

## Virtual Work Provides Growing Opportunities

Tory Johnson's tips on starting your own virtual home-based business.

By TORY JOHNSON via [GMA](#)  
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March 12, 2008 &#151; -- Virtual work is a smart solution when appropriate job opportunities in your area simply don't exist. I worked directly with one woman in Michigan to help her rebuild a once-lucrative photography career launched largely through assignments from the automotive industry, which have now all but disappeared.

This model applies to many areas of expertise – not just photography. You can provide consulting services, PR and marketing support, writing and editing, sales, bookkeeping, assistants, etc. from a distance. We maintain friendships that are long-distance. We have professional relationships that are long-distance — often with people we've never met. There's no reason why you can't get customers and clients who'll hire you long-distance as well. Carol lined up three clients last week specifically through virtual networking – she's never met them face-to-face. It's all phone and email – and it can be done. But it takes initiative. Nobody can do it for you.

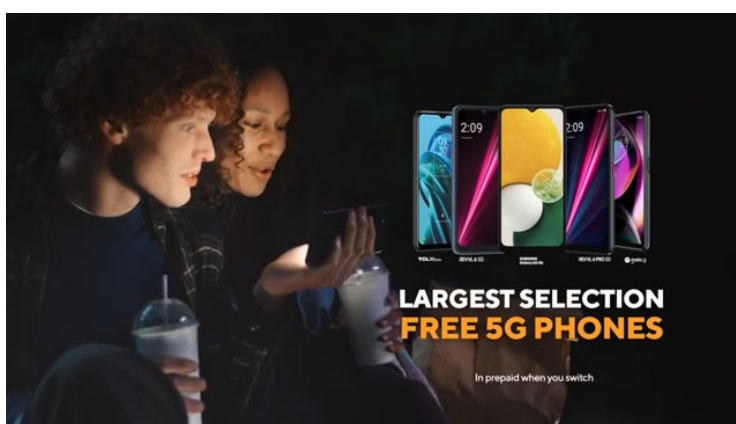
**Got a question for Tory? You can add your question or comments to this story and Tory will try to answer as many as she can.**

Here's what we developed as Carol Gould's Virtual Work Action Plan.

**Broadly define your capabilities.** Just because you've only done one thing, that doesn't mean you're incapable of broadening your horizons to adapt to the realities of the marketplace. In Carol's case, she's spent her whole career shooting big-budget automotive projects, so she had to refocus her client scope. Carol can easily apply her creative skills far beyond cars — the three virtual projects she's doing right now are very diverse: photos for skin care products, design of a corporate brochure, and creative for Mother's Day cards. She can also shoot family portraits, corporate events, even weddings.

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The same is true for other skills. Someone who has done public relations for a museum could likely do PR for an author. The same promotional skills apply. That publicist doesn't have to focus only on one type of client.

**Adjust for economic realities of the marketplace.** Carol is now doing projects for varying budgets, starting as low as a few hundred dollars. While she used to focus only on big-budget projects, the marketplace for that level has slowed considerably. As the economy improves, she can get back to some of that, but for now her pricing must reflect the realities of the marketplace.

**Showcase talents in writing or create a Web site.** Before someone is willing to hire you, you should create a simple Web site or have a crisp pitch to email around that

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someone about your skills and abilities.

There are so many free online templates to help you build a basic website, so even minimal technical talent means you can do it. (**Yahoo Small Business**, **Google Page Creator** and **1and1.com** are among thousands of options to explore.)



In Carol's case, she needed to showcase her exceptional photography and her range of creative capabilities. She bartered her photography services with the Web site development services of another small business owner. **A Firefly Studio**, a premier design firm for Web sites and print collateral, produced a sensational representation of Carol's work and her company, **PhotoGal Enterprises**.

**Engage in extreme networking.** Once you have that website or an electronic flyer ready to go, word of mouth is your best source of customer and client referrals. Reach out – not just to those you know, but to a broad wish list too. I had Carol make a list of everyone she's worked with – and wished she could have worked with. When I pushed her to reach out to those people she had lost touch with, some couldn't have cared less about hearing from her, but others were thrilled to catch up.

You win some, you lose some, but if aren't casting a wide net, you won't catch anything. Rejection is part of the process, but you must keep picking up the phone and keep sending those emails. While networking, you're asking people if they could benefit from your services and you're also asking them to share your website with other people who could become potential clients.

**Think nationally, not just locally.** We use the phone and Internet to build personal and professional relationships, so we should be able to use both to find clients and customers as well. Carol's extreme networking landed her more than \$2,000 worth of new virtual business in one week — and none of her clients are based in her home state of Michigan. These new clients also have no connection to her old automotive stomping grounds.

Take a woman who makes homemade candles and air fresheners. She typically sells to local buyers at craft fairs in her community, but that market is drying up. There's no reason why she can't have a customer base across the country. With a well-developed website and a national, not just local, mentality, she can send her site via e-mail to boutique owners around the country. She can also send e-mails about new product introductions to her family and friends -- and ask them to forward it to family and friends. She can offer holiday specials and referral discounts to encourage people to spread the word virally.

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**Create and manage your online identity.** Not only must you hustle to find clients, but you can take various steps to help clients find you. Maximize the online resources of social and professional networks such as LinkedIn.com and Facebook.com, and search projects and post a profile on sites specializing in independent contractor work such as elance.com, sologig.com, guru.com, and craigslist.com, among others.

**Maintain the momentum.** Keep contacts updated on your projects and progress. Let them know when you're doing interesting new things and send them ideas and resources that might benefit them too. For example, when Carol comes across a nugget of information that might be relevant to one of her clients or prospective leads, she'll send it along. All of her communication when they aren't about asking for more business; it's about building a long term relationship so they'll use her and they'll refer her.

Consultants2Go, Sandi Webster and Peggy McHale, about their successful business model.

**What is Consultants 2 Go?** Consultants 2 Go (C2G) is a professional services firm that specializes in providing marketing consultants to the financial services and telecom industry, as well as to mid-size companies. We provide resources on an interim basis or for outsourced projects (full end-to-end deliverables). Our consultants are all seasoned professionals, typically with ten or more years of experience, which allows them to immediately add value to our clients' businesses. We are a minority and women-owned business and in 2006 we were selected as a winner in the Make Mine a Million Dollar Business Contest.

**Why did you start Consultants 2 Go?** We worked across the street from the World Trade Center at the same company, American Express. After 9/11, we lost our jobs and decided to start our own company with the idea that we could help companies by leveraging our extensive network of marketing professionals.

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We quickly realized that we had tapped into the need by these companies for highly skilled marketing consultants and their desire for people that "could hit the ground running." We also realized that we were fulfilling a need by our consultants for more flexible and balanced work arrangements. Many of our consultants are moms or bridge workers (retirees/ex-pats from Corporate America) who wanted a more flexible lifestyle, something that we could provide them with our tailored assignments.

**What is the difference—and the benefits—of hiring virtually versus in person?** By hiring virtually, you can tap into a much larger pool of resources. You are no longer constrained by the physical geography of your location as a business. It also gives you access to people that are not able to work outside of their home. Often times, there are highly skilled women that can be a tremendous asset but require a completely virtual assignment. In addition, depending on the type of project, different time zones can be beneficial for the completion of the assignment. The team on the East Coast can start the initiative, and the West Coast resources can continue later in the day. This is particularly helpful when you need to complete a project for a client that has a compressed timeframe.

If you'd like to get hired as a virtual consultant, here's the advice from Peggy McHale:

- 1) Have a clearly defined work space with a dedicated phone line, broad band internet access and a professional email address.
- 2) Define your work hours. Set up parameters ahead of time so you know when you want to work. This avoids burnout.
- 3) Stay connected to the business world by joining organizations and keeping in contact with people in your field.
- 4) Use [freeconferencecalls.com](http://freeconferencecalls.com) to stay connected by phone when you must communicate with groups of people. This facilitates professionalism.
- 5) Consider a shared server to share files and documents with colleagues and clients. Some people use free GoogleApps.

Tory Johnson is the Workplace Contributor on ABC's Good Morning America and the CEO of Women For Hire. Visit her at [www.womenforhire.com](http://www.womenforhire.com).



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