

best practices

## Work & Life: Taking a Vacation

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**SMALL-BUSINESS OWNERS** are good at many tasks — except getting away from work.

Take, for instance, Bonnie Harris, founder of Wax Marketing in St. Paul, Minn., who confesses that she's installed a headset in her ski helmet so she can take calls while on the slopes. (This year, she booked a client on a national TV show while sitting on the chairlift.) Then there's Jennifer Kushell, who created YSN.com, a Los Angeles-based social-networking site for young professionals. Over New Year's, she took her first real vacation in five years to Tahiti — and over her husband's protests, recorded a podcast (about taking a vacation) from her over-water bungalow. "I just talked about how a lot of us were crazy workaholics who never step out of the office and live and breathe our work," she says. "I thought it would be a cool thing to share."

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Striking the right balance between work and personal life is difficult for many professionals but especially entrepreneurs, who have the added concern that the business they created will collapse in their absence. When it comes to vacation, many business owners report that they simply can't take one, or if they do, the vacation is derailed by phone calls, emails — and constant worries.

Yet, some entrepreneurs have come up with creative ways to take a break from the daily grind. Barbara Bickham, founder of consulting firm TechGenii in Los Angeles, says she "was in that boat thinking I couldn't take a vacation" until she got so burned out she couldn't focus or make decisions. Her solution? Create a company retreat twice a year to Hawaii's Kona coast. Bickham, a solo entrepreneur, invites business associates to come along, and finds that diving, golfing and hiking among the petroglyph rock-carvings cultivates their work relationships. And the retreat leaves Bickham feeling renewed. "I don't take my BlackBerry, I don't take my cell phone," she says. She brings a notebook to jot down ideas for her company, but "I really do think of it as vacation."

Many business owners report not feeling comfortable or even allowed to take a vacation until the business is established and trusted employees can run the show. Otherwise, "you feel like a flake," says Jennifer Zankan, a former attorney who two years ago started Jeneration PR, a Sherman Oaks, Calif., marketing firm specializing in fashion. She's about to take a three-week vacation (her honeymoon) to Italy, and is getting ready for the big break by alerting clients, hiring interns, and most importantly, giving her three employees a detailed, week-by-week breakdown of how to handle operations. That way, they know "exactly what I expect of them while I am gone," she says.

In fact, too many small-business owners fail to write down their policies and procedures, making it difficult for anyone to run the business in their absence, says Peggy Duncan, a personal-productivity expert in Atlanta who often coaches business owners. It's critical to get business methods "out of your head and on paper," she says. "Nobody can read your mind." Even entrepreneurs who run the smallest of companies should write everything out "as if you were running a franchise," she says. "Get your house in order and train your employees, so that you can walk away."

But what happens if you don't have a staff of full-time, in-house employees? Shel Horowitz, a marketing consultant in Hadley, Mass., says he's been able to take vacations by relying on a virtual assistant, who applied for the job sight unseen, and works remotely from Anchorage, Alaska. "She'll intercept my mail before it gets to my server, which is a huge thing because I get hundreds of emails a day," he says. The most urgent messages are forwarded to a private email address that he can check while away. The same assistant, who's worked for him regularly for several years, also can format and upload content to his company's marketing-related websites in his absence.

It doesn't work for every industry, but business owners such as innkeepers, personal trainers and even therapists sometimes rely on similar business owners to pinch-hit when they're out of town. An entrepreneur might want to consider creating a network of business owners who can fill in as needed, says Marci Alboher, author of "One Person/Multiple Careers," a book on work-life balance. "You have to figure out what part of your work can be handled by someone else," she says, "and you have to make sure confidential information and trade secrets are protected."

And then there's the business owner that can turn a work trip into vacation. Rich Brauman, founder of Little Pearl, a caviar distributor in Somerville, Mass., has tasted wine in Sonoma, checked out the sights in Bermuda, and fly-fished in Sun Valley, Idaho — and that's just for work. Usually, after scouting a new place where his company's caviar can be sold, he tries to take an extra day or two to unwind. "A lot of places we look to sell are places where people are celebrating," he says. "It helps that my hobbies are fishing, and I like to eat."