

## Webpreneurs - Doing Business Virtually © By Angie Pedersen



You could call them "minipreneurs" – Trendwatching.com did. Back in 2005, the independent consumer trends firm coined the term "Minipreneurs" to refer to "a vast army of consumers turning entrepreneurs; including small and micro businesses, freelancers, side-businesses, weekend entrepreneurs...and so on." A 2005 study by Mastercard and Warillow International revealed a then-new class of small business, the "Web-Driven Entrepreneur", which represented 25% of the U.S. small business market, accounting for more than 5 million businesses.

The internet is one of the driving forces in the rise of the minipreneur sector – quite literally, the internet has changed how we do business. So what does an internet-based business look like in 2008? How can you use the Web to boost your business? You'll get a different answer, depending on who you ask.

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#### Jackie Bogert, LifetimeMoments.com

Jackie Bogert is the owner of the popular scrapbooking website community LifetimeMoments.com. What started as an online storefront and web community has grown to include a brick-and-mortar store and sizeable warehouse property.

#### Create Community

One of the biggest draws to the site is the active message board community. Bogert employs a team of 12 women to help manage and guide discussion and activities on the message boards, so there's always something happening. Customers know they can visit to the message board 24/7/365 to find project inspiration, creative counsel, and fellowship with like-minded hobbyists. With nearly 10,000 registered users, the forum is a valuable resource for Bogert's business.

#### Offer Creative Inspiration

Much of the creative inspiration at LifetimeMoments is provided by Bogert's team. They design sample projects using products stocked in Bogert's store. They contribute to a weekly e-newsletter, cramming it full of creative ideas, all linked through to Bogert's store. Team members also actively participate on the online message board, providing creative "I-challenge-you-to..." tasks for visitors to complete. Their challenge examples are often completed using products from Bogert's store. Take a cue from Bogert here: give your customers a place to gather, and some inspirational points to consider, and soon you'll have customers with buzzing brains and itchy crafting fingers eager to get down to work. And if you happen to stock the products that will help them do that...so much the better.

#### Communicate with Your Team

As you can imagine, all these promotional activities take a great deal of pre-planning and coordination. Bogert and her staff handle all the administrative tasks via the Internet. That's because, while Bogert's business is based in Michigan, the rest of the team is scattered in eight states across the U.S, plus one international member from Denmark. The Internet makes this possible – and successful.

Most team business is conducted via email, as well as a private Design Team forum on their message board. The forum is set up so only specific usernames have access, so the team can have private discussions related to site business. "We use the private DT forum to do formal planning for newsletter features, discuss new products, brainstorm article ideas and share tips with one another on a daily basis," reports Bogert. "At the same time, we've been able to informally get to know one another and have built amazing friendships."

Even in her brick-and-mortar store, where she shares an office with two other women, Bogert still turns to the Internet to communicate. "We both actually email one another as our primary means of communicating about tasks. It enables us to be organized and work on things as we have time...we found that a great way to communicate quickly throughout the day is through Instant Messenger in addition to email."

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**Dina Giolitto, Wordfeeder.com**

Dina Giolitto is the owner of WordFeeder.com. She is a freelance service provider, offering copywriting and marketing services to other business owners, often entrepreneurs themselves. Giolitto markets her services primarily online, via a website, blogs, and e-newsletters.

**Play the Corporate Card**

For her, working virtually is the ideal situation. "Most people who come from a corporate/business background already work virtually for the most part anyway," says Giolitto. "They know their way around email, the Microsoft Word 'track changes' feature, Google, the web. Lots of teams have their projects set up on virtual systems like Base Camp. This lets them do anything from scheduling jobs to tracking milestones to communicating with teammates to uploading documents."

**Even Writers Can Go Paperless**

Email allows Giolitto to accomplish a wide variety of administrative tasks related to her business: creating/sending project proposals and price quotes, drafting/sending written documents, editing copy drafts, and writing website copy. She even faxes via email – for this, having an all-in-one printer/fax/copier/scanner is invaluable. "No need to run out for fax paper," she says, "you just scan the client contract, sign, scan again, and email them the document. They love not having to wait."

**Keep the Lines Open**

Giolitto also makes use of phone and conference calls. "In the case of solopreneurs, we just discuss important aspects of their projects on the phone. Small marketing agencies and corporate teams are typically good with setting up conference calls. If everyone on the team works virtually from a different part of the country, the project lead will set up one of those 1-800 conference call numbers so we can all dial in with a PIN. It's really very effective."

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**Molly Newman, Associate Editor, Digital Scrapbooking magazine**

Molly Newman is the Associate Editor of Digital Scrapbooking magazine. Although the magazine's offices are in the Salt Lake City, Utah area, but Newman lives about 800 miles away in Portland, Oregon, where she works remotely from my home office. She also homeschools her two sons, ages six and eight, "which has really required some intensive planning and scheduling to try and keep all the balls in the air."

Newman's home office space is the entire second floor of her house, "a long, skinny attic room" which she shares with her husband. Her half of that space is also divided – computer and files on one side, scrapbooking and craft supplies on the other. The "leftover" space is dedicated to homeschool space.

Some "best practices": I've found that, for me at least, it is absolutely essential to have a well-implemented time management system. Especially because I tend to procrastinate... shhh, don't tell! The resources I recommend are David Allen's "Getting Things Done" and Julie Morgenstern's "Time Management from the Inside Out." David Allen focuses quite a bit on the problems of "knowledge workers," or those who have to juggle multiple simultaneous projects and cope with a near-constant stream of interruptions. Julie Morgenstern is oriented more toward those who have (or need) a more formal daily/weekly schedule. I use practices from both writers--I need daily flexibility and weekly structure to ensure I can handle the constant changing demands of work, family, homeschool... the list goes on.... I really think that it's much harder to manage time well when you're working completely independently, and when no matter what you're doing, there's something else you could/should be doing instead. (Cleaning

the bathroom... folding laundry... blogging about some cool new product... yeah, the list goes on.)

I write absolutely everything down so I won't forget it. I don't have an actual planner, though I used to keep one up religiously--instead, I have a Miquelrius Spot 4 notebook. It's divided into four color-coded sections, and I have sections dedicated as follows: work/meeting notes, personal notes, to-do lists and shopping lists/menus. I also use Google Calendar to keep track of all appointments, and as of a few weeks ago, I also schedule tasks on specific days using Google Calendar to ensure I have enough time blocked out to do everything and to try to keep from dropping the ball on different projects.

I am trying to keep my weeks to a pattern where Wednesday is my "work hard all day" day and Thursday is my "spend time with the kids" day, though of course this schedule has to shift from week to week depending on time pressures. I've found it's not too hard to "train" people to expect me to be at home/available on Wednesdays but not on Thursdays. I'm also trying to break myself of the habit of checking e-mail every fourteen seconds, though that's a hard one to quit! I find that if I check and respond to my e-mail three times a day--morning after an hour or so of intensive work, after lunch, and at about 4 or 5 pm--that's usually enough and I don't have people running after me for something I've missed.

One important idea I've gleaned from David Allen is the notion of the "Weekly Review." This is when you take an hour or so to process everything in your inbox, evaluate the status of various projects, check out what's coming up on your calendar... basically to give everything the once-over so there are no surprises and nothing forgotten.

And I can't forget my absolute #1 way of getting things done: my timer! I have a red timer that goes around my neck on a lanyard so I look like some insane coach... really, most of the time it's just on my desk. Every time I have something that NEEDS to get done, I set my timer... usually for about 5 minutes LESS than I actually think it will take... and start cranking away. My reward for beating the timer? I get to play a game of FreeCell on my computer! (I gave myself 20 minutes to answer your questions, tee hee.) Seriously. It sounds so dopey and kindergartenish to use a timer, but it has done more for my productivity than anything else.

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Learn from the Web Biz Whizzes

### Learn from Jackie

Set your expectations formally - get the 'business' out of the way first. Make sure your staff knows what is expected of them. Bogert's staff has signed both a confidentiality agreement and a Design Team agreement. Outline any deadlines for turning in projects, as well as consequences for not completing them on time.

Communicate clearly and professionally. Establish a high level of professional mutual respect. Make team members feel valued and happy to be a part of a professional team.

### Learn from Dina

1. Keep your computer files organized in folders. "I learned the importance of having a hierarchy of folders and computer files from working with graphic designers who manage thousands of design files daily...As soon as they email you something, do a SAVE-AS and transfer the document to their personal folder on your computer."

2. Back up your data. Giolitto recommends purchasing a removable storage device, such as the Maxtor OneTouch Manager. "Make it part of your routine to plug it in and back up your files. It's really easy and worth it if your system ever crashes."

3. Stay virus and spyware-free by keeping your antivirus and firewall updated and fully engaged. Or you may have to reinstall the operating system that came with your computer, and then "spend the next six hours rebooting all the disks, redownloading all the programs you bought off the internet, and re-establishing all your passwords."

4. Keep your machine clean and operating at peak performance. Always clear old cookies or temp files when you've completed an internet session. Routinely run Disk Cleanup and Disk Defrag. (These programs are located under Start>Programs>Accessories>System Tools.)

### Learn from Molly

Take Advantage of Web Resources. In Molly's Favorites list:

- Getting Things Done: <http://davidco.com/> and <http://lifehacker.com>
- Time Management from the Inside Out: <http://juliemorgenstern.com>
- DIY Planner: <http://diyplanner.com> (but heed Molly's warning: "do not waste hours and hours geeking out about designing the perfect planner after visiting this site!")
- Miquelrius notebooks: [http://snipurl.com/miquelrius\\_notebooks](http://snipurl.com/miquelrius_notebooks)

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