

Who's in charge when you're not there?



[Jim Kendall](#)

This column had its genesis when I, the client, called a service provider seeking what (to me) was some vital information. Unhappily, she was rolling along the highway toward the East Coast and, she admitted, did not have anyone in her consulting practice who could provide the information I needed.

She did come up with a friendly competitor's name -- but no contact information (which wasn't difficult to find). However, the experience made me wonder: Who takes over, especially in smaller businesses, when the owner isn't available?

I asked a handful of business owners I know for their thoughts. There's nothing scientific about the "survey," but my small group provided some interesting -- and hopefully useful -- approaches.

The key often (though not always) is having knowledgeable staff.

"When I go on vacation, I do not take my phone with me and, depending on where I am going, email is not always available," says Leif Jensen, whose Elk Grove Village CPA firm (Leif Jensen and Associates) carries his name.

Like the others, Jensen tells clients when he will be away.

"I have a phenomenal office manager who can handle most things that come up," Jensen says. "If an accounting or IRS issue surfaces, I have an equally phenomenal CPA backing me up. My clients are comfortable knowing that I have backup."

Maybe the best response came from Brian Basilico, president of Aurora-based B2b Interactive Marketing. His response was simple: Treat customers the way you want to be treated.

"Mine is a one-person business," Basilico explains. "I do have vendors and service providers who can keep the flow going smoothly, depending where we are in the project process."

"When I will be gone, I let people know I still am there for them. People expect immediate response, but understand they can get that type of service before and after my trip."

With today's connected devices, staying in touch is not much of a problem, says Jim Mitchell, Mitchell Marketing Management, Arlington Heights.

Still, some advance notice helps. "I generally give a week or two notice and ask clients to let me know of any upcoming deadlines or projects," says Mitchell. "With planning, we can keep things moving without skipping a beat."

Mitchell does try to marshal his time. "If I am traveling on business for a client, I make every effort to stay responsive to other clients and not create delays in their work. If I am on vacation, I stay in touch but do try to protect my time. I'll acknowledge inquiries but, unless there is a significant emergency, will hold off on doing any work until I return."

Stacia Skinner, president of Creative Training Solutions Ltd., Mt. Prospect, has "someone people can call when I am out of town," though response depends on the issue. "Larger issues must go through me, via email or cellphone," Skinner says. Small things others can handle.

"Interesting topic," she adds. "You should have a course of action, just in case."