



UP CLOSE AND

virtual

WHEN IS IT BETTER TO BE HEARD AND NOT SEEN?
FOR MANY AGENTS, A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT PROVIDES THE
HELP WITHOUT THE HASSLE. **By Anne Willoughby**

Ask any REALTOR® how easy it is to find a good on-site assistant and you'll probably be met with a bit of hesitation, rolling of the eyes and a deep sigh. Why? Because, while assistants are seemingly everywhere, a good assistant — one that will provide more long-term relief than stress — seems to be quite elusive.

For many agents, insurance (life,

health, workers' comp and disability), taxes (state, federal, social security and unemployment) and other expenses such as training, equipment, sick and vacation pay make the thought of hiring someone tough. Plus, you actually have to like a person in order to work and speak with them every day. It's no wonder why many agents throw up their hands and convince

themselves that they can do it all themselves.

Why Virtual?

Joan Prout, CRS, ABR, broker/associate with RE/MAX Villa REALTORS® in Jersey City, N.J., remembers feeling the strain of being without an assistant, yet knowing that she needed to do something about it. Labor-intensive duties were taking up a lot of Prout's mental and physical time.

"I would wake up in the middle of the night and try to remember if I had changed something on the MLS or not," she says. Yet Prout hesitated to hire an on-site assistant. She didn't have time to train anyone, and the expense and the thought of office politics made it unappealing. "One of my colleagues in my office jokes that she's trained every assistant in the market," says Prout, who also didn't want to deal with the possibility of eventually losing an assistant to a competitor.

It wasn't until she heard more about the usefulness of virtual assistants (VAs) that she seriously considered getting help. Michael Russer, a speaker/trainer/consultant to the real estate industry, uses VAs himself and travels the country extolling their value.

"Virtual outsourcing is a process of requiring help from real people who speak your language and have the time, talent and desire to help you with your business," he says. "With each new project that comes across your desk, you should ask yourself, 'should I be doing it, or should it be outsourced?' If it's not in your core competency, you should always outsource it," he says. "Your time is worth a lot of money."

After hearing Russer's message three years ago, Prout hired Carrie Gable, who owns RealSupport, Inc. in Palatine, Ill. "My production went up by about 50 percent after being stable for seven years," says Prout, who figures she uses 10 to 15 hours of Gable's time per week. "I figure that every dollar I have paid her netted me at least three. Plus, if she moves, that's okay. If I move, that's okay. If I change offices, no problem. There's no office politics to work around."

For Allyson Hoffman CRS, ABR, a broker/associate with RE/MAX North in Northbrook, Ill., hiring a VA added another dimension to her business. Hoffman has employed a reliable on-

site assistant for 16 years, yet reached a point where she needed someone with specific expertise.

"I wanted help with marketing, and it was becoming too much for me. I had no time to sit down and do it, and I didn't have the skills," she says.

Her solution? Kim Hughes (www.kimhughes.com). Recommended by colleagues, Hughes works for Hoffman from her 300-acre ranch in Mineola, Texas.

"I keep Kim focused on keeping my Web sites content-rich, and I interlink several of my Web sites," Hoffman says. "Kim has been critical, and it has grown my business. Before Kim, my Internet marketing accounted for 15 percent of my business. Now it's 40 percent, and I think that will continue to increase."

Is It Practical?

"As human beings we have to feel comfortable with other peoples' presence — the way they dress, smell, look, etc. — before we even consider their qualifications. It's a big test they have to pass," Russer says. "When someone is working virtually for you, you don't care if they have blue hair and 10 piercings. All you end up caring about is if they can do the job consistently, affordably and ethically. You eliminate that hurdle and you're picking from a bigger pool of applicants since geography isn't a hurdle either."

Practicality is probably the greatest benefit of hiring a VA rather than an on-site assistant. The flexible nature of having a VA — in terms of how many hours a person works and when — allows agents the ability to use a VA as much or as little as necessary without having to pay for the downtime.

Plus, "when you have an on-site assistant, there is a limitation of how much smarter s/he gets at their job. This person is only as smart as you are," Russer says. "A VA that works for many other top producers across the country is getting smarter all the time, and you're the beneficiary."

How Payment Works

Prout pays her VA by the hour. "It works like a phone card," she says. "I'll pay for a specific number of hours and as soon as I get close to using that amount of time up, she'll send me a bill. She's very well paid, but I expect a lot of her."

Hoffman also pays her VA by the

What Can a Virtual Assistant Do For You?

According to Joan Prout, CRS, ABR, anything that doesn't require a license.

- Prepare and send CMAs, listing packages, presentations and closing gifts
- Input listings into Multiple Listing Service (MLS) and handle changes
- Draft advertising copy and promotional materials
- Create fliers and postcards
- Place advertising
- Create virtual tours
- Maintain Web sites
- Create just listed/sold cards
- Input listing into database
- Review and keep track of Web site hits, showing appointments and other activity
- Create, maintain and send activity reports to sellers
- Schedule showings, closings and inspections
- Maintain mailing lists and e-mail databases
- Address and mail open house invitations and thank-you notes
- Mail expired and for sale by owner listing letters
- Assist with organization of agent tours
- Coordinate closings
- Perform other duties for which a license is not required

hour. "I'm paying a lot," she says, "but I'm not just getting one person. I'm getting Kim and her whole team for that." For instance, one of Hoffman's Web sites needed to be completely redesigned. Her VA subcontracted the project out, and the expertise has helped her create Web logs, pod casts and higher recognition for her business. "That's all Kim. I couldn't have done it, and I'm getting a lot more done in less time."

Transaction coordination and listing marketing coordination can also be outsourced to a VA on a per-transaction basis, says Russer — and will run anywhere from \$250 to \$400 per transaction.

"I was initially hesitant in getting a VA," Hoffman says. "It took me about a year to make the mental jump to get there. But when I saw what I was getting from it, I started using her more. It's been two years now, and I have complete trust in her abilities."

How to Find — and Work with — a VA

Both Prout and Hoffman found their VAs online. "I started to check out the VAs that had Web sites, and I was bowled over with what they said they could do," Prout says. "I put together a long e-mail — I went into detail about the types of technology and software I use, the part of the business that I love and the parts that I hate. And rather than submitting an RFP, I sent the e-mail out to the first six VAs who had real Web sites and real Web addresses — not just an 'AOL' address."

Within a couple of days, Prout had several qualified responses. Next up: phone interviews and a signed 30-day contract. It was that easy.

As her client care manager, Prout's VA handles everything from setting up appointments and subsequent follow-up, weekly status reports, Web site development, advertising, listing maintenance, printing and sending pre-listing packages, and flier design — anything that doesn't require a New Jersey real estate license.

"I actually provide my clients many more services now than I could have before," she says. "I just didn't have the time."

An 800-number keeps her VA easily connected to potential and current cli-

A VIRTUAL ASSISTANT (VA)
IS AN INDEPENDENT
ENTREPRENEUR PROVIDING
ADMINISTRATIVE, CREATIVE
AND/OR TECHNICAL SERVICES.
USING ADVANCED
TECHNOLOGICAL MODES OF
COMMUNICATION AND DATA
DELIVERY, A PROFESSIONAL VA
ASSISTS CLIENTS IN HIS/HER
AREA OF EXPERTISE FROM
HIS/HER OWN OFFICE ON A
CONTRACTUAL BASIS.

Source: The International Virtual Assistants Association

ents without anyone knowing that she's thousands of miles away, and overnight mail gets pre-listing packages and forms where they need to be without Prout even lifting a finger.

"My job is to talk to sellers and negotiate contracts — the dollar-intensive stuff," she says. "Everything else I delegate."

Hoffman favors her once-a-week conference call with her VA. "We really don't have to do this, but it's my way of having a more personal side of the relationship," she says, "and it lets me catch up on the long-range projects she's working on."

Delegating is key to making a VA/agent relationship work well, Russer says. "Top producers tend to be control freaks, yet true control is not doing it

yourself, but making sure the job gets done," he says.

What Are The Downsides?

If it all sounds too good to be true, it's important to keep in mind that no assistant is perfect. Time zone differences can cause confusion every so often, and errands that require an assistant's physical presence are obviously not going to be eliminated.

Making sure you hire an honest and ethical VA is critical, since you won't be there to track their hours. "The selection process is really important," Hoffman says. "Check references and get an endorsement from someone you respect."

Also, consider entering a short-term contract that is cancelable with a 30-day notice, so you're not tied into a long-term relationship. Find out what resources they'll need to get started.

"One thing that is absolutely critical is how your VA determines who they'll take on as clients," Hoffman says. "You don't want them to take on anyone in your marketplace." A simple non-compete agreement can be drawn up to put your mind at ease. "The nice part about that is that she gets ideas from other agents in other parts of the country," Hoffman says. "We've actually given referral business to each other, too. There's a synergy there."

So whether you go with an on-site or virtual assistant, the old adage still rings true: If you don't have an assistant, you are one. "The biggest mistake that a real estate agent can face is that they feel they need to do everything themselves," Russer says. "Every time you do something outside of your core competency, you'll pay top dollar for mediocre results. It's that simple: You are underperforming if you're not selling or listing." ■

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Find A Virtual Assistant

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