

“The Successful Home office”

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Many massage therapists have home businesses and even those with commercial office space occasionally see clients at home. A home office yields many advantages such as low overhead (a home office is less expensive than most commercial offices), flexible hours, household tasks can be more easily accomplished (e.g., do laundry between sessions), less stress, increased quality time with family members, and the commute is within walking distance. The flip side is that some people are not productive at home: they are too easily distracted and lack discipline; they find it difficult to balance family life with work life; and they are faced with feelings of isolation. Other problems arise from family members not respecting their boundaries or arcane zoning restrictions often restrict or prohibit home businesses.

Commercial office space conveys an image of professionalism that is rarely found in a home office, no matter how nice it is. This perception is changing as more and more people in diverse professions are working at home. The main objective is to create a space that's comfortable and inviting for clients.

The key to a financially successful home-based massage practice is to choose target markets that not only feel comfortable in a home office, but actually prefer it!

Physical Structure

Home offices present a few challenges. The main things to consider in conveying professionalism are privacy, sounds, cleanliness and environment. First of all, make sure you have a separate work space in your home. Ideally, this room would have a private entrance from the main house (many cities require this before granting a license). The next best option would be to have a separate room. If you must meet with clients in the main living quarters, do your best to set up a private area separate it with a screen, room divider or large bookcase.

Noise is a major concern. You may need to soundproof your office. At the very least, make sure you can silence the telephone ringer. Be certain that when receiving phone calls from potential clients you have surroundings that are free of outside noise. It's wise to install a separate business line from the home line, especially if you have children. You always want your phone to be answered in a professional manner. An answering machine is a must a voice-mail system is preferable.

Any area in your home that your clients may see needs to be kept clean and tidy. Cleanliness is imperative to your professional image. Pets can present problems because no matter how well you vacuum, dander is always present if they are allowed in the session area. Even if the animals are restricted from the session area, people with severe allergies may not be able to enter the house. The other challenge with pets is that they are not always cooperative in honoring the silence rule. Extra steps may need to be taken to ensure quiet.

Home office requirements are often more stringent than those for commercial office space. Check your deed covenants for any specific limitations. Residential offices are often restricted to the amount of vehicular traffic generated, parking, the numbers of clients allowed in the home at any one time, signage, hours of operation, the percentage of floor space devoted to business, and storage. Many permits require a separate office entrance with an attached bathroom. In some locations home businesses are not allowed to have employees or sell products. (For more information on zoning, refer to the Winter 1996 issue.) Privacy and security are critical issues for home-based businesses. Consider getting a post office box or renting a box at a mail-receiving company (e.g., Mail Boxes, Etc.). The benefits of mail-receiving companies are that you are provided with an actual street address, they accept deliveries from the postal service as well as private companies such as United Parcel Service, and they offer other services geared for home offices that don't have the amenities of a commercial office (e.g., copiers and fax machines).

Many home-based therapists only work with clients who are directly referred to them. While this doesn't guarantee safety, it certainly reduces the likelihood of problems. Safety risks can be diminished by having someone else at home while you are working with clients. Another idea is to phone someone at the beginning of the session. Tell the person you are about to start a session and will be calling back as soon as the session is over. Note: Be sure to place the call in front of the client.

Boundaries

Clients are more inclined to linger after a session when you have a home office. Friends are more apt to just drop by or expect you to talk on the phone for hours. Family members tend to barge into your space whenever the whim strikes. The key to managing a healthy, productive home-based business is in setting good boundaries with yourself, family members, friends and clients.

Discuss your business rules with your family and friends. You must be firm. Set office hours, including times when you are available to chat. Clarify what types of problems allow for interruptions (consider the parameters of interruptions that would be acceptable if you worked in an outside office).

One of the joys of working from home is that it affords you more time to be with your children. Still, steps need to be taken to have a harmonious working home environment. Preschoolers need some type of child care. An alternative to day care is to hire someone to watch your preschoolers in your home. The drawback to this is that most children are effusive and noisy. If the children are older, you can see clients when they are in school. If you must work when your children are home, make your expectations clear and let them know when you will be available to be with them. Set aside time for your children's activities so they don't become resentful of your business.

Develop a system that alerts others that you are not to be disturbed. This can simply be by virtue of shutting your door or putting up a "Do Not Disturb" sign. This is important not just for household members but for anyone else who happens to stop by.

Getting people to leave your home office is not always an easy task. An effective non-verbal cue is to stand up and move toward the door. Setting up a closing procedure with clients helps to make leaving less awkward. When it comes to friends and neighbors, you may simply need to be blunt and tell them that you've enjoyed spending time with them but you need to get back to work.

Self-Management

Self-discipline is critical. It is so easy to get distracted or procrastinate. The best solution is to set a schedule and create routines. Establish the days and hours you will work, including breaks (how often and how long), and when you will eat lunch or dinner. Determine the following: the circumstances under which you will take time off to play, read or watch television; what interruptions you are willing to allow; and when you will do household chores. Ascertain the necessary time for marketing and operations, and schedule those activities in your appointment book. Most importantly, arrange your schedule according to the demands of your work as well as the times of day you work best. Within the structure of a schedule is the flexibility to make changes. Another problematic area for massage therapists is staying within the allotted session time. It's so easy to work longer on clients when you don't have anything else "scheduled" immediately after the session. While having the flexibility to extend a session is nice, be careful to respect those time boundaries.

A tip for becoming more proficient at time management is to keep a log of how you spend your time. Track all of your activities for several weeks include everything from time spent on telephone calls, dealing with interruptions, taking breaks, working with clients and so on. Tracking will show you where your time is being well-spent or wasted.

Working out of a home office increases the likelihood of falling prey to bad habits, particularly too much snacking, drinking or excessive television viewing. If you have any of those tendencies, it's imperative that you restructure your environment and create new, healthy routines.

Separating Business and Home Life

When you have a home-based business, the distinction between home life and work life is often blurry. There isn't the traditional five o'clock quitting time. Create a ritual for ending your day: take a walk, meditate, do yoga, take a shower, listen to music, change clothes, or set goals for the next day. Then close the door to the office!

Sidebar:

Tips for Overcoming Feelings of Isolation:

Get out of the house every day, even if it's just for a walk around the block.

Keep in contact with colleagues and peers.
Participate in professional, business and civic organizations.
Attend workshops.
Go on-line. There are numerous newsgroups and websites with interesting information. The address for one such newsgroup just for this profession is: listproc@legion.echonyc.com
Meet with peers and colleagues for a meal or even create a support group.

Resources:

American Association of Home Based Business
PO Box 10023
Rockville, MD 20849
202.310.3130; 800.447.9710
www.aahbb.org

Home Business Institute
PO Box 301
White Plains, NY 10605-0301
914.946.6600; 888.342.5424
www.hbiweb.com

Home Office Association of America
909 Third Avenue, Suite 990
New York, NY 10022
800.809.4622; 212.980.4622
www.hoaa.com

National Association of Home Based Businesses
10451 Mill Run Circle, Suite 400
Owings Mill, MD 21117
410.363.3698; 410.581.0071
www.usahomebusiness.com

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