

Tools of Running a Business, at Tag-Sale Prices



Marie-Susanne Langille for The New York Times

Tricia and Bill Ballard, shown with their son, Alex, were able to find low-cost equipment to start up their business, which they run out of their home in Bloomington, Ill.

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WHEN Tricia Ballard of Bloomington, Ill., started her Web hosting business, Hosting SPOC, in April, she had lots of motivation but little cash. Fortunately, she also had great research skills, so she discovered a wealth of free and low-cost services available to business owners, entrepreneurs and independent professionals.

Ms. Ballard was able to get a toll-free business line for \$2 a month through a service called Kall8. “As far as office equipment and supplies, computers are dirt cheap now, especially online,” she said. “We use a site called PriceWatch to price out new computers.”

As Ms. Ballard discovered, a small budget need not be a problem for new businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs who need office supplies and services. These days, a number of companies specialize in providing cheap (or even free) services to businesses.

Evoice, like **Kall8, provides toll-free numbers and voicemail to businesses for a few dollars**

a month. For fax needs, there are services like eFax, which allow customers to receive faxes free, with a small charge for premium services like a local fax number and the ability to send faxes as well. Such low-cost services are especially beneficial to small start-ups or home-based businesses that may have limited resources but still want to present a professional image. There is usually no way for a client to tell if your fax is arriving from a free online service, or a fully staffed administrative team.

One important and immediate need of any business today is establishing an online presence with a Web site and domain name. There are now many ways to do this on the cheap. Many hosting services throw in domain registration free with an account. Companies like Homestead Technologies provide services — starting at less than \$10 a month — that allow customers to put together their own site quickly without any programming skills or design experience.

Yahoo also offers many cheap business services, like hosting packages starting at \$12 a month, which includes free domain registration and the ability to start a blog using two popular blogging programs. Yahoo Search Marketing is available to small businesses for a minimum of only \$5. For \$40 a month, Yahoo Merchant Solutions offers an e-commerce package that includes a storefront, payment processing, order management and other capabilities.

VistaPrint — an online store where customers can design and order business cards, brochures and other printed materials — is popular with budget-conscious professionals. You can even get business cards free, if you don't mind a VistaPrint logo on the back — or spend a few dollars more for the logo-free versions. Latashia DeVeaux, founder of the DeVeaux Agency, a public relations firm in North Hollywood, Calif., is a big VistaPrint fan. "I've used them so often, I've earned lots of bonus coupons," she said.

When it comes to starting a business on a shoestring, creativity and ingenuity can be a huge help. Ms. Ballard saved money by trading services with other businesses. "We had our legalese written by a wonderful attorney, and in exchange we did her search engine optimization," she said. "We're both happy, and cash flow is untouched."

Kim Francis also barter for services. Ms. Francis, of Columbus, Ohio, started her consulting business, KAF Enterprises, in 1997 with virtually no start-up money. "I bartered with a local printing company for paper," she said. "I joined all the small-biz organizations I could, and we all bartered with each other for services. For example, a local I.S.P. hosted my Web site and my husband did tech support for them, and a Web design firm did my Web sites and my client's Web site at a huge discount, and in exchange I did their brochures and my husband did their bookkeeping."

Tony Wright, vice president for client services at Kinetic Results, a marketing and advertising company, says ingenuity went a long way in helping the company get off the ground in late 2005. Mr. Wright and several of his former co-workers had all found themselves unemployed at the same time, so they banded together to form their own company.

They had the brains and the background, but lacked a big bankroll. "We found that raising capital with no clients and just your reputation is difficult at best," he said. "We all scraped our savings together and began hitting the pavement. Our first office was a room at the Homewood Suites in Addison, Tex., where we strategized on long pieces of paper bought from Kinko's and taped to the wall because we didn't have a white board."

The enterprising group soon heard of an office available nearby. “The room was about 11 by 15, and three of us worked there for three months,” Mr. Wright said. “We used all our own computers and got business cards from an online printer that put a special protective coating on them. These cards could literally be held underwater and not get wet.”

The group called in lots of favors and continued to work on establishing the company, soon landing their first client while still based in their tiny office.

“Finally, we landed some big clients and are now in our present larger space in Addison,” Mr. Wright said. “We are still very budget-conscious — we have VoIP phones that don’t work well, all our furniture is from Ikea and we moved into an ‘as is’ situation and fixed the place up ourselves — but we are doing well.” The company has just opened its second office, in New York City.

James Hills relied on the same entrepreneurial spirit after quitting his job last year. He and his wife, Heather, decided to start their own business, MarketingHelpNet.com, which helps small-business owners market themselves. Mr. Hills, located in Bartlett, Ill., made an office from a former storage room, and built his desk into a closet, giving him an extra few feet of valuable work space. “Also, I am using Vonage for both my fax and voice, which is great because of free long-distance to Europe and low costs to Asia for some of my contractors,” he said, referring to the broadband provider that uses “voice over Internet protocol” to offer phone and online connections.

Some businesses do not actually need a fancy physical space, but would like clients to envision them working in a professional environment. In this case, a virtual office like those offered by Micro Office Solutions can help. With this service, businesses receive a business phone number — answered by a receptionist — plus voicemail and a company mailing address. In many cases, this is a desirable address, perhaps on Park Avenue in New York. The mail is then forwarded to the business’s actual location. Companies like The Regus Group offer several virtual-office packages, including some that include access to furnished offices, conference rooms and other facilities for occasions like client meetings.

FURNISHED-OFFICE companies like Sunshine Suites can help businesses that need a full-time location, but can’t afford a traditional office. For less than \$300 a month (with no long-term commitments) you can rent a private cubicle at one of Sunshine’s locations in New York. The rent includes business essentials like Internet access, technical support, printers and office equipment and other amenities. For \$700 a month, you can get an entire private office.

Bottom line: do your homework, and odds are you can find bargains or freebies for almost every office essential you need to get your business off the ground.

“With some creativity and research, you can run a small office efficiently without much money,” Ms. Francis said. “And your clients will never know the difference.”

More Tools at Tag-Sale Prices...



Faxaway.com is an electronic Internet faxing service that charges only \$1 monthly to provide you a working fax and voicemail number that delivers messages to your PC. All of your incoming messages are free.

The Faxaway service lets you send faxes from any of your email accounts, including those of free email providers such as Google's Gmail, Yahoo!, and Hotmail. The body of your email message, and up to three attached documents with a combined file size under 1 megabyte, will be delivered to any fax number you specify — just as if you had sent them using an ordinary paper fax machine. Faxaway charges 11¢ per minute for outbound fax service.

Internet fax service like Faxaway helps keep paper costs low. Because faxes are sent and received as email, you need only print out documents when you require a paper copy. Faxaway also cuts down on storage costs, since you can save all your faxes on your computer hard drive instead of in file cabinets.

If your business requires that you store documents for extended periods, be sure to backup your hard drive regularly. Another advantage of Internet faxing is that the email messages you save will not fade over time like ordinary documents do, and you can reprint your saved faxes whenever you need.