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JOURNAL REPORTS: SMALL BUSINESS

My Home Is Not Your Home

Operating out of your house may be convenient. But it can also be annoying.

By **CHUCK GREEN**

November 14, 2011

Running a business out of your home can be a big convenience. But things can get awkward when you open your door to customers.

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Just ask Patricia Colombo-Beyeler, who runs Top Fitness Inc. out of her home in Oxnard, Calif. After an hour-long power-training session, Ms. Colombo-Beyeler realized she never saw one man depart.

She searched her house for him to no avail, so "I thought he must have slipped out past me," she says. Then she went up to her room and there he was, "at the foot of my bed, passed out."

She brought the client around, and he explained the last thing he remembered was finishing the class and going to his car. When he left—for sure, this time—Ms. Colombo-Beyeler "went right to the computer to find a place that could build a door for me with a lock so that can never happen again."

It's Not Su Casa

More than half of all business owners run their company primarily out of a home, according to a 2007 Census Bureau survey. And, like Ms. Colombo-Beyeler, many of them have horror stories to share, from customers barging in where they don't belong to kids interrupting a sale.

When a client comes into your home, they say, it creates a false sense of intimacy—making an appointment feel more like a personal visit. That can lead clients to do things they wouldn't in a store or office, like borrowing your phone or taking a snooze. Avoiding those situations means setting boundaries, says Susan L. Reed, a small-business expert and author. Insist that your clients treat your home like a professional space, even in the smallest things.

"It's amazing what clients think they can or should be allowed to do when your business is in your home," she says. "For most brick-and-mortar businesses, a client wouldn't ask to use the business's computer or telephone. Neither would they expect little favors like borrowing a stamp or faxing something—they would expect to pay for that."



One of Patricia Colombo-Beyeler's fitness clients ended up overstaying his welcome after a session *BRITTANY COLOMBO*

So, don't give out any freebies, and don't let your clients take liberties like bringing in coffee, sodas or snacks. If you do decide to offer food or facilities, make them as professional as possible. For instance, have a mini-fridge where clients can get a drink; don't let them use your personal refrigerator.

Likewise, "dedicate one bathroom in your house as your office bathroom and make it into an office bathroom" by taking out all the personal items and any fancy soaps or personalized linens, Ms. Reed advises.

Of course, there are some situations that are hard to plan for—like simple bad manners or inconsiderate behavior. Granted, customers in a store can step out of line, but it can hit a lot closer to home when the client is actually in your house.

Diana Gonzalez found that out recently when a student at one of her art groups showed up to her house early—with terrible body odor. "I burned incense, but it didn't help. I opened the windows, which didn't do any good, either," she says. "I'm also pregnant, and suffering from scent aversion and morning sickness. It was terrible. I had to put on the air conditioner, and that helped somewhat."

On top of that, she says, the woman started complaining about Ms. Gonzalez's taste in furniture. "When she left, she told me, 'The next time I come over, I'm going to...,'" Ms. Gonzalez says. "I stopped listening after that, simply because I was thinking, 'What do you mean, the *next* time?'"

The Darnedest Things

It's not just clients who present problems—it's their kids. Most people wouldn't take their children to a meeting at a conventional office, but they feel comfortable bringing them to a home-based business. And youngsters can be a lot tougher to corral than grown-ups.

Ms. Reed urges entrepreneurs not to let clients' children into the house, if it's at all optional. "Just because little Susie has a cold and is out of school does not give a client license to bring her along to a business meeting," she says. "Same goes for having little Johnny dropped off at your home to meet Mom or Dad who is your client."

When a business involves kids, though, it's impossible to keep them out. And owners find they have to reinforce rules over and over.

Jamie Adams, owner of Gotta Dance, in Eagle Mountain, Utah, holds dance lessons in a small studio in her basement. One day, her family was having dinner during a dance class, and one young dancer came into the kitchen, and innocently sat down and asked what was for dinner. They shared a little of their meal with the child, along with a gentle reminder about house rules.

Entrepreneurs also need to be careful to corral their *own* kids. Gail Heraty, founder of

Grow With Love Boutique, an online store that specializes in children's clothing, accessories and gifts, lets clients pick up orders at her home to save on shipping.

When one customer arrived with her girls, Ms. Heraty's kids were playing outside. She and the customer left the kids to play—but after a few minutes Ms. Heraty heard the girls screaming and crying.

The problem? Her two older boys were showing off a couple of large toads they had caught, and the animals escaped. "The screaming and crying continued as the boys chased the toads around the room trying to catch them again," Ms. Heraty says.

She says her boys no longer will be allowed to bring toads inside the house, "and these little girls will not be so willing to come along with their Mom anytime soon."

Mr. Green is a writer in Chicago. He can be reached at reports@wsj.com.

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