

news

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Business Models for 2011 and Beyond

Growing from One Woman to One Great Business

Monica Friel, Founder, NAPO Chicago; Golden Circle Member; Chaos to Order, Chicago, IL



A sign in my office reads, “Do what you love and never work a day in your life.” I found what I love in 1990 after losing a good corporate job due to the struggling economy.

An article I read said tough economic times were ideal for motivated self-starters to create their own business. This spoke to me, even though I knew it was quite a gamble—I lived alone, had a mortgage to pay, and needed to be able to support myself.

I had recently met my future husband, John, an electrician who worked for himself and loved getting up every morning to do something he was passionate about. I thought, “What is it I love to do? What would inspire me every morning with the same excitement?”

I did some soul searching. I thought about my upbringing in a very organized home. I loved it when my mother would rearrange a closet or find creative new ways to make use of space. I enjoyed helping friends organize their homes, and giving them tips to be more efficient. I reveled being at home rearranging my drawers.

So I started an organizing business. I was just one woman with a passion, but I had my husband to motivate me and my mother to inspire me. My mom, whose organizing skills are unparalleled, now works full-time as one of our senior level POs.

The business plan for my company was simple: help people, one at a time, to organize their home or office, and earn enough money to cover my daily expenses. Period. I had no grand plans to expand the business. I was simply motivated by the opportunity to do what I love—organize.

I soon realized there was a large demand for my organizing skills. My schedule filled up quickly, so I brought in other organizers sporadically to help out. I followed them to every job, nevertheless I

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Don't use a free e-mail address for your business e-mail account such as Google, Hotmail, MSN, Yahoo. This immediately tells your clients you're not in business for the long haul or you don't take yourself seriously. Most internet service providers will provide you with a free e-mail address, if not several, at your own domain. Using your domain's e-mail address also keeps your business name in front of clients, prospects and vendors.

Use professional printed business cards. Sometimes your business card is the first impression you make. The weight, texture and even the graphics say a lot about your business.

Use an out of office assistant. If you are going to be away on vacation or traveling for business, use your e-mail out of office assistant to let people know when they can expect to hear from you. Be careful not to give out too much information, you don't want someone else to know your home is empty.

Follow up. This is one of the best ways to stay on the radar of a potential client or an existing client. It's far easier to earn their business when they are already interested in your services. If you make a promise to follow up on a particular date or time, ensure you have a system in place to record this information so you can follow through.

Be willing to accept change. We ask our clients to make changes every day. How do you react when someone suggests a change for your business? Could you hire one of your colleagues to evaluate you and implement their advice? Sometimes we need to consider changing our methods in how we deliver our services and work with a client to ensure their success. Can we walk a day in their shoes?

If you're already practicing these tips, good for you! If you're not, perhaps it is something to consider for 2011. It doesn't matter what your "business model" is, we all have an opportunity to walk our talk.

Contact Laura Leist at
Laura@eliminatechaos.com

knew all the clients and the details of their projects. Letting go, I learned, would not be easy.

One year after I started the business, I helped found the Chicago chapter of NAPO. Organizing was slowly coming onto the public radar, and I was ecstatic to be a part of the new and growing industry.

Three years later, I was married, and two years after that, my first child was born. I quickly realized juggling my son and my business was a tall order. I was not as prompt as I had been about connecting with clients and organizers. To grow my organizing business, my company itself had to be organized.

Although it was difficult to loosen the long-term bonds I had with clients, I knew it was important for me to work on the business rather than in the business. For me, it was worth the risk of losing them—and I did lose some—but the reward was much greater.

I decided to bring in a full-time office manager to answer calls, promote the business, and connect with the POs. We called her our "organizer of the organizers." It was this decision—to have someone in the office, regularly available to our clients and organizers—that gave my business a chance to blossom.

The growth was slow, steady, and not without struggles. We had several good organizers in Chicago, and then we started getting calls for the suburbs. We hired POs to cover those geographic areas, but when things slowed down, it was difficult to keep them employed.

We had many questions: "How far should our organizers travel? Should we hire organizers in every geographic area, even if we don't have enough work to keep them busy? What about the risks involved with training organizers, only to see them leave to start a competing business?" We had our struggles, but we were able to define who we are as a business because of these struggles. In time, our family grew to include three children, and my business grew to include more than 10 organizers, a full office staff, and another location in Atlanta.

I discovered the thing I like best about being a businessowner is the ability to distribute my time and attention to the parts of the business I enjoy most. Sometimes, that has meant speaking to various groups

about the benefits of being organized. At other times, it has been marketing and developing business relationships. Lately, it has been making use of all social networking has to offer—blogging, using Twitter, and creating a following on Facebook. We have a strong online presence, enabling us to thrive in this struggling market.

I believe our greatest strength is our adaptability. When the economy was good, individuals and families were eager to have us spend multiple hours—often as many as eight hours a week for many years—helping them become more efficient and organized.

As the economy struggled and individuals had less expendable income, we found corporations had greater uses for our services. For example, when Boeing relocated its headquarters to Chicago, we were asked to unpack and organize their executives' homes. We learned to adapt, so our energy was with those who were most interested in our services at any one time.

Today, we are focused on using business alliances to further the message of getting organized. By nurturing relationships with companies we believe in, we are able to bring this point to people we would have not otherwise reached. I have taken on a spokesperson role with eBay Classifieds, appeared on shows like Hoarding: Buried Alive, and shared my organizing expertise with large corporations like S. C. Johnson, Sara Lee and 3M.

Last year my daughter started first grade and it was a milestone, both for our family and for our business. I now had three children in school full time, allowing me to focus on pouring my lifeblood and motivation into the business. I go into the office each day and learn about the projects our organizers are working on in the field, develop ways to help individuals become more efficient, and work with corporations to create partnerships where we both benefit. I'm passionate about the work we do and grateful for the freedom it allows me. I am able to work from home and be available to my family, which is my priority. I have found what I love to do, and it's true—none of my days feel like work.

Contact Monica Friel at
info@chaostorder.com