was a teleworker in the '70s when teleworking wasn't cool. Where [telecommuting and owning a home-based business are] similar -- where they're actually the same -- is in the discipline. If you're 20 feet from the television ... do you have the discipline to stay at work doing your tasks rather than go turn the television on and watch your "stories"? Do you have the discipline to say, "I know the wash needs to get done or the house needs to be cleaned or the yard needs to get mowed but that's only a coincidence that I'm nearby?"

Where it's different is for a teleworker, you presumably have a manager. So if you like being a teleworker and you want to stay a teleworker, you have to make sure you make that manager feel comfortable. That not only are you making the deadlines but you're doing it in a way that would be the same as if you were right there under his or her nose. If you're a home-based business owner, you're the boss. You're the manager and you're the only one who can really say, "Hey, you better get it in gear and make things happen"

CNN: What are the questions you get asked a lot?

Blasingame: The biggest thing, the most frequently asked question is, "What kind of a home-based business should I start?" They know they want a business, they would like to be home-based: maybe it's a mother who's going to have a baby and she wants to stay home or maybe a parent is ill or a spouse is ill and they need to make some income and stay home.

And it's an almost impossible question to answer, and the reason is if you're going to be in a business, you must be in a business that you love a lot ... almost as much as you love a child. Because you've got to be able to stay with it when the times are rough and when the times are good, and if you don't love it you won't.

The other question I get asked a lot is about technology. "What kind of technology would make me more productive as a home-based business owner?" You've got to have a computer and ... because often times space is an issue with a home-based business, they've got the really good combination like the "biz hub." We've got one in my regular business actually, it's a scanner/fax/copier and it's all in one piece and you don't have three different pieces of equipment.

CNN: What are some pitfalls that home-based business owners can fall into?

Blasingame: The one thing that I would say -- and this is typical of all small businesses, especially starting out -- I'd say the pitfall is you get some business, and you focus on delivering that business ... it's difficult to do the work and do the marketing at the same time.

That's what happened to me when I was a consultant. I'd work hard to get a bunch of clients and some business, and then I'd be in really good shape for a month or two, 'cause I had all this business. And then I'd deliver the business, and I'd realize that while I was doing the business no one was marketing. No one was getting the next customers. So it's hard to keep business in the pipeline when you're the only one that's doing the marketing and delivering the services.

The impact of time on any small business is something that shocks a lot of new business owners. And the reason is the expense clock never stops ticking. You have three clocks: you've got sales clock, cash collection clock and expense clock. The sales clock can stop, the collection clock can stop, the operating clock never stops, the expense clock never stops. It's shocking to a lot of businesses when they've gone a week without making any sales or collecting any money, all of a sudden that bill comes due again. And that bill you've got coming in for your phone or whatever you're using for your business, it doesn't care whether you've collected any money or not, it's still due.