

The Australian

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Faking it while you make it in business

- Helene Zampetakis
- From: **The Australian**
- November 27, 2009 12:00AM

IT'S the old conundrum. How does a budding business tap into that rich vein of success that breeds more success? The answer for many lies in faking it until you make it.

For James Tuckerman, founder of business and finance website Anthill, starting up meant working at night in his sister's spare bedroom behind blinds replete with pink love hearts.

"I was 26 years old and had no publishing experience so for my first edition I Photoshopped 10 years on to my age to give me gravitas," he says.

He also added size to the business.

"When people called, I'd put them on hold, then pick up the phone as if I were from a different department," he says.

After a year and with three people working for him, the site won Australian Publishers Association best small publisher award.

Nielsen Online Ratings ranks it among the top 50 business and finance websites in Australia.

As small-business owners strive to achieve a critical mass, smart operators are adopting an array of tactics to appear more established than they are.

They range from the simple (dressing the part) to the crafty (using a CBD address box instead of one that proclaims a suburban home office).

Experienced operators say the trick is to look as if you're well-established.

A big no-no is meeting clients in coffee shops, appearing too eager and having very low reference numbers on quotes or invoices, such as 0000004.

Also taboo is skimping on business cards and websites and using a free email address.

Conversely, they recommend using up-to-date technology, registering for GST to suggest you have a reasonable turnover and referring to fictitious business partners or staff in conversation with clients. As well, they suggest treating clients as big competitors do, such as by having someone meet them when they arrive for meetings and

offering them tea or coffee.

Whether or not these tactics cross the line beyond creative marketing, business advisers say the most effective strategies are those that add practical value to the business.

Sole traders who use different email addresses for various business functions, such as sales@smallbiz.com.au and technicalsupport@smallbiz.com.au, not only suggest a larger operation but also stream incoming mail into logical functional areas.

But any effort to inspire confidence will fail if you can't follow through.

"It could easily backfire if the small business convinces clients to give them work that's beyond their skill or capacity," says Brad Tonkin, director of Brad Tonkin Consulting.

For many start-ups, it's not just about building an initial customer base. They need some basic facilities. "It's a myth that you can do business with a laptop and a phone and crack it," says Rowena Murray, director of Bureau Business Lounge Australia. "Yet there are a lot of people who've had big corporate careers and substantial expertise and break away to start up on their own.

"They can't run out of an e-garage. They have to be able to follow through because people will see through any pretence very quickly if they don't."

One trend that is spreading globally to support that outcome is the business lounge.

Cheaper than serviced offices, these facilities hire out space and support services such as secretarial back-up and conference rooms in prime business locations to members whenever they are needed.

One person who regularly uses this service is Ingrid Maynard, chief executive of Harvest Management, which generates executive-level sales meetings for top-1000 companies.

Six years ago when Maynard started Harvest, which is based almost an hour from Melbourne in Mornington Peninsula, she spent long hours and interstate trips rushing across cities with her luggage in taxis to meet clients in cafes.

"It wasn't the image I wanted to convey," she says.

In contrast, the business lounge gives Maynard a base for her luggage and access to meeting rooms and refreshments for her clients, who can come to her rather than meet in cafes.

"I can put my best foot forward," she says.

This approach has helped boost her business by 25 per cent since March.

"You only get one chance to create a first impression," Maynard says.

"Getting it right is crucial."

LOOK THE PART

- * LOOKING well-established lends credibility to a small business.
- * SMALL-business owners can try to fake it until they make it.
- * THE best strategies are the ones that add practical value.
- * SMART tactics won't work for long if you can't deliver.
- * Make sure you have the resources at hand to help you deliver.

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