

How to run a franchise from home

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Many prospective franchisees today are finding that opportunities to work at home have become plentiful. Industries that offer you the chance to work out of your home now include bookkeeping and financial services, consulting, children's services, computer training and repair, cleaning, handyman and home improvement, entertainment, home inspection, fitness, pet care, photography and travel just to scratch the surface. What surprises many who look at home business opportunities is that these are not all part time opportunities with part time financial rewards. Working from home does not mean a sideline business.

Most franchise systems that have home based opportunities will spend considerable time in training you how to work from home. They will go over the requirements for setting up your office, making sales calls and serving your customers. But, just in case your franchisor left some gaps in your knowledge, lets revisit some of the basics.

Do you have the right to work at home

The first thing to realize is that not every community allows you to run a business from your home – especially if clients will be coming to your house on a regular basis or you need to park a truck in your driveway. Check with your local zoning board or government office for the rules in your town. If you are living in a planned community, cooperative or condominium, you should also check to see if there are any rules or deed restrictions that may limit your commercial use of your property.

It's not your home – it's your office

Except for a limited period of time or in unique circumstances, forget the notion of using your kitchen table or family room as your office. If you must, try to set aside an area that is exclusively used for work and make certain that your family understand that this is your headquarters, even when you are not at your desk.

If you have the room, the best choice is to take a spare bedroom, a section of your basement or other isolated area of your home as your office. The more separation you can make between your office and your home, and the way that you and your family treat that area will strengthen your ability to establish yourself as a professionally run operation.

Furniture and Equipment

You are going to be spending a lot of time in your office making phone calls, writing letters, maintaining your records and a million other tasks. Make sure you're comfortable.

Even on a limited budget, you can afford to have a professional office. There are a lot of stationery superstores and budget office furniture retailers that specialize in furnishing a home office. You might also consider buying your furniture used. Thrift shops are a great source to meet your needs. Start out with the basics. As you become more experienced in your needs, you can add additional pieces.

- Lighting – if your office doesn't provide you with natural lighting and overhead fixtures, get a good desk lamp. Popular today are the new Halogen fixtures but remember that they can throw off a lot of heat. If your room has poor ventilation and the lamp is too close to you, it can become uncomfortable.
- Desk – Get one as big as you can fit comfortably into your space. No matter how neat and organized you intend to be, everybody eventually needs a place to make piles – even temporarily. Having a large desk allows you to have a work space, even when you're less than organized.
- Chair – This is the place to spend some extra money. You are going to spend a lot of long hours working at your desk and a comfortable chair, with arms that allows you to lean back on occasion is a necessity. If your work area is carpeted, it is a good investment to buy a carpet protector to put under your chair.
- File cabinets – Every business produces paper and you need a place to store and organize your records. Most file cabinets are adjustable so that you can set up some draws to accept legal size paper and others to hold letter size paper. Make certain your cabinet has this feature as well as a lock. Even if you are working at home, there will be times that it is appropriate to have your important papers secure. If you are on a tight budget, many of the office supply stores sell file draws made out of cardboard. These are great as you can add drawers, as you need them. They also provide you with permanent storage boxes for your records. You may also want to consider a fireproof "safe" or filing cabinet for some of your more important records.
- Computers – You can get a top line computer and printer today for under \$1,000.00. In fact, if you have access to the World Wide Web, many of the major computer companies such as gateway (www.gateway.com) even sell remanufactured equipment that come with warranties. There are also a host of resellers that have remanufactured computers from Sony, Toshiba, IBM and others that you can search for. If you are planning on printing brochures you might consider upgrading your printer. Speak to your computer salesperson about the software you will need. Many of the computers will come with all of the basic software required to get started.

- Fax Machine: While some of the computers will come with software that allow you to fax right from your desk, without even printing a copy, its best that you invest in a fax machine. Many of the fax machines available for home offices can also double as printers and scanners.
- Copiers – Yes there is probably a Kinko’s or similar photocopy shop right around the corner. But, every time you have to go out to print something you are losing time that you can invest in something more important – like maybe getting off early and having dinner with the family. If you can afford it, get a basic copy machine to make those one or two copies you will need to make a day. You can use the copy shops for the larger printing jobs
- Telephone – You probably have a phone line coming into your home, but that’s your home phone number. Invest in a phone line, maybe two for your office. One can be your main number and the second can be used to connect to the Internet for email or for your fax machine. It also can be your role over number for those times you’re on the phone and someone calls. While more expensive than owning an answering machine I recommend you talk to your local phone company about setting up a voice mail account. Besides being more professional, it enables you to easily access your messages while you are on the road. I do not recommend that you use call waiting for your business. This is perfectly acceptable for your home phone but is less than professional for most business applications. However, Caller ID can be essential. You do not want to miss that important call if you are on the line with someone else.

Invest in a good phone with speaker capability. If you can afford one, get a portable phone. This will allow you to leave the office but not miss your important calls. For many people, using a cell phone instead of a landline is a great option. Some of the cell phone plans are cheaper to use than the landline when it comes to long distance calling.

If budgets are tight and you go with a landline, you can get by with a single phone line and answering machine, but invest in a telephone splitter that allows your fax and email to work on the same line as your telephone.

- Putting it all together – Make certain that your work area is comfortable. Try to arrange the furniture and equipment in a way that you can multi-task. The printer and fax machine should be within arms reach or at least only a short walk from your desk. This will allow you to be as productive as you can be.

Stationary and Business Cards

For many small business people today, there is little need to invest in having stationary and business cards printed professionally. The quality of the product that can be

developed off of most printers and software is very professional. Select a logo that works for your type of industry. Many can be found in software that will come with your computer or off of the Web. The import thing is to invest in good quality paper stock to print your letters, envelopes and business cards on.

Setting a schedule and sticking with it

One of the major problems with a home office is it's in your house. It's so convenient to get up in the morning, put on a robe and work through dinner. Maybe, you can even sneak in after dinner and put in a couple of more hours. Remember, you have a family and they need you too.

Set yourself a schedule and try to stick to it. Get up in the morning as if you were going out to the office. Shower, put on business attire and get to work. Make it a habit. Take lunch breaks and other breaks during the day. Try to end your day on schedule as well. Everybody works overtime sometimes – some more than others - but don't get into a rut of working all the time just because your office is nearby.

Remember though, you're at work when you are in your office. Don't allow your friends and family to drop in uninvited and don't plan your day around doing everybody else's errands. Your work schedule is just as important as theirs. Ask them to respect your workday just as you do theirs.

It takes some discipline to not go out into the garden to get a jump on Saturday's chores when you don't have a boss to report to. But you do. Beside yourself, you report to your customers and clients.

Working from your house is a great way to begin your business. In fact, there are many business people who are running sizable companies that remain in their home office simply because it works for them.