



Growing Your Business When the Business is You

*Three Ways to Continue Your Professional
Development While Working from Home*

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Abstract

There's a reason they call it "working for yourself" – not only is there no one to submit those pesky vacation time forms to, but there's also no one whose job responsibilities include your professional development. That's why when you work for yourself – and we all do in a sense – you need to take the time to continue to advance your career. In this article, I outline three easy ways to get started.

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Our world today is changing the way we work: Gas prices are driving an increasing number of professionals to telecommute and the economy is driving more and more employers to cut back on internal staff (especially in the areas of public relations and marketing) and seek external resources on a project-by-project basis. The result is significant growth in the number of professionals working from home. And while it has its obvious benefits – what other job lets you stay in your pajamas until just before your spouse gets home – it has its unique challenges too. I would argue the most significant of which is the isolating nature of a home office, and the impact it can have on one's professional development.

Regardless of whether you work in your slippers most days or you punch the clock in the more traditional way, we are all self-employed in the sense that we should take responsibility for our own careers. So in the sections below I describe what I find are the best ways to get yourself up that professional ladder, instead of waiting for the corporate elevator to take you there.

Cast a Wide Net at Networking Events

Although we wish we could “build it and they will come” with our business, if you work for yourself, you spend a large chunk of your time generating new revenue. So you sign up for every networking event you hear about and spend the evening working the room while everyone else enjoys the hard-to-eat hors d'oeuvres and wine from a plastic cup. You start every conversation with a glance at their nametag and the standard, “So what do you do for Company X?” You've learned what job titles will get you in the door and which are a dead end and when the response is the latter you quickly wrap up the conversation and move along.

Even though you've resigned yourself to missing out on the scallops wrapped in bacon in the interest of new business, by filtering your conversations so resolutely you're missing out on some important relationships in the room. The more people you know in your immediate community, the better off you are, both financially and professionally. If LinkedIn, Facebook and the like have taught us anything it's to never underestimate the power of a network – so take the time to develop yours.

Schedule Regular Check-Ins with a Mentor

It's likely that if you have decided to go out on your own, it's because you have a considerable amount of industry experience under your belt. And during that time you've likely come across colleagues or managers who inspired you. But unless the organization you were working for had a formal mentoring program in place, it's unlikely that you dedicated much time to formally

acquiring knowledge from this person. Well, now that you work for yourself, it's time to implement that structured, mentoring program.

Being self-employed it can be very easy to become isolated. Even the most engaging networking events can leave you feeling a bit isolated when you've had to pitch your company all evening. That's why it's important to stay connected, especially to someone whose opinions and experience you highly respect. It can not only fill a void for engaging professional interaction, but can also help you meet the needs of your clients better as you expand your knowledge-base to attack their challenges.

For self-employed women, such as myself, I encourage you to find a female mentor, if possible. Despite the significant strides towards equality in the workforce, it's still a reality that we face unique issues in our professional lives. And it's no secret that talking about those challenges with someone who has also faced them can make them significantly easier to face.

Follow Your Customers

As marketing and PR professionals we're often inundated with invitations to events for people in our field. There's no limit to the national and local associations looking for our membership and attendance. I've attended quite a few of these in my career, and don't get me wrong, they can be very informative and helpful. But as people who make a living crafting messages, we should know that nothing compares with getting it "straight from the horse's mouth". So instead of attending an event where they have distilled your target market's message down to some pie charts and a keynote address, why not attend one where you'll find your best prospects? And while you're there, listen for their pain points and aspirations. Then when you create a pitch for yourself, you know you're speaking the right language.

So whether you've managed to hang on to your nine-to-five job in this economy, or you're navigating the ups and downs of self-employment, always remember to take time to make an investment in your career. While it can be tempting to get swept up in the constant drive to find and close the sale, the time you take to continue your professional development will produce significant returns, guaranteed.