

CONNECTIONS

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Working with a Virtual Assistant to Meet Your Goals

BY ANN BROWN

You just sold a fantastic home in an affluent neighborhood and want to let other potential sellers know about it. You decide to send out "Just Sold" postcards to 250 of your client's neighbors.

However, when you look at your schedule for the next couple of days, you realize that between listing appointments, returning phone calls and the weekend's open house preparation, you have no time to spare.

Sound familiar? In real estate, the jobs that help to grow your business have to be done, but the smaller tasks sometimes get pushed to the side.



What's a VA?

Today, many REALTORS® are seeking the help of a virtual assistant (VA), an independent contractor who provides administrative, creative and technical services on a contractual basis from his or her own office.

The VA profession is actually only a few years old. With the growth of the Internet, corporate downsizing, the explosion of telecommuting and changing demographics, these professionals are finding that an increasing number of real estate professionals use their services.

For REALTORS®, the thought of hiring a VA comes with a whole new set of concerns:

- How do I pick a VA?
- What can I expect to pay a VA?
- Do I even need a VA, and where would I find one?

Let's examine these questions one at a time.

Do I Need a VA?

In deciding whether or not to hire a VA, a REALTOR® should take a look at his or her in-box or to-do list. If there are tasks that must be done, but completing these smaller jobs doesn't immediately result in new business, or if an agent is not busy enough to warrant hiring a traditional assistant, then a VA relationship may be beneficial.

For instance, a VA could complete

the previously mentioned postcard mailing in a matter of hours instead of letting it sit on your desk for days or weeks. If you don't get the mailing out within the first week, its effectiveness is lost. Yet, because this type of task doesn't result in new business today, many REALTORS® push it aside and hope they'll get a chance to do it later.

Imagine making one phone call to your VA, explaining the job at

hand and then knowing your postcards will be mailed the next day. A VA can help with many jobs, such as contact management; desktop publishing, including newsletters, brochures and flyers; presentation slides and graphics; travel arrangements; and marketing.

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Where Do I Find One?

Finding a VA isn't as hard as you may think. A simple online search can be conducted to locate one in your area, but an even better source is a fellow REALTOR®.

Ask around to see who other agents are using to get their smaller projects done. Go to your local Board or WCR meeting and see if there are affiliate members who are virtual assistants and give them a call. You can also visit the International Association of Virtual Assistants online at www.ivaa.org to find a qualified VA in your city.

Once you find a VA, you will then want to find out his or her areas of expertise, such as real estate support, Internet or graphic design. A good VA will have no problem referring you to their clients for references. Ask about the VA's quality of work and timeliness of completing tasks, as well as his or her overall attitude.

Find a VA whose personality and objectives in business match yours. If

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you are still a little unsure, start off by giving your new VA a smaller job to complete first. As your relationship builds, you will feel more comfortable in outsourcing more important jobs.

Depending on the job you would like your VA to complete, you can expect a 24- to 48-hour turnaround time for most projects.

What Do I Pay a VA?

A typical VA will charge between \$30 and \$40 per hour. Some are available to do emergency weekend or holiday work, but expect to pay a premium of \$60 to \$80 per hour for those assignments. Many will require a small retainer fee, and some virtual assistants charge per project as opposed to per hour.

Outsourcing work to a VA means you only pay for the services you need at that particular time in your business. In many instances, this can save you thousands over the cost of traditional in-house assistants because a VA is an independent contractor. This means you do not pay employer taxes, insurance and other benefits or spend precious time training someone new.

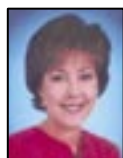
Another benefit is low overhead. A VA will use his or her own computer hardware, software and office equipment and is solely responsible for expenses such as insurance or maintenance, so you do not have to invest in more office space, computers or expensive tech support.

A full-time staff person is seldom 100 percent productive because of

Find a VA whose personality and objectives in business match yours.

down-time between tasks, personal matters and phone calls and the inability of the employer to generate enough work for an on-site assistant. For many REALTORS®, using a VA is a wise investment.

The most important function of a VA is to assume certain tasks that do not require your attention, which in turn allows you to focus on the most important aspect of your business: generating revenue. The VA can be a powerful tool for you and your business by offering you all of the services of a full-time, on-site support person at a fraction of the cost.



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