



**D**ID YOU KNOW you can connect with other entrepreneurs through online forums? Here are five to get you chatting—and networking:

[WWW.BUSINESSOWNERSIDEACAFE.COM](http://WWW.BUSINESSOWNERSIDEACAFE.COM)>> Pick the brains of other business owners at IdeaCafe's Cyber-

Schmooz message forums. These chat rooms focus on everything from business ideas, marketing, and home-based businesses to Gen-X entrepreneurs, e-commerce, money talk and more.

[WWW.FOODSERVICE.COM](http://WWW.FOODSERVICE.COM)>> FoodService.com tackles all food service-related issues, from gift cards to food safety, and features an enormous array of topics broken down into "Restaurant Biz Talk," "Chef & Cooks Corner," "TechTalk" and "Onsite."

[WWW.SMALL-BUSINESS-FORUM.COM](http://WWW.SMALL-BUSINESS-FORUM.COM)>> Small Business Forum covers a broad range of categories, such as new business ideas, franchising, business law, insurance and website management, just to name a few. In addition, the site dedicates an entire section to small business.

[WWW.SMALLBUSINESSFORUMS.ORG](http://WWW.SMALLBUSINESSFORUMS.ORG)>> The Small Business Community Forums site is dedicated to all things related to small business, including taxes, employees, import/export tips, legal matters, advertising and much more. It also conducts regular polls and provides statistics on its community members.

[WWW.THESWITCHBOARDS.COM](http://WWW.THESWITCHBOARDS.COM)>> Created so women entrepreneurs could talk shop and help each other, TheSwitchboards.com is filled with public and private forums offering advice, tips and resources. Topics include "Critique My Website," "Legality," "Money Matters," "Barter Is Better" and "PR."

## LET'S TALK ABOUT BIZ

TAP OTHER ENTREPRENEURS' KNOWLEDGE VIRTUALLY WITH ONLINE FORUMS. *By Steve Cooper*

**D**OES THE IDEA of competing with the big boys make you quiver in your startup boots? It shouldn't. As a small, growing startup, you can create an überprofessional brand that inspires confidence from potential clients—none of whom needs to know that you conduct conference calls from your home office while wearing your slippers.

"If you want people to perceive [your company] as bigger, you have to start from scratch with your corporate pieces—your

business card, logo, letterhead, etc.," says Scott Deming, a professional speaker, sales and branding expert, and founder of RCI, a marketing company in Syracuse, New York. To present the image of a larger, more established company, you've got to produce professional and well-made marketing materials (read: no beginner's desktop publishing), and your website must be attractive, informative and easy to navigate.

Once you get customers interested, the key is to deliver on your promises, says Deming. This starts from the very beginning with how you and your employees answer the phone. It builds from there—deliver A+ service to show clients how dedicated you are to their every need. "[Satisfied customers] go out and start building your brand for you," says Deming. "People talk. You have to create the experiences that will create the evangelists."

That was just the sort of strategy employed by Matthew Smith, 36, Alexander Rusich, 38, and Jacob Rusich, 34, founders of LiveOffice Corp., a Torrance, California, web services company that focuses on the financial services market. While the trio knew their website had to be top-notch to attract clients, they also sent out impressive postcards via direct mail to court new customers. Smith recalls emulating magazine ads from more established companies—the spots, featuring few words and strong visuals, targeted the same niche. They also reached out to professionals who worked with other entrepreneurs so they could act as ambassadors for LiveOffice. The strategy worked, and the fledgling company immediately began signing clients. Since the 1998 launch, annual sales have grown to between \$14 million and \$16 million. Says Smith, "You're not immediately written off because you're small—you're written off because you act small."

## GO BIG OR GO HOME

YOUR COMPANY MAY BE SMALL, BUT THAT DOESN'T MEAN YOU CAN'T BRAND BIG. *By Nichole L. Torres*