

soapbox Cincinnati

Virtually Working

BY MATT KOESTERS

Local businesses are eschewing the costs of full-fledged offices and staff for the convenience of virtual headquarters provided by companies that supply the illusion of a large-scale, professional operation. Everything from renting temporary conference rooms to hourly receptionists trained to receive calls and take orders in a virtual landscape.

This trend means employees and employers have the tools needed to create a work life that they control. Although not for everyone - strong time management skills are paramount to the success of running a business like this, the benefits can be well worth it. Consider that more and more of today's workers place control over their time above having job security. Both men and women are increasingly willing to leave the work force to create personal and family time. Consider also that technology levels the playing field. Limited resources doesn't prevent today's small business owner from creating a Web presence that looks established and professional. And finally, workers who own their time are generally more happy, appreciative and efficient.

Motortoy's Limousine Service is one such company that is taking advantage of this new way of thinking. Owner Tom Muehlenkamp has run his business out of his Loveland home for more than three years. He estimates that with its fleet of eight stretch SUV limousines, two full-time employees and 14 independent contractors, Motortoy's is now the fourth or fifth most successful brand of its kind in the city. So how has a virtual office helped?

"Most of our customers shop for our product by phone, and I wanted to make a good impression," Muehlenkamp says. "Number one, you don't want someone to get a busy signal. And I didn't want the person answering the phone to be the reservations clerk, the driver, a maintenance guy, or the owner, because that gives the wrong impression." Despite that need, Muehlenkamp didn't want to spend the money to hire a receptionist. "Think about it," he says, "how many businesses have you called and the receptionist was nasty? Or sounded like a moron? Nobody wants to pay a receptionist." So he didn't. Instead, Muehlenkamp teamed up with Intelligent Office, a company that provides virtual office solutions.

Instead of being answered by a Motortoy's employee, every call placed to the limo service is answered by one of three receptionists work-

ing out of Intelligent Office's location in Mason, OH. When a call comes in, a script tailored by Muehlenkamp appears on the receptionist's computer monitor. The receptionist reads the script, identifies the party the caller is trying to reach, and seamlessly routes the call to the appropriate recipient. For Muehlenkamp, that means that whether he's at home, on the road or on the golf course, his customer will think he's sitting at his desk when he takes the call. The Intelligent Office folks even screen his calls to insure that unwanted calls don't make it through to him.

"Especially when you first open a business, it's like a pack of hyenas on a dead carcass in the savannah," Muehlenkamp says. "'Call 'em up! They need credit card services! They need a postage meter! They need a copier! They need furniture!' And they drive you out of your mind! Intelligent Office will screen all of those calls for you, and they'll deal with the headache of telling people to go away. To me, that's worth it right there."

Muehlenkamp estimates that the monthly cost of virtual office solutions is about the equivalent of what he would pay into worker's compensation, unemployment insurance and payroll taxes for one employee - without paying a salary. And the answering service is only the tip of the iceberg. Muehlenkamp's mail - including packages that need to be signed for - goes to the Intelligent Office location. For a business going through growth and relocation, that's a big boon. As far as Muehlenkamp's customers are concerned, the telephone number and address are the same.

A desire for a high level of professionalism is what made Baker & Daboll CEO Todd Uterstaedt seek out Intelligent Office. A three-year-old executive coaching firm, Baker & Daboll regularly receives phone calls from high-powered executives from around the country. Each of the firm's three full-time coaches spends about 95 percent of the time in front of clients, says Uterstaedt. Taking a call from another client during a one-on-one coaching session could be harmful to the mentor-client relationship.

"When we're working with clients in coaching sessions, we have our clients turn their phones and Blackberries off," says Uterstaedt. "We turn ours off. So we're unavailable. Period. It's great to have Mary, Paula and Nicole to be able to answer the phones for us so that our clients have someone live to speak with. That adds to our professionalism."

Although Baker & Daboll executive coaches



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Todd Uterstaedt, Baker & Daboll CEO

usually visit their clients, sometimes situations arise where it would be inappropriate for the client to host a meeting. During those times, Uterstaedt reserves a private conference room at the Intelligent Office location in Mason. "We pay for the office space that we use rather than creating a long-term lease, which would reduce our profit margins," says Uterstaedt. Most of Baker & Daboll's business is conducted from the field; leasing an office just doesn't make sense. The client is rarely the wiser.

If you didn't already know the game, one would be fooled by the looks of Intelligent Offices high-end office building. The marble floors and high-quality woodwork outside of a large conference room near the entrance are clearly designed to impress.

Another virtual office solution is Office Suites Plus which offers annual leasing options for office space downtown as well as in Blue Ash. Clients can rent a conference room or a furnished office for as little as two hours at a time. Along with videoconferencing and providing projection equipment, Office Suites will even assist with catering needs. Office Suites Plus can literally help their customers put on a show.

"Part of the attraction of our virtual packages is that we do put on that united front," says office manager, Sara Bottoms. "We are projecting a professional image for them." Bottoms estimates that virtual office solutions through Office Suites Plus are in the \$99-\$199 per month range but "you get way more than you pay for," says Uterstaedt.

"It's cost sharing," he goes on. "Maybe in the future it will make sense to hire a full-time receptionist. But right now, it's just more cost efficient to do this."

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