

## Family Living Focus Multi-County Extension Agent Winnifred McGee



### Becoming More Professional

When Susan began to speak at my workshop on pricing crafts, I knew almost immediately that there was a problem with her business — a problem she didn't know she had. She talked about how she'd started her craft business in an effort to make some spending money while caring for her preschoolers. She made items to sell now and then, blending work hours around her family's hectic schedule. She sold at craft shows, not on a regular basis, but when the table fees were low enough and her inventory was large enough. And, of course, she added, she sold items at a rate that was much lower than her competitors because she was really an

amateur and saw this as a way to make *pin money*. Although she wasn't sure that her prices covered the costs and her time, she felt that everything was alright because she got to be with her children when she was needed.

Susan's problem was that she was *playing at* being in business, rather than taking the entrepreneurial challenge head on. Although she was making some money, by not setting goals, not knowing whether she was doing something profitable, and by engaging in her venture now and again, she was actually wasting hours not spent with her family, rather than making the most of every minute. This is because, like many home-based business peo-

ple, Susan did not consider herself to be a professional, and did not work at letting other people see her as one.

Setting a professional tone from the start is an important way to ensure business success. According to Debra J. Perosio, of Cornell University, it's been said that in the business and professional world, people form their lasting impression of you within 30 seconds of meeting you. Generally, if we see a person (or business) in a favorable light, we are likely to continue to make favorable associations with that person (or business). If this is true, then communicating a professional image in your first business contact is necessary if you want to continue selling or providing services to the people you meet.

Your professional image improves when you consider these questions:

• **Your Product** — Is it the very best one that you can make, while remembering what your customer can afford? What can you do to improve your skills? Remember that the marketplace is filled with average, cheaply made goods from large assembly lines. As an entrepreneur, you should

ensure that your product is special and valuable; something that you are proud to have your name linked with.

• **Your Appearance** — Do you get dressed for work? When you are out in the community, does your behavior and appearance tell people that you are serious about success? This doesn't mean that you must go out and spend a great deal on a business wardrobe, but the way you dress and act should at all times reflect your goals, helping you fit in with other professional people.

• **Your Work Schedule** — Do you have regular working hours set aside to make products, promote and sell, and do the paperwork for your business? How often are interruptions to this schedule allowed? Remember that there is a difference between a true emergency and just taking up the slack for friends and family members who are employed outside of the home. Asking yourself if you would use vacation days from an out-of-the-home job to do a task helps you judge whether it should interrupt your business schedule.

• **Your Work Space** — Is the area where you work clean, neat and well-organized? Is this space used only for business, allowing you to *leave home life behind* for interruption-free work sessions? Even if your customers never see your workspace, it is necessary for you to have an area that you can go to separate you from the demands and cares of daily living, to give your full attention to your work.

• **Your Price** — Have you priced your product or service to cover costs, labor and a margin for profit? Is your price in the same ballpark with others' prices for similar goods/services? Low

prices translate into low self-esteem. They signal to the buyer that there is something wrong with what you're offering. Pricing lower than your competitors may anger them, causing you to lose the valuable networking that takes place between professionals.

• **Your Network** — Do you belong to any guilds, professional organizations, or community organizations (like a Chamber of Commerce) that help you to grow as a business person? Do you regularly make new contacts, and work at keeping old relationships, to keep your foot in the door for sales?

In her book, *Women and Home-Based Work*, Kathleen Christensen says that one of the three major problems for home-based business people is a loneliness, caused by lack of contact with the outside world, and loss of daily contact with co-workers. She suggests as a solution that "those who run a home-based business can compensate for the lack of office culture by joining business groups, or trade guilds focused on their type of work, and can thus ensure that they have access to the kind of information they need."

The road to greater professionalism is not paved with a binding set of rules and regulations ... it is instead a path you cut for yourself. Starting on a path toward success requires a decision on your part that you will make your business real to yourself and others. It means stepping off the path occasionally and taking a critical look at what you're doing, who is helping you, and if you're really heading toward success or into a dead end. Professionalism makes your business — and the hours you invest — pay for themselves.

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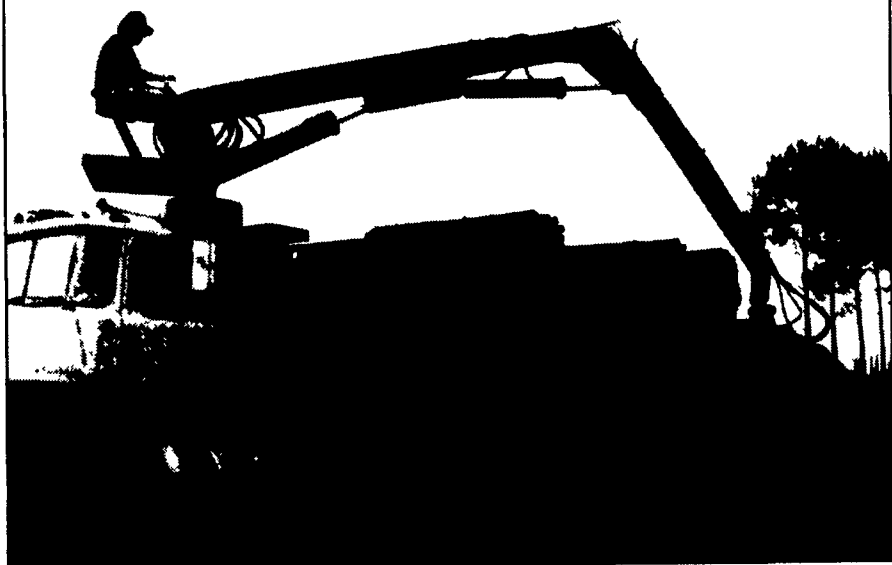
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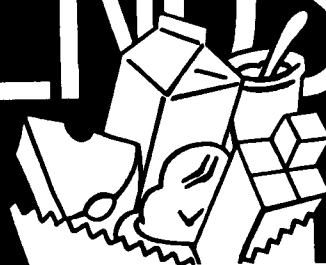
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