

S T A R T U P S**Upstate entrepreneur dials in to virtual office business**By **ADINA GENN**

Some say enthusiastic customers make the best employees. Roger Kahn went a step further, switching from an Champion Office Suites customer in the fall of 2003 to franchise owner of the Garden City site in December of the same year. At the time, the location was three years old.

Kahn discovered Champion Office Suites through a Wall Street Journal ad in which the Boulder, Colo.-based company was seeking franchisees.

He immediately liked the concept, which centers on providing road warriors and home workers with "virtual" office services, including a remote receptionist and conference-room space on an as-needed basis.

Virtual receptionists answer the phones by way of caller-ID technology, then transfer calls and process information per client instruction.

The franchise also rents offices and conference rooms on a monthly, weekly and hourly basis. And it provides a professional mailing address for those who don't have one – most often for clients who work from home.

Kahn, already the owner of Scarsdale-based Lafayette Lease Services, was intrigued. "I came out to Garden City and liked what I saw," he said. "So I signed up."

He was hooked by the very first business call he received. "That client said, 'You have a receptionist now!' It gave my business a totally different image," recalled Kahn, who up until that point had forwarded his home-office calls to his cell phone whenever he went out. The receptionist "handled the call like a champ. All of a sudden, I had a receptionist without paying someone a full-time salary."

Kahn learned that the Garden City franchise had been sold back to the fran-



'SMART-OFFICE STARTUP: When Roger Kahn discovered Champion Office Suites in 2003, he liked the concept immediately and wasted no time snatching up the Garden City franchise.

chisor and was on the selling block again.

"I saw the possibilities," he said, citing three trends, in particular, that could benefit his Long Island franchise operation: an increase in the number of home-based businesses, an increase in the number of traditional companies whose employees work from home once or more a week and an increase in companies seeking off-site services.

"I could have opened a new office," he said, "but I liked the idea of a staff in place. It took the uncertainty out." And this particular franchise on Franklin Avenue, well situated near the Mineola courthouses, was already a hit with lawyers, Kahn said.

Kahn declined to discuss his investment, but according to www.intelligentoffice.com, franchisees typically spend between \$350,000 and \$500,000 per franchise. Kahn said he owns the only Long Island operation, and in a year he has boosted his client roster from 155 to 200.

Services start at \$50, but "most clients

are at the \$175 to \$250 range," depending on the level of service, Kahn said.

Currently the office has six employees, but he plans to increase staff as business grows.

Prior to Kahn's arrival, the Garden City franchise received no real marketing efforts, save for the occasional radio ad, he said. Now he's running radio ads on WABC, WLIE, WFAN and, next week, WBBR, Bloomberg radio. He has joined networking groups, including Long Island Association, LeTip and ExecuLeaders. And he's building by word of mouth too.

Meanwhile, Kahn tailors services to each client. One decorating company, for instance, wants to receive incoming fabric orders by e-mail. A law firm wants messages e-mailed. And several contractors want appointments scheduled.

While he still runs his leasing company, Kahn has big hopes for the future of virtual offices. "I could potentially open up another location," he said.