

# 10 Ways to Launch Your Dream Career

*By Tamara E. Holmes - Essence Magazine*

Are you working on your dream career after your nine-to-five job, but wondering how to take your side gig to the next level? Meet several successful women who turned a part-time pursuit into a full-time focus, and learn strategies to turn your own passion into a profit-making machine.

1. Create a plan. "Don't just suddenly quit your full-time job. First create an exit strategy," says Rhoda Smackum, a career coach and founder of Career by Design in Laurel, Maryland. Write down the goals you must accomplish before you can quit your full-time job, whether it's a specific amount of money your sideline must generate or a certain number of clients you must have. Next write down the steps required for achieving those goals. "Talk it over with colleagues or people who are already doing what you want to do to get an idea if this is realistic," Smackum adds. Most important, give yourself dates for completing each step. If you fall behind, you can always adjust your plan.

2. Shift your priorities. While Alisha Gray-Johnson, 32, of Richmond, worked full-time as a social worker, in her personal time she was growing Messless, her professional organizing business. But in her mind, Messless was always her top concern. "I never thought of Messless as a gig on the side," says Gray-Johnson. "I always thought of my full-time job as the gig on the side." As a result, she was willing to go the extra mile, often working 20 hours per week on top of her full-time duties (and pulling in an additional \$1,000 a month). Be sure to perform well at your regular job so you aren't shown the door before you're ready.

3. Make vacation time pay. Forget the plans to go to the Bahamas. Use vacation time to meet with potential clients instead. "Whenever I had an appointment, I would just take off work so that I really utilized my leave time," says Gray-Johnson. "When I had so many clients that I had used up all my vacation time, I knew it was time to take my business full-time."

4. Maximize your day. Think there aren't enough hours in the day to work full-time while you grow your side gig? Become an early bird or a night owl. Before she opened her shop in 2002, Katrina Rarris-Pinn, 38, owner of Katrina Parris Flowers in New York City, worked her side hustle out of her home and would spend the early morning hours buying flowers at wholesale before clocking in to her main job as a human resources executive. During her lunch hour she often returned clients' calls on her cell phone, and after five, "I would fine-tune the business plan, research or take classes at Brooklyn Botanic Garden," she says.

5. Hire outside help. When Debra L. Mars, 49, of Dallas, launched her promotional merchandise company, Gifted by dezyn, in 1988, she was still working as a marketing executive. With the \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year she was making through her side hustle, Mars hired an employee who was recommended by a colleague to be the public face of the business and take care of the day-to-day obligations. "She could filter all my calls with clients and fill in for me on sales calls," says Mars. "For two years I was a ghost owner." When hiring, get recommendations from people you trust, because reliability and honesty are crucial to a successful relationship, Mars says.

6. Use corporate knowledge. Don't just use your time at your day job. The lessons you learn may help you understand future clients and competitors. When Mars was working as a marketing executive, she was struck by how outside vendors sometimes did not make their promised deadlines. As a result, speed and accountability were two of the ways she set herself apart from the competition when she started selling promotional merchandise to corporations. "Within the first year and a half, I was making about \$2 million in sales," Mars says. "To win corporate clients, identify the customer's most important business goals and objectives, and tie your product and service solutions to the achievement of that company's goals," advises Smackum. Make sure

marketing materials such as letterhead, business cards and brochures are polished and explain clearly the product you sell or service you provide. Also have references willing to vouch for the professionalism of your work, Mars suggests. To find corporate clients, contact local small business associations for information on obtaining minority contracts. And don't be afraid to "pick up the phone and call people you don't know," says Tag Goulet, coauthor of *Dream Careers* and co-CEO of FabJob.com. "Look at each call as simply an introduction of your business-you have a service or product that could possibly help this person and organization."

7. Give freely to generate buzz, while you have the comfort of a steady paycheck, you can afford to gain exposure by giving away products or services. While working full-time as a recruiter and trainer, Tiffany Taylor Smith, 37, gave free workshops to educators as she launched her diversity educational consulting firm, TR Taylor Consulting, in Cranford, New Jersey. Likewise, Parris-Pinn gave away her services-and flowers-to build her clientele. "You have to comp a lot of stuff to get your name out there," she says. Successfully generating buzz and boosting demand is key. "One of the things that gets people moving from doing something on a part-time basis to full-time is they find that more and more people are asking them for it," says Goulet.

8. Pay yourself last. AS long as you're getting a regular paycheck from a job, pump all the profits from your side hustle into the business. Use the money to buy supplies and create marketing materials, then bank the rest. Once you take your hustle full-time, "you might take a loss the first year or so," says Smackum. Bank enough money to stay afloat for six months even if you don't make a dime, she advises.

9. Switchyour hustle. "Say, for example, you are an office worker but you'd like to be a party planner," says Goulet. "You could move into the party planning full-time and do some temporary office work from time to time. Now the office work becomes your side hustle." Along the same lines, check with your employer to see if part-time work is available. That way you can scale back your day job's hours gradually while increasing the amount of time you can devote to the hustle.

10. Make severance pay. Before making any moves, be sure your firm isn't planning to downsize. Before Smith left her job, she'd heard rumors of possible layoffs. "I started praying for a separation package," she says, which would give her a financial cushion. Sure enough, the company soon offered voluntary separation packages. "When the announcement was made, I knew it was time," she says.