

Providing online consulting services

By Justine Castellon

Online consulting affords a home technopreneur all the mobility he wants at less the cost.

Oliver Kuy took up Industrial Design in college, but he never practiced his training in a corporate set-up. Instead, he put up a graphic arts studio that he operates virtually. Never one to agree to be holed up in a windowless cubicle, Kuy's virtual office can be anywhere he can take his high-end laptop - be it his room, a crowded mall lobby, a coffee shop, or the front seat of his car. Through his interactive website, www.kuydigital.com, Kuy proffers clients his skills in fine scale and prototype modeling with emphasis on graphic design; illustration; packaging; and print and interactive media. His work portfolio is uploaded on his website for prospective clients to view.

Kuy's online graphic art consulting work has served clients from all industries, including non-profit organizations here and abroad. He attributes his being at the forefront of technology to the shift in his clients' perception of home-based technology businesses. Home technology set-ups, Kuy says, can actually be better than corporate structures because of the flexibility and speed of delivery they provide at the same quality service. And being highly mobile allows Kuy not only to respond quickly to his clients' needs, but also to give him the life he wants.

Kuy relishes the independence his business affords him. "Relocating to a virtual office gives me more freedom to work anywhere, to meet people, and to be exposed to a multitude of environments. These provide me with the inspiration and excitement I need." But the road to laying the foundation for his technology business was paved with difficulties. He spent years building his website, giving it enough functionalities to make it highly interactive, and listing it in as many search engine sites to reach as diverse a market as possible. "The preparation was tedious. I had to go through years of work so I can put together my own website. I went through several versions and I'm still doing one now," he says. His efforts have paid off because his website had made him accessible 24/7 by local and foreign clients.

"Having a website and getting listed in search engines have produced a lot of good results for me. I'm surprised at how many people depend on the Internet for graphic designers," Kuy says. "A lot of word of mouth marketing brought challenging projects and dream design jobs that added to my portfolio." He considers as his competitive advantage his being able to reach his market without having to do cold calling, and his ability to stay in touch with his customers and suppliers with just a click of the mouse. His laptop doubles as a workstation when doing graphic designs, and along with his mobile phone, gives him instant access to the Internet. "Cellular phones have really taken off, and file transfer and wireless video conferencing is within reach. Now what I do whenever I need to go online is park in an establishment with wi-fi (wireless fidelity) connection and turn my laptop on."

Kuy says efficiency, timesavings, and reduced overhead are not the only benefits he has derived from his home technology business. "It also lessens stress and gives you a lot of creative space, and most especially, inspiration."

Brand consultant Michael Christopher Dela Cruz was equally satisfied with his and his partners' decision to set up shop at his condominium unit at One Burgundy along Katipunan Avenue in Quezon City. Dela Cruz, along with partners Michael Lu, Isabelle Warren-Gonzalez, and Andrew Robles, put up One

Strategic Designs, a business that aids companies in acquiring a corporate identity, mainly as a channel for their creative energies. All in their 20s, the partners pooled their expertise to provide clients with a system of rules and symbols to help develop their brand.

One Strategic Designs was started with virtually no hitches. “We simply used our laptops and desktops and applied ourselves and our talents to our creative collaboration. We also communicate online. It’s great to know that you can start a business with the car, telephone, and computer which you already have,” says Dela Cruz. “We hold company meetings at the nearby 7-11 or Seattle’s Best and collates work online with Yahoo Messenger. In fact, we hold regular online conferences every Wednesday.”

While Dela Cruz is all praises for the home set-up, he still thinks it’s important to lend it an air of professionalism, like observing set working hours. “Sometimes just because you’re at home or you’re at someone else’s home you tend to be less urgent about things,” he says. It takes getting used to, but it’s possible to separate work from personal life, and “one can act professionally even when you’re talking to a client in your pajamas.”

Since its inception in 200_, One Strategic Designs has been able to build a good portfolio of clients owing to the owners’ innovativeness and out-of-the-box thinking. Dela Cruz also attributes a big part of their success to establishing an online presence through postings in e-groups and threads. There they do e-mail marketing, write blogs or online journals, and do portal exhibits. Dela Cruz and his partners are in the process of building a company website to widen their reach.

Moving to an office is among these young entrepreneurs’ plans in the next couple years. Right now they’re enjoying being in control of their time, being able to attend to other things, and take action without having to answer to someone else. “For now, we’re still pretty much without an office. Each of us work on the fly either from our individual homes or our official home office,” says Dela Cruz.

Online consulting 101

Capital: To start this business you would need P300,000 to buy computers, software, wireless equipment, and six months of operating expenses.

Materials: Because of your business’s dependence on high technology, you need to invest in quality hardware like a PC that supports graphic design software (over P50,000); laptop (around P90,000); a high-end digital camera (P26,000); and a scanner (P2,000). You should also get wireless and broadband connection (around P4,000); and a touch phone (P1,400). Then, acquire a domain name (your website’s Internet address) and a domain host (renter of Internet space). One year domain hosting and registration cost P4,628. Design output is necessary for design consulting, so it is best to work with several high-quality printing house (one such is PRINTX located at 119 Isarog Street Sta. Mesa Heights, Quezon City). For proofing, the cheapest Epson Stylus C65 (P 3,500) would do.

Workforce: One advantage of online consulting is that the entrepreneur’s website showcasing his portfolio can pull clients without him having to make cold calls like what his brick-and-mortar counterparts sometimes would have to do. One can go it alone when starting out, and projects are still few and far between. But once projects pour in, that’s the time you outsource to other designers or hire them on a part time basis.

Process: It is best to work with clients during the planning stages because you get to know their marketing objectives. Anticipate their requirements by presenting your concepts of how best their product can communicate with their market - before they ask you to do so. Once everyone has agreed on a concept, submit the design output for proofing (typo designs, colors, images, etc.).

Marketing: Go paperless for easier document management. Use virtual fax for receiving and sending layout and other paper work. Use electronic invoicing, job orders, and client contact reports. You should also develop an interactive website that manages file transfers, exhibits your portfolio, accommodates online bookings, and responds to online inquiries. You have to set up your online support systems like Yahoo Messenger or Skype for instant messaging and video conferencing; low-cost instant messaging like Chikka; an email account; and a File Transfer Protocol Server that would act like an online file courier. You can download these for free at www.download.com, www.chikka.com, www.skype.com.