

Professional is as Professional Does

BY DOUG CAPLAN

Maintaining a professional image is even more important when you're a one-man show.

NOT TOO LONG AGO, I was on a steel detailing listserv and read a posting from a detailer who was considering the jump from working for a firm to working for himself. As a formerly self-employed detailer, I replied to him with my advice and then realized that it might be beneficial to others in the industry—or anyone else thinking of going into business for themselves—as well.

The first thing to keep in mind is the difference between self-employed and being a business owner. Self-employed people work for themselves. It's a simple formula: Work 40 hours, get paid for 40 hours. Work very hard, crazy hours for those 40 hours, still get paid for 40 hours.

Business owners, on the other hand, know that a business is a team effort. A 40-hour job can be done in 20 hours if there are two people working on it, or maybe even a day-and-a-half if there are four people working on it. Those folks who don't particularly like the self-employed lifestyle probably never viewed the whole concept as a business enterprise when they got into it.

Being self-employed is great in a consulting capacity, but detailing is a production-based trade. I only have five people working for me, and I still lose jobs because we do not have the production capacity to fast-track a lot of jobs. Regardless of business size, a professional detailing service needs to appear as exactly that: professional. This is especially true when you're running a small or even a one-person business, as you can't necessarily fall back on the inherent image of professionalism that comes from being associated with a larger company.

Here are a few ideas for self-employed detailers to promote a professional image and hopefully get more respect and appreciation—and work:

Don't answer the phone with "Hello."

Answer with your company name. If you don't have a company name, either get one or answer with one (under a proprietorship), and if you are not available, don't share the answering machine or voicemail with your family phone. Always say that you are either on the other line or away from your desk, even if you have only one line. There is nothing wrong with a client believing you are on the phone with—god forbid—

another client! No one will treat you as a professional if you don't treat yourself as one.

Always under-promise and over-deliver.

It worked miracles for me. If you can do a job in three weeks, tell them four, and then give it to them in perhaps a little under three weeks. Also, learn the art of negotiation. Since you're not a large firm, you'll want to be realistic about your ability to turn a job around in a specified time frame and you'll need to make sure your customers are realistic as well.

Get a real e-mail address.

A Yahoo! or Hotmail address tells the business world you are not taking yourself seriously, so why should anyone else? Get a domain name and look professional.

Always refer to yourself as we, not I or me.

I learned this one the hard way. "We" means you are a company open for business. "I" means you are desperate for clients.

Don't be afraid to tell the world how good you are at what you do.

Successful people are attracted to successful people. There is nothing arrogant about bragging about your abilities and achievements. What is arrogant is bragging about your achievements and not delivering the goods. (This is assuming that you are, in fact, good at what you do.)

Bottom line, look and act like a professional, and other professionals will take you a lot more seriously. Good fabricators are always looking for good detailers—always. Lousy fabricators are also looking for good detailers, but they are looking for suckers!

Despite being self-employed, if you're good at what you do and can present yourself as a professional, credible candidate for a customer's business, there's no reason you shouldn't be able to land the job.

Final note, there are a ton of great books that can help you get what you want out of your life and career (*Book Yourself Solid* by Michael Port and *Maximum Achievement* by Brian Tracey are two that come to mind). Try reading some of them. It might be the best 30 bucks you've ever spent. **MSC**

Visit <http://finance.groups.yahoo.com/group/steel-detail/> to access the Yahoo Steel-Detail Email Discussion.



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