

## Get a Big Business Image on a Shoestring Budget

No matter how tiny your company is, you are a CEO. But when prospects dial your number, do they get the impression that they have reached the CEO of a successful company? Take a moment to ponder this. You might even want to pick up your cell phone and call your business line. I doubt you'll get an answer, but listen to the message your callers hear when you aren't available. What sort of impression do you get? Put yourself in your customers' shoes. Do they get a warm reception or a rude, abrupt order to leave a message? Or, Heaven forbid, do they hear Junior singing, "We're not home or we're asleep, leave a message at the beep"?

Now that you've completed that exercise and you've made a note to change your greeting, consider something else.

How often are you interrupted by the phone throughout the day? It never fails. When you've finally gotten in the groove and are intensely focused on an important project, the phone rings. You can't drop everything to take the call. Or, if you work from a home office and find yourself in the middle of a domestic duty when the phone rings, you can't very well let your important caller hear your kids splish-splashing with rubber ducky in the bathtub. How many times have you murmured to yourself that you need a receptionist?

What can an entrepreneur on a limited budget do to improve his or her phone presence? Do you think those fancy automated menus you hear when you call a big company cost a lot of money? You'll be glad to learn that not only can your small business sound like a big business to your potential clients, but it's cheap. Dirt cheap.

Thanks to modern technology, any business owner can have a Virtual PBX, and it's doable no matter what your budget.

"Hold the train!" you're thinking. "What's a Virtual PBX?"

It sounds very technical, so let's simplify it a bit.

First of all, to understand what a VPBX (Virtual PBX) is, you must understand what a plain-old PBX is. You may not realize that you come into contact with PBXs on a daily basis. You know those automated menus you get when you call your bank to check your balance, your doctor's office to make an appointment, or your insurance agency to ask about your policy? Each of those systems is a PBX (Private Branch eXchange).

Have I lost you again? Hang on—don't give up on this yet! Simply put, a PBX is a phone switch that routes calls within a private network, such as an office building, a hospital, or a campus. Back in the old days, a PBX was a huge piece of equipment that lived in a business's phone closet, allowing calls to be received by one main extension (typically the operator or receptionist), and then transferred to other extensions within that network. With the progression of technology, PBXs got

smaller and smarter. Today's PBXs can do much more than transfer calls. They can take messages, forward calls to outside numbers, put callers on hold, speed-dial, fax, and so on and so forth.

Back when you needed a closet to house a PBX, a small business owner like you and me would never have been able to afford one. Only large corporations or government offices could afford them. As small-scale entrepreneurs, we would have been stuck with our local phone companies to act as our PBXs. Sure, we could add call waiting and call forwarding to our phone plans, but choices were limited. If you're under the impression that your local phone company is still your only option, you are happily mistaken, although you won't be happy to know that you're probably paying much more than you need to for phone services.

Enter the Virtual PBX: a marvel of modern technology! The solo entrepreneur or small business owner can have all the features of an old-fashioned closet-dwelling PBX for a fraction of the cost. The main differentiator between a PBX and a VPBX is delivery of services. With a PBX, you have to buy hardware that is housed in your place of business. Not only is this hardware extremely pricy for the budget of a 1-5 person company, but it demands a ton of space, which is always at a premium for home offices. A *Virtual* PBX is basically software-driven, and the servers that house this software could be located on the other side of the world. It doesn't matter where the server is located though—it's "*virtual*." The service provider partitions a section of their PBX, and you get full control of it through a web interface.

Here comes the reason you should care about all of this PBX stuff. Like it or not, home-based businesses competing in today's marketplace suffer from an image problem. One of the biggest hurdles to overcome when working from home is credibility, or lack thereof.

Allow me to demonstrate.

Imagine that you are surfing the web for a particular service you require. You find two websites that sell what you need. You call Company A and are greeted by a pleasant voice. Someone takes your information, gives you some information about the company, and tells you that someone in sales will return your call.

Then you try the second company. Company B's line rings several times before a distracted-sounding voice answers with a flat, "Hullo?"

Which company gives the better first impression? Consumers often equate bigger with better. I don't personally feel that way, but it's a fact. Company A's callers think they're dealing with a large operation. Now, I'm not suggesting you pretend to be bigger than you are, but I am suggesting you set up a system that will give your caller a sense of security. A system that will make callers perceive you as a professional, polished, and established business. That is what will happen with a Virtual PBX.

Have I piqued your interest? Are you beginning to think you could use a phone image makeover? Consider the following top 10 benefits to using a VPBX in your own business:

1. **Work from anywhere.** Do you despise being tied to your desk when you're expecting an important call? With your VPBX, you can have your calls forwarded to your cell phone, your sister's house, or any other alternate number. The beach, hair salon, airport, or car can now become your office. If you travel frequently, you can have access to all of your voice messages and faxes through the Internet. You can also receive notifications by text message, email, or even your pager when new messages or faxes come in.
2. **Project a polished image.** Let's say that Prospect Bob calls your company for information. When he hears your automated attendant or cyber secretary (feel free to give her a name) say, "Please hold the line while your call is transferred to John Smith," Bob pictures John Smith sitting in his fancy office at a fancy desk wearing a fancy suit. Bob doesn't need to know that John is actually sitting in a coffee shop in a T-shirt and jeans. Perception is reality. The most common perception is that someone who does business wearing a suit and tie is more trustworthy than someone who does business wearing jeans. Ask anyone.
3. **Unified communications.** That's a fancy way of saying you have one phone number for all your calls and faxes. Your business card will be much tidier with only one number rather than a business line, cell phone, fax number, and pager listed alongside all your other contact information. Maximize this benefit by getting a toll-free "vanity" number that spells out something memorable like 800-FOR-JOHN. Your prospects won't ever forget that number.
4. **Your company information—accessible 24/7.** Prospect Bob can call an information extension and listen to a list of your products and services or get details on your latest promotions. He can request that a white paper, article, or brochure be faxed to him, and the system will take care of it. Bob can even do this at 3:00 a.m. while you're sound asleep. This is a great feature, especially if you work in a different time zone than your clients or prospects. Your business can now be open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.
5. **No software or equipment to buy.** A VPBX service is an add-on to your current services, and you will need absolutely no additional equipment. Your VPBX is a system that will tie all of your current communications together.
6. **Make changes on the fly.** If you want to make changes to your local phone or cellular service, chances are that you'll have to call them, wait on hold until your call is answered, request the change, wait for the change to be completed, and pay them a service fee for the privilege. With your VPBX, you can make any changes you want, whenever you want, through the web-based interface or via phone. You may add or remove extensions, change your greetings, activate features, set up call

forwarding rules—whatever you like. And you can make these changes yourself without waiting for someone else to do it.

- 7. Disaster recovery.** You should always be prepared for disaster, and since you're a small business owner, that applies doubly for you. A VPBX will provide business continuity through any situation that you may (hopefully never) face. You will be able to quickly and easily make changes to your system to ensure no calls are missed, and prospects will be able to reach your business, even if your business is in the throes of disaster.
- 8. Ability to prioritize calls.** Your time is precious and in high demand. If you're constantly at the mercy of your phone, how will you ever have the time to get any quality work done? Most VPBXs offer a "whisper" feature that allows you to listen to the name of your caller and then decide how to handle the call. You can take the call, send the caller to voicemail, or transfer the caller to another extension (for example, to the extension of your virtual assistant or your information line). You can also place your system in "do not disturb" mode, which means all callers will immediately reach your voicemail without the phone ever ringing. You can then answer your messages at your own convenience. Aaaahhhh. No ringing phones. Nice.
- 9. A local presence in a distant market.** Your toll-free number allows anyone in the country to call you without it costing them anything. Did you know you can get a local number in an area that's not local to you? When would this benefit you? It's easily described in the context of virtual assistants. Let's imagine you're a virtual assistant with a client who is a real estate agent in Los Angeles. This agent doesn't want his clients to know he has an assistant (you) working in Miami. He wants his clients to think they're dealing with a local person. You can get yourself a Los Angeles number where his clients can reach you, and all communications will flow seamlessly through your VPBX. You now have a local presence, no matter where you are!
- 10. Pay for what you need.** A VPBX is flexible, and will grow as you grow. You might choose to start out with a basic, simple system and a limited number of minutes. As your business grows, you can add more minutes, extensions, and features. You can do all of this without having to change the system you've already come to love.

So many benefits—so many reasons for you to consider setting up a VPBX. Never before have so many features and capabilities been available to independent professionals like you and me. You really have no excuse for a sloppy phone image anymore. In today's marketplace, implementing a VPBX system for your business can put you that much further ahead of your competitors, and it will cost you less than you spend on coffee every day.

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