

Espressopreneurs: Working wireless in today's business market

By Merlisa Lawrence Corbett

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When entering any coffeehouse these days, you hear the unmistakable sounds of frothing milk, grinding coffee beans and baristas barking orders of grande-skim Lattes. Listen closer and you may also hear colleagues planning, contracts being negotiated, partnerships forming and marketing strategies developing.

Fueled by the Starbucks revolution and the emergence of wireless technology, coffeehouses are now home to "espressopreneurs": a new breed of entrepreneur who operates a business from coffee shops.

"I think it's the most wonderful way to do business," said Cindy Engquist, President of All About You Central, a marketing and customer service consulting company. "My home office is my headquarters, but I don't want to have clients there. I either meet them at their business or in a neutral place like a coffeehouse."

Engquist is among a growing number of area business owners who take advantage of the low cost/high comfort coffeehouse alternative to traditional office space.

A mother of two, Engquist said working from coffeehouses offers her the flexibility she needs to juggle her work and family life. "I live in Annandale, my son goes to school in Herndon and I do a lot of business in Alexandria. Doing business out of coffeehouses allows me to have a professional career and still get things done."

Like many "espressopreneurs" Engquist circulates her business among a few coffeehouses. Her favorites are Panera Bread (Duke Street, Richmond Highway and Baileys Crossroads), the large drive-thru Starbucks at Columbia Pike and Linconia and Cameron Perks, in Cameron Station.

Circulating business

Cameron Perks, named 2004 Hospitality Business of the Year by the Alexandria Chamber of Commerce, caters to independent business owners and salespeople. Realtors hold seminars there and two Business Network International (BNI) groups hold weekly meetings there. These meetings usually take place in a separate room that can be closed off from the main dining area at Cameron Perks. Cameron Perks also offers free wireless Internet access (WI-FI), a must-have for business owners who need to check e-mail or conduct online research.

Franchises such as Starbucks and Cusi, offer wireless access, however, users must have an account with HOTSPOT providers such as T-Mobile. Coffeehouses that offer free Wi-Fi tend to attract more small business owners who seek to keep operating costs down.

Although growing in popularity – In August Alexandria unveiled "Wireless Alexandria" the region's first free, outdoor, wireless Internet zone – wireless access is just a small part of what makes a coffeehouse an ideal setting for entrepreneurs. Coffeehouses are close to home. There is a Starbucks or one of its many imitators on almost every corner. Most coffeehouses offer comfortable seating elegant enough to entertain clients, yet casual enough to drop in without reservations.

Over coffee

Brett Ludden, Vice President of Marketing for LiveWell Financial, a Richmond-based financial planning company, drives two hours to Alexandria to hold orientations in St. Elmo's Coffee House on Mt. Vernon Avenue. He has done this twice and plans to continue using this popular Del Ray coffee shop to train new hires.

"I first looked into renting a small conference room at a hotel in Old Town," said Ludden. "The room held 12 and there would be only two of us. It was just a plain room. We would have to leave to get lunch or snacks or pay extra to have it brought



Alexandria Times Staff Photos/Bob Lennox
Working wireless and conducting business from local coffeehouses is becoming more and more normal these days. Matthew Tucker of Country Vintner works on his laptop at Del Ray Dreamery.

Clarification

in." Ludden opted for the less expensive, and he says, more comfortable environment at St. Elmo's.

On this afternoon Ludden was 2 ½ hours into a four-hour training session with Jesse Jennings, who also serves on the Alexandria Planning Commission. Their day began at 10 a.m. over coffee and pastries. Many espressopreneurs like to arrive at the coffeehouse office mid-morning, avoiding long line of commuters whisking in and out for their daily caffeine fix. After the morning traffic rolls out toward more traditional office spaces, the espressopreneur strolls in and takes up residence for an hour, or two or three. It's an unspoken rule that the longer you stay the more food and coffee you should purchase.

"You definitely want to patronize the owner," said Ludden. His orientation usually includes purchasing breakfast, lunch and a snack.

Jennings, an Alexandria native, said he's held several meetings at St. Elmo's. "I love the atmosphere. You have structure, but it's warm and inviting," said Jennings. "People are warm, friendly and it sets a good tone for the meeting."

As Ludden and Jennings continued their meeting, they talked about the many different types of meetings that have taken place at St. Elmo's that day. "I overheard all types of business being discussed here," said Ludden. "Behind me, there was a group of people planning a start-up company."

An annoyance?

Not every coffeehouse is conducive to small business. Some older establishments have few outlets available because they were constructed prior to the mobile computing trend. Some coffee shops are more restaurants and the non-working patrons may become annoyed at the sight of laptops and PDAs.

Engquist believes coffeehouses are a natural extension of her home-based business. "I have my Blackberry to check e-mail and my cell phone is my primary business line," she said. "When I need to do a lot of paperwork, I do that stuff at home. But sometimes you just need to get out of the house."

The calendar item in last week's The Alexandria Times, Toast the Ghosts, sponsored by the Alexandria Convention & Visitors Association and Gadsby's Tavern Museum, is by invitation only and not open to the public in general.