

# Experiences Of A Home-Office Businesswoman Or How I Took The Leap and Lived To Tell The Tale (So Far)

by Adrienne Jones

*L'auteure qui opère son entreprise à partir de chez elle parle des aspects positifs et négatifs d'une entreprise à la maison.*

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*It's now two full years since I quit—that's right, quit!—my full time job to begin my home-based business.*

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I'm a public relations consultant in business for myself. I work out of my apartment in the outer reaches of Queen Street West, a spacious two-bedroom in a low-rise pseudo-Tudor building that in the 1920s was an inn for well-heeled Parkdale visitors. My office is in the second bedroom. The walls are lined with bookshelves overflowing with magazines, stuffed animals perch on top, paintings and prints jostle for space next to bulletin boards. My computer, printer(s), fax and various desk supplies take up all available work space. The floor is occupied by two chairs, one overstuffed and decorated with my Obus form, the other lean and wired in front of my typewriter (yes, I still have one), festooned with my file folders.

I listen to CBC talk radio (740AM) almost non-stop—audio wallpaper partly—but I also get a good idea of the type of topics each show does and the style of the hosts. I take phone calls when I should be writing. I do chores when I should be making phone calls. I know I should jump into my sweats at 6:00 a.m. and trot to the gym or have a vigorous walk before I start my work day. Instead, I arise at 7:30 a.m. or at 8:30 if I've been up until 2:00 or 3:00 a.m., shower and dress in leggings, sweater or shirt and, sometimes, do yoga. Mostly, I eat a banana, make coffee, feed the cats and trot across the hall to my office. Sometimes, I roll out of

bed directly into the office.

During off hours of the morning or afternoon when others are at their high-rise offices, I can go to the bank, go to the cleaners and shoe repair, have lunch in a restaurant while I read *The Globe and Mail*, occasionally sneak some browse time in bookshops or buy that Indonesian jacket I've lusted after.

I can also work until the wee hours of the morning to finish a proposal, go to meetings back to back, and reduce my current account to minus while I wait for that check in the mail. Whatever it takes, I'm determined to succeed because I love my independence.

It's now two full years since I quit—that's right, quit!—my full time job to begin the spade work for my home-based business. I'd been doing public relations professionally for 12 years. I learned the rudiments of P.R. by osmosis when I was recruited to work at a newly formed pay-TV network in the early '80s. Two years later, after the bankruptcy and buyout of the company, that resulted in murderous layoffs, I ended up heading their tiny public relations division.

Before that, my career was, shall we say, checkered. I started out in the Mecca of publishing, New York, in the 1960s, fooled around in Berkeley on an underground newspaper, moved to Toronto with my Canadian boyfriend (soon-to-be-husband), worked as co-director of Interval House, Canada's first (actually North America's first) home for battered women, had a series of nondescript jobs, had a fling with photography, worked at the Ombudsman's Office of Ontario, and made two very creative attempts to get in the back door of Toronto's film industry.

In 1984 I left my job at the pay-TV network and transferred with my journalist husband to Washington, D.C. Among other jobs, I was director of

media relations for the National Wildlife Federation. Next stop: Hong Kong where I worked for Ogilvy & Mather Public Relations. In the Philippines, where I couldn't work legally, I chaired a cross-cultural committee for the American Woman's Club.

My five-year hiatus in the U.S. and Southeast Asia ended with a marriage that had imploded. When I returned to Toronto, the pay-TV network hired me again. As writer/editor for their public relations department, I was chained to my computer. Four years later, I still had no opportunity to advance or take on more responsibilities. Not only was the ceiling made of glass but the walls appeared to be closing in. It was 1992, and still in the depths of the recession (or depression, let's face it), I decided to take the leap into the abyss.

What was the attraction? I wanted to work for myself. I was in my middle years and not yet a senior executive. My previous experience as a manager had become cobwebbed with disuse. I wanted flexibility. I wanted the opportunity to meet a wide variety of people. I wanted to learn a slew

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*I wanted to meet a wide variety of people.*

*I wanted to learn a slew of new skills.*

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of new skills and enhance the old ones. None of this was possible in that company. Over those four years, I'd applied for dozens of jobs in other companies. A few close calls, but no match. As the recession deepened, job chances became slimmer and the economic climate chillier.

So why leave and risk everything? Well, it was either my savings or my

sanity. Even if I fail, I thought, I will at least have given myself the chance to make it on my own. And who knows, public relations may be only a stepping stone to my true profession, whatever that may be.

The many skills I've accumulated over the years could apply to my new business. Business plans, lines of credit, even company names, are the same whether you have a home business or not. Working at home, though, has special attractions, definite advantages, and several nagging drawbacks.

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#### **Flexibility**

One of the main attractions of working at home is the flexibility it permits. In my personal "business plan" I could now get up when I choose, work at my own pace, dress as I please and do chores or take a walk at my leisure. But, as a former colleague and home business owner told me, "everyone thinks there will be plenty of time for a bike ride, but when I have work I barely have time to brush my hair."

True, I can work until 2:00 a.m. and read the paper in the morning until ten if I want. The reality is at least 50 per cent of my time has to be spent in hustling business. That means networking like crazy, cold calling strangers, going out on appointments, most of which come to nothing, preparing proposals that often as not are turned down, but may be used as blueprints for the niece or friend who will work cheaper. The other 50 per cent is doing the actual work, the administrative details, and all the little steps between the initial contact and the invoice.

The key to working alone is self-discipline: getting up every day without having to be somewhere. I find it helps to have early morning appointments, whether with clients, prospective customers, or network groups. For some, the gym works as a day-opener. For me, I just shut off the

alarm. Even without a place I have to be, I get up regularly, although not at 6:00 a.m! Organizing my time, though, is another matter.

#### **Time management**

Without someone breathing down my neck, I still get a lot of work done—as long as I have a deadline. When I'm getting close to that wire, the adrenaline starts pumping and the little bits and pieces of research, writing and organizing I've done suddenly have to be put together. Pronto. Put on the "William Tell Overture" and here I go.

So I make up deadlines for myself. Weekly ones are more effective for bigger projects because they're more flexible and I have more time to accomplish the task. I make laundry lists every day of things I have to do. For instance, on Tuesday call ten prospective customers, watch five talk shows, and read all the Toronto dailies. That's not as out to lunch as it sounds. I have to be *au courant* with TV shows, especially talk shows, that are potential outlets for clients. I also have to keep up with the dailies. I glance at the arts section of *The Star* while keeping an eye on CBC's "Mid-day" to see if I can twist a client's product into a topic of national interest. This week: write that proposal by Friday, do the budget book, balance check books, and pay bills. I'm just getting acquainted with "Maximizer," the office management software program. There are several good ones on the market but I find it's still easier to write my tasks down than it is to turn on the computer every time I want to check my list.

#### **Getting customers**

That's sales. The very thing I've never wanted to do. I don't sell widgets. I sell a service—public relations. Worse, it means selling myself. Well, maybe that's better. In short, how on earth does a home-based public relations consultant differentiate herself/himself from the ever-increasing herd of consultants and

offer the array of services needed to make the business a viable, and valuable, one?

Public relations is not what one would call a hard-edged profession. It's not accounting, or lawyer-ing, or doctor-ing, or other more readily recognizable professions which, while they may be the butt of jaundiced jokes, nevertheless are distinctive and, more important, their practitioners get paid for their services. It's also not like manufacturing or selling a product, something tangible people can taste, smell, or see. Public relations is not a retail business *per se*, although I deal directly with my customers.

Most flattened or already horizontal businesses which have downsized their in-house public relations activities and staff, are often interested in "outsourcing" their P.R. needs. Outsourcing is the buzzword for hiring a free-lancer or outside firm to do the job.

So, public relations is a very tough sell. How do I overcome the hurdles, the objections? First, target my market to growth industries and specific businesses that may actually want public relations. That's tough for every business. Second, have a business plan that charts your potential course. I don't, so much of my identifying potential clients is ad hoc, or under my "lifestyle" umbrella, e.g., food and beverage. Third, learn sales techniques. I'm learning.... Fourth, educate people about P.R. (or your profession), and differentiate yourself from the competition. Fifth, listen, listen, listen.

#### **Doing it solo**

For a home-based business, though, making the contacts, getting the appointment, doing the proposals, pricing the job and, most crucial, closing the deal, all have to be done by me, myself, and I.

One of the things I miss about working for a company, is the synergy that makes ideas spark, the teamwork that spreads work loads, and the brainstorming that fine tunes plans and

leverages job pricing. No colleagues in the department to bounce ideas off of, no boss (should I be blessed with one I could talk to) to check out budgets and resources with. Instead, I have to probe delicately the secrets of co-professionals, friends and network buddies. I also go to seminars, free and otherwise, try to keep up with magazines, newspapers, and books on specific topics when I can.

I also belong to IABC, the International Association of Business Communicators, a group of public relations professionals that's based in San Francisco. Besides all the seminar and materials available, I'm

supposed to be able to plug into any of these colleagues for help. I do, often with useful results.

#### Referrals versus cold calls

Clammy hands and lurching stomach are symptoms of the I-would-rather-have-bamboo-splints-under-my-finger-nails-than-make-cold-calls syndrome. Some home-based business people never seem to have to make those loathsome cold calls or warm calls to people met while networking. They say they have gotten all their business through current or previous clients, friends, colleagues, and business acquaintances. When I ask how that's happened, I get pretty shrugs and "I guess I've been lucky" responses. However, I'm just beginning to have that happen myself. Yet, I still have to make those calls.

#### Networking

Meeting people well connected in the target markets/companies you want to reach is vital for any business. The social lubricant is important. For home business people, it's the sap of life. I don't mind talking to myself; as a writer, it's mandatory and besides, I'm a good listener. But

when my cats start walking away, it's time to get out and mingle with people. The fact is, it's essential to put a face to a voice I've talked to, exchange ideas about the latest trends in public relations, in pricing, in anything. Getting business referrals is part of networking, but it's equally important to exchange information about everything from where to get cheap software or sourcing a good fulfillment house to getting the lowdown on a change of the guard at one of the newspapers or finding a better hair dresser or stock broker.

Earlier in the week, on top of three business appointments, I went to a Le Tips meeting at 7:00 a.m.—a referral group, based in the U.S., I had coffee with a portfolio manager I met through a colleague (potential client, maybe); went to a CAWEE (Canadian Association of Women Entrepreneurs and Executives) trade show; drove out to Oakville to a Rotary Club lunch (by invitation only); went to an evening financial planning seminar for women a friend is giving for the Canadian Women's Foundation; and participated in a Ryerson focus group for female public relations professionals.

Later in the week, I meet with a new Business Referral Network for women. A luncheon at the Empire Club proved non-fertile for business—membership is \$80, cheap really, but lunches are \$25.

That's the catch in the networking mechanism. It costs every time you meet, for lunch, for "mixers," for dinners. And that's always in addition to membership fees. There are groups which are strictly for networking, and they charge too, anywhere from a mere \$3 for breakfast to \$25 for a dinner. It all adds up and costs far more than the exceedingly modest \$1,000 I'd projected for my first year.

One rule of thumb—"don't join groups of competitors"—I broke when I joined iabc because I feel I have to keep in touch with developments in my own industry, and not just in Canada.

I used to think networking was contacting people you knew who in

turn would give you referrals. Well, I found it's quite an art. It's working a room to meet as many people as possible. Having your business cards at the ready to give out but not to thrust in people's faces or hands, as one woman did at a recent convention dinner. She actually walked through while handing out her cards like flyers. Who knows? Maybe it works.

It means following up your network meeting with phone calls and/or letters to those you want to meet again to make an appointment to meet one-on-one. To have an idea, request for advise, or some kind of offer to juice up the prospect of someone taking the time to have coffee with you. And don't forget thank-you notes afterward.

#### Office equipment

The home office is the new boom market for the computer industry. For a techno peasant like me, it's a cluttered and mystifying moonscape. Without unlimited time and money to upgrade to the state-of-the-art whenever you wish, the business of equipping the home office is a continuing nightmare. I've been putting off shopping for a new computer for months, what with money being in short supply, new software programs proliferating like supercharged rabbits while hardware and systems de-

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signs obsolesce (my new word) every nano second.

I have to bite the bullet. My next purchase will be a laptop or notepad, preferably used. Cellular phone next and miniature photocopier as soon as they're priced in my range.

Keeping up with office supplies is pretty basic. Buy more when supplies are low, not out. One element to keep

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track of is out-of-pocket costs for clients. I'm pretty lenient. Faxes are free. I know one woman who charges a non-profit client 15 cents per fax. Maybe that's customary. I don't do it. But I do factor in a percentage for letterhead and envelopes, ink cartridges, bond paper and figure out a percentage for other supplies used. Without prudent attention to expenses, it all adds up, on your tab.

### Professional self-development

"The more you learn, the more you earn." That's a new maxim I've committed to the front of my third eye. It's paramount in the information industry. And extremely tough to do unless you have a photographic memory, are a techno wizard, and have unlimited funds. But with creativity, tenacity, and the ability to leverage knowledge, you can and must keep up with what's happening.

I go to seminars regularly (although will miss one on editing to fly to Florida for my mother's 85th birthday) on a motley variety of topics, mainly through the IABC. I've been remiss in taking courses offered at the community colleges; Seneca offers an excellent one-year course in business and Sheridan, too, has a flock of courses. The University of Toronto and Ryerson offer continuing education in a wide variety of subjects, and York specializes in business.

Associations and organizations worth their salt—and membership fees—offer seminars and workshops in industry-related topics. Time and money once again. To offset the cost of the Canadian Women Entrepreneur of the Year Award Conference (the most expensive way to go is conferences), I volunteered to help with media relations and got to attend the two days free. I met some fascinating women, attended the lunches and dinner, and was totally inspired. However, my follow-up letters are still waiting to be written.

This evening, before my three-hour financial planning class, I have an IABC committee meeting to fine tune the topic of measurement for public relations professionals for our next "Career Management" workshop. I will be signing up for beginners' Spanish at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I want to take a strategic planning course, a course in advertising, and as I'd planned to do three years ago, take a series of courses in marketing. Time is the problem.

### Part-time or full-time help

I have finally plugged into the office management program I've had for over a year and have just begun to use. Since I've accumulated well over 300 contact names, I have a lot of inputting to do. Diane, my part-time assistant is busy updating my media

contacts, a continuing and tedious task. I've made a deal with her. I'll teach her how to write a news release in exchange for helping me use Maximizer and organize my office. For other tasks, I pay.

Diane can only come in on evenings and on weekends because she works full-time. That's fine with me. I can't really afford to pay anyone. I also can't afford *not* to pay someone to help me. Diane's typing envelopes, doing mailings, and inputting changes to my media lists has been invaluable. Time is money indeed, and my time is more valuable than the small sum I pay her. While she does clerical work, I can make sales calls, write or take care of administrative tasks. With luck, she'll eventually work for me full-time on a contract basis. As a home-based business, I don't want the hassle of a payroll. I will hire on an as-needed basis, as I am hired.

How am I doing? Ask me when I get contracts signed for some of the 12 prospects I have on the boil.

*Adrienne Jones, a dual Canadian/American citizen, has lived in Toronto since 1972, except for five years spent in Washington, D.C., Hong Kong, and Manila. Divorced from her Canadian husband after her return to Toronto, she has been an independent consultant for two years. She is an aspiring writer and is interested in finding companionship with a male (human).*

## Call for Papers

### *A Feminist Companion to French Literature*

The editors seek contributors for this encyclopedic volume to be published by Greenwood Press. The work will include 600-700 entries devoted to the literature of France of all periods written by women. Women writers from other francophone cultures will be included only if they live(d) or work(ed) primarily in France. The entries, which will vary in length from several paragraphs to five pages, will view individual writers, periods, critical theories, themes, genres, organizations, archives, historical events, social conditions, and institutions from a feminist perspective.

For a list of topics, please write to the general editor:

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*Five of the eight Connections' sculptures by Jane Garland.  
(Left to right) "Chosen One," "Maker," "Warmth," "Always," "Patterns." Photo: Don Holman*

## *Connections*

*Sculptures by Jane Garland  
Poems by Liz Zetlin*

*A testimony to the power and strength of eight Grey County, Ontario women*

The multi-media exhibition *Connections* features eight larger than life-size sculptures and eight poems and voice pieces representing each of the women who supported Jane Garland during a period of personal crisis. Says Garland, "My work is a testimony to the power and strength gained from the encouragement of a network of friends." *Connections* is the shared project of Garland, Markdale poet Liz Zetlin, and a community of local women. The artist and poet have self-published a book that captures the essence of the exhibit. The book features Garland's totemic sculptures (in full colour) and Zetlin's powerful poetic portraits of each woman. An audio cassette of each woman's story—narrated in her own voice—provides an inspiring addition to this intimate and provocative book.

Both the *Connections* book and tape (\$10 each; \$16 for the set) are available from Always Press, 1267 Lansdowne Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M6H 3Z9.