

SMALL Business Times

Reprinted from September 5, 2008

Prepare to die

Don't be a burden to survivors after your death

You know that death and taxes are about the only sure things in life. We have shrewd estate planners to take care of the taxes when we die. But many of us might be negligent when it comes to sparing our survivors a lot of work it takes to deal with everything else when we're no longer here.

This month, I'd like to deal with the pre-prep issue, thanks to my friends at the North American Trainer Association, a war bird pilot group. Its members think of such things because they routinely fly around in 50-year-old World War II aircraft just for fun!

This is basically common sense stuff. But I'll admit it, when I first saw these recommendations, I hadn't done most of these things.

Now I can say I have. Call this your "what if" or "JIC" (just in case) file, or whatever. Because of identity theft issues, make sure you place this in a safety deposit box or safe, or with your executor or a close family friend.

Cash/Investment Accounts: Maintain records for the past 12 months of transactions. Obviously, if you can do this online, you don't have to worry about saving anything.

Passwords: If you're like me, you have several different passwords. It's a good idea to have them all listed in one place, but not in a text file on your computer and not on a piece of paper in your office where someone can easily steal it. You can find two excellent password management software programs at KeePass.com (free) and RoboForm.com.

Account numbers: Think about how many account numbers you really have: checking/savings, 401Ks, IRAs, mortgage, credit/debit cards, association memberships, etc. They need to be itemized in one file, but not on your computer.

Need-to-know sources/resources: I'm not talking about family members, relatives and friends, who will be contacted as soon as you die. Consider pastors/priests, attorneys, accountants, bankers, investment advisors, your business, customers, vendors, funeral directors,

insurance agents, business stakeholders, primary physician, military (if a vet), and anyone else you want to add to this list. Make a list and provide addresses and phone numbers.

Copies of all life insurance contracts: By the way, are your current listed beneficiaries, including trusts, updated and really current?

Copies of lease agreements: This is one that's easy to overlook. Vehicle leases, property and equipment leases, even animal leases, if applicable, should be itemized.

Asset/liability summaries: If you don't do an annual net worth statement, I highly recommend it. It takes all of one page, and can keep any "surprises" away from the IRS, not to mention your executor.

Copy of your most recent tax return: Also, if you have estimated taxes due, it wouldn't hurt to include the balance for the current tax year – federal and state.

Property taxes due: For your property/properties, an itemized list of payments outstanding, and payments estimated for the current tax year should be in the file.

Email address book: Surprised? It's an easy way to notify lots of folks that we aren't on the planet anymore. However, there needs to be instructions, as with everything else, about how to "address" those in your address book.

Cash: A TEC member friend passed away unexpectedly. Believe it or not, his wife had no cash, and their ATM account was frozen pending verification of death. The couple's law firm is one of the largest in Milwaukee, and they couldn't help. Bottom line: Put some cash aside in an envelope in the safe deposit box. Call it "get by" cash – enough to get by for a week or so for sundries. You name the amount. I put away \$1,000.00.

Living will: This subject has been beaten to

death, I know, but have you looked at your living will recently and are you satisfied with your power of attorney? For example, what instructions do you want your spouse, significant other, or family to follow upon your death? Organ donations? Life support? Burial versus cremation? Memorial service? Obituary?

Estate plan: SBT readers know this is an important document and that the rules of the game are changing pretty quickly. Please don't wait for the new rules to ruin your intentions regarding your estate.

Designating "stuff": This is a hard one when it comes to what our kids and grandkids should inherit. I think it's better to determine this before you die, not after. Asking them what they want is better than not asking at all. I'm personally involved in a situation in which this wasn't done, and siblings have been torn apart as a result.

You know, talking about our death isn't pleasant, regardless of the circumstances. I'm sure that the simplistic viewpoints I've shared with you here do, as I said earlier, reflect common-sense choices. Let me conclude with these thoughts:

- Have you done these things? If not, will you?
- Do you have a good advisor on these matters?
- Do you agree that it's hard to control these things from the proverbial grave?

Hey, the good news? We're all human. We all face the same inevitable consequence in life. And we all have the same power to do something beforehand.

Until next month, thank you for reading, to the end, about this difficult subject.



Harry S. Dennis III is the chairman and CEO of TEC Wisconsin/Michigan. TEC is a professional development group for CEOs, presidents and business owners. He can be reached at 262-821-3340.