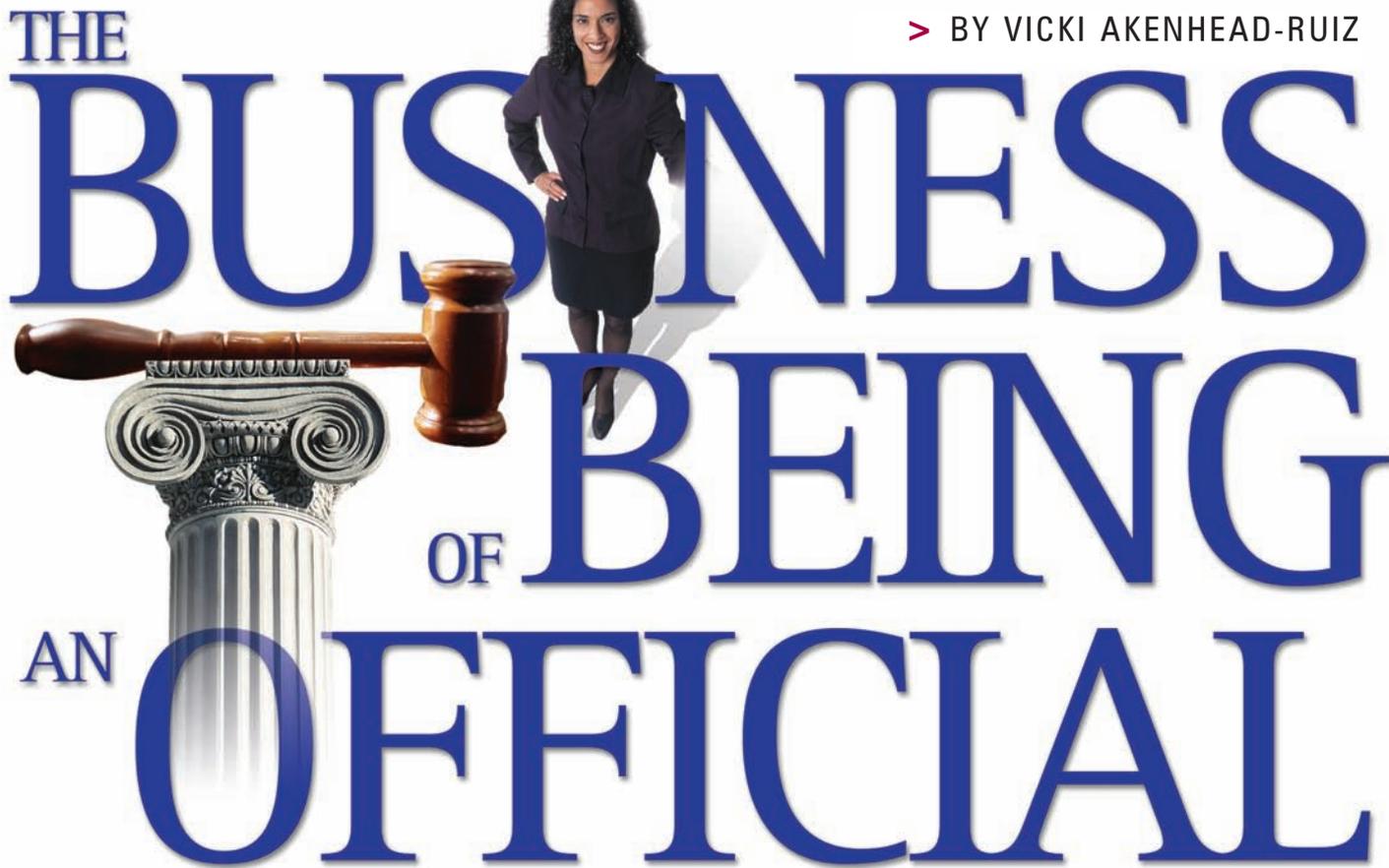


THE BUSINESS OF BEING AN OFFICIAL



> BY VICKI AKENHEAD-RUIZ

**Should officials consider themselves business people?
If so, what is the benefit to running an officialship as a business?**

Here are some questions that aren't often pondered in the official arena: should official court reporters consider themselves business people, what is the benefit to running the officialship as a business, and is the job of the official viewed as a business?

After 30 years in the profession, most of which was in and around the courtroom, I would state without hesitation that official court reporters are and must be viewed as business people and — most definitely — the duties and responsibilities of running an officialship must be treated and viewed as running a “real” business. Not only should an officialship be viewed as a business, but the official reporter must know the details of how to operate a successful business and then apply that knowledge to the job.

Questions to Consider

Let's take a closer look at running an officialship and see how you would fare as the CEO. Some important considerations include the following. (To make it easy, I have provided the answers.)

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1. Who are your clients?

This answer is easy because official reporters have clients from all walks of life the minute a case begins. The client is not just the individual ordering the transcript but all of the possible people who could ultimately come in contact with the transcript. Those people could include the parties' family members, the press, and the different agencies such as the attorney general's office, appellate

court, prison system, insurance companies, hospital facilities, and many others. Looking outside the box to include the list of potential clients is important in being successful as an official.

2. What kind of marketing do you do as an official?

I would suggest that there is no better marketing than a timely and accurate product. Does this approach mean that only the transcript is timely and accurate? Of course the transcript is one element, but timeliness should also extend to other services. Do you stay current and up-to-date with what is happening in the profession? Do you provide the latest and greatest in litigation support so that the job of the attorney is more efficient and easier to manage? I contend that if you don't, now is a good time to start. The more services you market, the more secure your place in the court system will be.

Not only should marketing extend to the clients in the courtroom but also, just as important, is the court system itself. Do the support divisions of the court truly understand and embrace your role in the court system? Have you taken the time to educate your court

administrator and clerks as to how to accomplish your job and what tools are required to do your job? If not, I would suggest that you begin educating others today. You might just be surprised.

3. What is your product?

As you know, with any successful business, there is a product or service that you promote. I would contend that the product in this case is you. The transcript is also the product, but nothing sells better or makes a more lasting impression than a well-trained, certified, knowledgeable professional at the helm of the business. You, as the official, represent not only the court but also all that you provide — transcript, information, technology, training, and education.

Improving Your Position

Another important area to ponder is how you can improve your position within the court system. Running a successful business means constantly changing to adapt to current trends in the profession. Let's look at some of the areas in which you — as an official — can improve to create an even more successful and solid business.

1. Professionalism. Perhaps the single most important component to operating a successful business is professionalism. It extends to not just those who receive your services as an official court reporter but also to everyone you meet or everyone who sees you in and out of the courtroom. First impressions are lasting impressions. Your demeanor, dress, and dialogue with those in and out of the courtroom, as well as the dignity and respect with which you treat yourself and others, will seal a solid impression with others.

2. Impartiality. Are you, the business owner, viewed as the most neutral person in the courtroom? Are you impartial and fair toward everyone you meet and work with? Are you trusted and trustworthy? As a business owner, the one running the business, it is imperative that those in your professional world view you as a fair and impartial officer of the court. You can be fair and impartial by drawing solid lines and demonstrating this comportment in all of your dealings in and out of the courtroom. After all, you represent not only yourself but also the court and the administration of justice. This is not a

small task. It is, however, necessary to the smooth and efficient administration of justice.

3. Technology. As the business owner, do you use state-of-the-art technology? Are you considered the “information manager” for your court system? Do the court administrator and those in charge of making decisions about your future come to you for expertise and advice on technologies and issues affecting the role of the official reporter and the record? If not, I suggest that today is not too soon to start becoming educated in not only the technology used by the official reporter but also the technology competing with the way officials do their jobs. Oftentimes, decisions are made without the benefit of the knowledge and expertise of the official reporter. It is your duty to be the professional who is consulted for useful and helpful information needed by the administration.

Official reporters often ask, but how is this possible when administration and officials can be at odds with what is happening in the court system? I suggest that the answer to that question is simple: knowledge. Official reporters are the people who need to know what is



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happening in their arena and in other arenas within the profession. Get educated on other forms and techniques of making the record. Become the resident expert in your business so that you can fairly, objectively, and professionally provide up-to-date information to the administration. Through this avenue of sharing, you will find that the communication gap will slowly disappear.

4. Timeliness. Because so much of what the official reporter does in the work force involves deadlines and time

limits, a business cannot run without strict adherence to those rules and procedures that govern officials. In addition to the well-defined deadlines, I suggest that officials and business owners have a duty to provide the most expeditious service possible when dealing with the court and clients outside of the court. If 10 days is the norm for getting out transcripts, why not continually strive to do better and get those jobs out in seven days? Your work product, in a sense, is a reflection of you. When those jobs are completed and the certification page is signed, it is a reflection of you and what you represent. Poorly prepared transcripts and unmet deadlines make a statement about you — the business owner — that is sometimes hard to turn around once the damage is done. After all, your transcript lives on for decades, and it is often hard to erase the memory of a poorly prepared transcript no matter how hard we try. Do it right the first time, and do it ahead of schedule — so that everyone walks away happy.

Special Considerations

There are special considerations in every business, and the business of running an officialship is no exception. Officials today cannot become too comfortable with their jobs, or they may ignore what is happening in the profession. Continued education is a must when wanting to solidify and secure a job within the court system. This education is especially important when so many reporters are needed to fill official positions around the country. The way we do our jobs, run our business, and represent our profession work hand-in-hand to ensure that official reporters are always a priority within the court system. The way we represent what we do is also a large component of whether we are viewed by others as a truly educated and knowledgeable professional. We owe it to ourselves — and our business — to be the best that we can be so our customers and clients reap the rewards of a well-run business with a truly qualified professional behind the wheel.

Think about it. Is your business all that it can be? If not, start today to make the changes necessary to carry your reputation and your business well into the future. The rewards will begin the minute you start. ■