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More than a remote chance of success

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October 5, 2010 - 12:53PM

Neil Willis runs Sydney Commercial Kitchens out of Santa Monica, California.

While it would be reasonable to assume that a business called Sydney Commercial Kitchens operates out of Sydney, few people realise that the company is actually being run from Santa Monica, California.

Founder and former Sydneysider Neil Willis has structured his business so that he can effectively run it from anywhere in the world - as long as he has access to the internet and telephone.

The business, which started in 1998, supplies equipment to the hospitality and catering industries. In 2000, Willis began to experiment with online marketing strategies to promote

his business, becoming an exclusively web-based business the same year.

"In those early days, I had no big vision for where the internet could take the business," says Willis. "The first online sale was in September 2000. I remember sitting in Perth later that year while I was on holidays, trying to summarise everything I knew about the internet. The list was embarrassingly short, a real wake-up call!"

Willis resolved to learn everything he could about successful internet marketing.

"After that first online sale, I clearly remember the feeling of satisfaction when that turned into a sale every month, then every week, and now daily."

Willis said he had two years with a turnover of more than $700,000 and after employing his first team member his goal was to reach annual sales of $1 million.

"I felt this would be an amazing achievement for a small online business in Australia. That year, our turnover increased by over $1 million."

That was in the 2005 financial year. "My business has basically doubled again since then and we now have sales around $300,000 per month," says Willis, whose customer base is spread across Australia with 50 per cent of client in Sydney, 25 per cent in the rest of NSW and 25 per cent in the remainder of Australia. "This financial year, we have already had our best ever August and September so I expect these figures to grow again."

In May 2009, Willis and his wife Linda had to relocate to the US in a hurry, for family reasons. While many business owners plan for months – even years – to facilitate this kind of transition, Willis had little notice.

"When we moved here, it was fast. Linda left on a Saturday with only eight hours notice and I followed the next Monday. I went briefly into my office to advise my team that I was leaving that afternoon. We weren't sure when I would be back. Since then, I've only spent about 30 days in the office in Sydney [on return trips]."

Willis says he had already spent the first five years of his business creating efficient systems. "I am effectively able to fulfil my role, do the marketing and make changes to the website from anywhere."

He uses a web-based content management and customer relationship management system. Therefore, his records are not locked into a computer or server in his office. He can review this data from anywhere with an internet connection.

"Using Windows Server, I am able to log on remotely and access our MYOB program," he says. "This keeps me up-to-date with the accounts side of the business. Also, I am able to work on my files through this remote connection with the added value that everything is backed up daily.

"Once a fortnight, we have a team meeting using Skype. Any important mail or documents that are sent to the office are scanned and emailed to me".

His team consists of three staff members based in Cromer in Sydney.

Willis says his absence from his head office has not hampered the business. This year, Sydney Commercial Kitchens was a finalist in the NSW Telstra Business Awards.

IT services provider David Moore moved from Sydney to Tasmania, working remotely from the rest of his team.

Willis isn't alone when it comes to running a business remotely. Earlier this year, IT services provider David Moore moved from the northern beaches of Sydney to Tasmania. Moore runs I Hate My PC, which offers computer help to individuals and small to medium sized businesses.

While Moore predominantly does the marketing for the business – he blogs, writes a regular newsletter and communicates with customers – it's his Sydney-based team which trouble-shoots for clients on site.

Using LogMeIn Rescue, Moore is able to remote control clients' computers so that he can see their screens as if he is in front of them. His documents are kept in a centralised location via Google Apps so that all team members have access. And he regularly communicates with his team via Skype and telephone.

Moore credits the simple tools above for enabling him to run his business remotely. "After 25 years in IT, I'm quite into KISS - keep it simple, stupid – so I've chosen the best of breed to do the job, as opposed to tech for tech's sake."

Source: theage.com.au