

# *Hometime*

Home-based business booms in Valley



Gail Gesell, district public information officer for the Arizona Small Business Administration

**by Cynthia Scanlon  
photography by Kevin Creighton**

*H*ome-based business owners, those pioneers of the entrepreneurial spirit, are forging their own paths in Arizona's business community. The journey is not always easy, nor is it always clear-cut. But many in the Valley have chosen to blaze the trail with confidence and caring. It's true that home-based is not for everyone, but for those who decide to make their own way in the world, the experience can be extremely rewarding, occasionally terrifying and definitely growth enhancing.

One of those entrepreneurial spirits making her mark on Arizona's home-based business landscape is Catherine Dinsmore, owner of Public Relations Plus. Dinsmore, an independent business writer and public relations consultant, has run her business successfully for more than 12 years in what is sometimes regarded as a highly competitive and, oftentimes, cutthroat industry.

Her initial decision to create a home-based business was driven by her need to be more accessible to her husband and their desire to start a family. "We wanted an option for a child other than 12 hours in a daycare setting, five days a week," says Dinsmore. "And a lot of mothers and fathers don't have that option."

Now that the couple has a son, Dinsmore is pleased with the ways things have worked out. But just as importantly, Dinsmore says she wanted to offer her expertise at affordable rates to the business community. At the time, that was a niche that needed to be filled. But 12 years ago, that was easier said than done. Most people were unfamiliar with home-based businesses and were suspect of the concept. "When I first started out, someone called my office at 9 in the morning," she says. "I keep regular work hours. This person said, 'I didn't wake you, did I?' And he was half serious. People still think of a home-based business as a hobby."

While this attitude can be occasionally annoying, Dinsmore says her clients have been with her for years, precisely because she can deliver what they want. She cites the times she has gotten up in the middle of the night to check on work or review a project. For those times, having her office at home is a real advantage. "It doesn't matter where my office is, I conduct myself as a professional regardless of where my office happens to be," she says. "The people I have worked with for years work with me because of the work I can produce for them. They don't care if I'm sitting on my roof or in a parking garage."

Dinsmore adds, "But those people are open-minded enough to seek independent help and they are more open-minded about how an independent conducts his or her business."

For Joann Weschler, owner of Sunshine School For Dogs, owning and operating a home-based dog training business means providing a needed service for a fair price. But for Weschler, being home-based goes beyond economics. Her dog training company has almost a life-and-death component to it and it's a responsibility she doesn't take lightly. "If dogs are not taught carefully and with respect, they don't make very good pets," says Weschler. "Then people turn them into the shelters. It's not really the people's fault nor the dog's fault. People just haven't learned to communicate with the dogs and tell them what they want."

Weschler, who has been training dogs for 20 years and running a home-based business for 10, wants to change that. She and her associates run obedience classes both in her home and at numerous off-site

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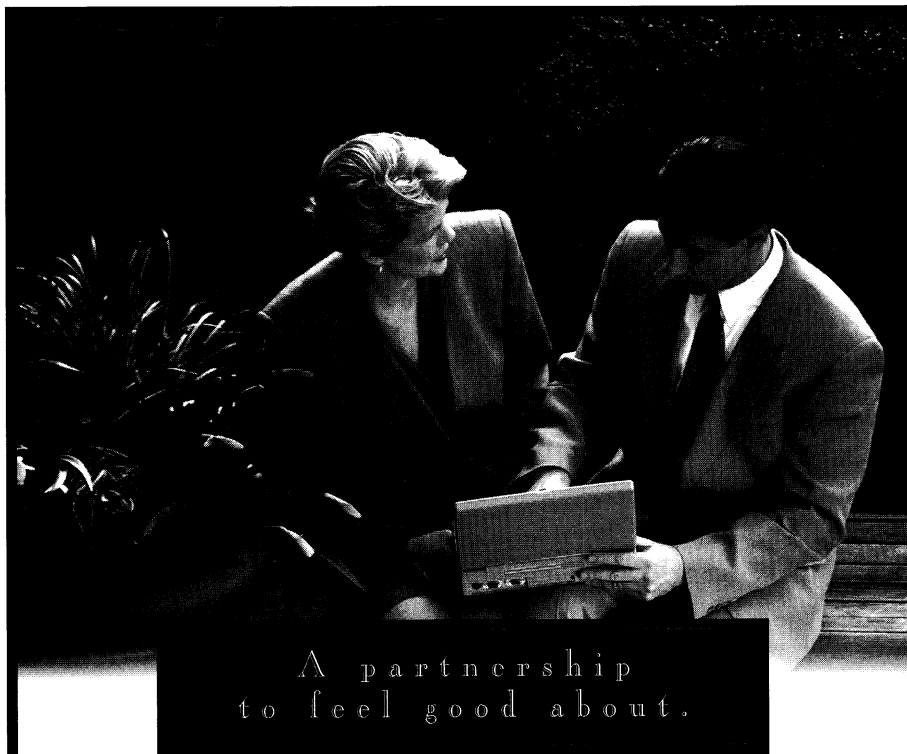
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offers a way for [owners] to get away from their home base and connect in many different ways to other chamber members and do business with them," says Swisher.

Those interested in joining the chamber can do so on a sliding scale. For those businesses with one to five employees, the cost will run \$290 a year. While many home-based business owners bring a certain expertise to their company that they have garnered over the years, sometimes an idea for a home-based business can be rooted in childhood.

Such is the case with Gregory Lizanich, president of Creative Coloring Cards For Kids. Lizanich and his business partner, Terry Harper, have developed a line of greeting cards for children that they can color and decorate any way they wish. The idea came from Lizanich's experience as a child. "Whenever I wanted to send my grandparents a note, I'd tear a page out of a coloring book and send them that with a little note," he says. "And I thought, wouldn't be neat if I had my own cards to do that? That's how it got started."

The cards work well for either boys or girls and can be used for thank you notes, birthday cards, or anything else a child's imagination might wrap around. Creative Coloring Cards is in its first year of operation, but Lizanich and Harper have been able to get their product in local retail outlets. They are also talking with the post office as another possible avenue of exposure and profits.

To help them market their company, the two turned to the Internet, but Lizanich says the results have been disappointing. "We're not getting as much business as we expected, and it's not as profitable as we had thought," he says. "We were expecting a lot more from what we've read and what we've heard." The company's Web site can be found at [www.cards4kids.com](http://www.cards4kids.com).

Still, Lizanich and Harper are undaunted. They feel the upside of owning their own business more than outweighs the negatives. For others thinking of stepping into a home-based business



Gregory Lizanich, president of Creative Coloring Cards For Kids

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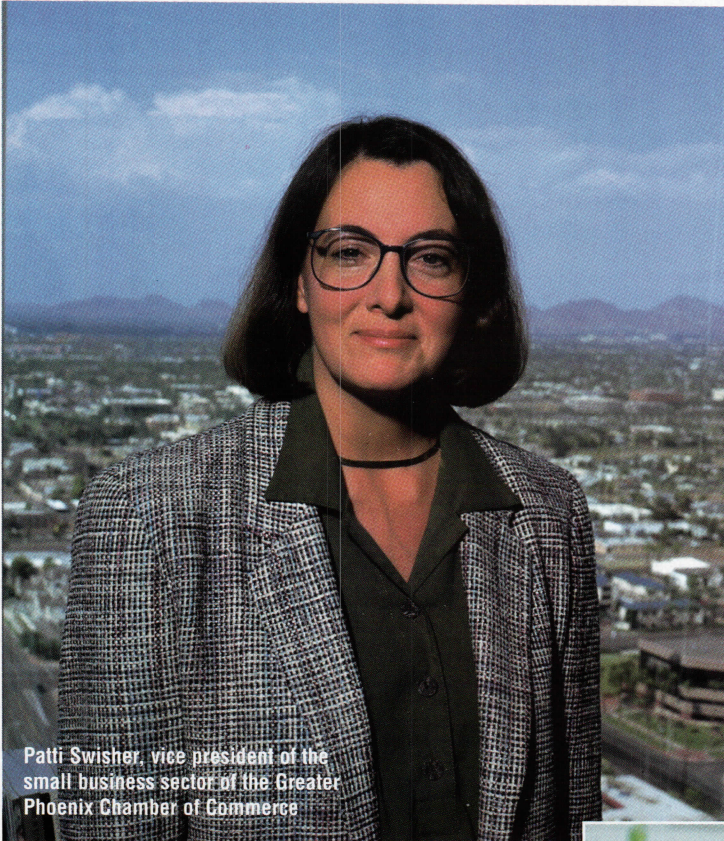
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Patti Swisher, vice president of the small business sector of the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce

generally and greeting cards specifically, Lizanich warns would-be owners to thoroughly investigate the costs before getting involved. "We investigated printing costs, so we knew what we wanted to charge for these cards to make sure we would be able to make a profit," he says.

They also investigated the other areas needed to run a successful business, home-based or not. "I have friends who have opened businesses and it didn't work out because they didn't investigate costs," says Lizanich, who is quick to point out, however, that money cannot be the only factor in creating a successful business. There are other intangibles that are harder to measure. Most significantly is whether or not the business you are thinking of running will be enjoyable to you one, five, or even 10 years down the line.

For Lizanich, who enjoys working with children, his business is a natural fit. He has a knack for thinking like kids do, which allows him to tap into ways they can express themselves. As an example, he tells of a woman he knows whose mother is dying of cancer. She purchased a set of cards for her 10-year-old son. "She said he colored a card and wrote the most beautiful thing inside to his grandmother," says Lizanich. "She said, as a parent, she never knew he felt that way. That story meant everything to me."

Like Lizanich, Weschler has faced many challenges in starting and operating a successful business, but surprisingly, one of the biggest challenges Weschler encounters in her business does not center on paperwork or organization or any of the other myriad details a small business owner faces. Weschler's biggest challenge is expectations from her clients about what can and cannot be achieved with a living, breathing animal.

"People come in thinking once they talk to a trained

professional such as me that we will give them two or three magic words and their dogs will suddenly turn into angels," she says.

If the thought has crossed your mind to start a home-based business of your own, Dinsmore has some words of wisdom. First and foremost, she says, when you're first starting out, don't judge your worth by your bottom line. "People hear the word consultant and they think, 'Wow. These people must be really bringing in the bucks.' In the communications industry, that really doesn't happen."

She adds, "Don't judge your success by your first years of income. Focus on how well you're marketing yourself and how pleased your clients are with your work."

Dinsmore says you must also assess the type of person you really are and be honest about whether or not you can truly self-motivate. "Ask yourself, 'If no one is sitting in the next office, can I really do this?'" she says.

And lastly, she points out that running a home-based business is about constantly selling yourself and your services. She likens the whole experience to day-to-day job hunting with a lot of the unpleasantness. "When we're not working, we're looking for more work."

She, like many others, would have it no other way.

**AB**

Cynthia Scanlon is a Tempe free-lance writer.



Joann Weschler, owner of Sunshine School For Dogs