

When Is the Right Time to Hire a Virtual Assistant?

(published in the Romance Writers Report, March 2011)

What Is a Virtual Assistant?

A Virtual Assistant (VA) is an administrative professional who provides secretarial, marketing, and support services from a remote location, usually her home. I often tell people that I do secretarial work from home, but it's so much more than that. Being a VA uses all of my skills – administrative, graphic design, website maintenance, writing – in a way that no job has ever done before. I know a little bit about a lot of different things, and my author clients benefit from that.

VAs aren't just for best-selling authors. Midlist and category authors can benefit from the services of an efficient VA, as well. A VA can handle all of the "time sucks" that prevent you from writing and connecting with your fans ... and from spending time with your family. Not only that, but a VA can help you sell more books.

Promotion

The days are long gone when an author can expect her publisher to handle the promotion side of things. As an author, you are in partnership with your publisher in getting the word out about your book. This is the area where a VA can be of the greatest help to most authors.

"By acting as the point person for marketing," says VA Joni Snowden of *A Novel/Space*, "the VA will coordinate creation of the website, media kit, promotional items such as bookmarks, press releases, blogs, podcasts, author participation in virtual book tours, book signings, etc."

Here are a few of the areas where a VA could help you with your marketing efforts:

- *Social Networking* – Many authors have a presence on Facebook, Twitter, Goodreads, and other social networking sites, but may not be taking full advantage of the promotion that these sites offer. A VA can help you to link your Facebook and Twitter accounts so that every time you post a new discussion to your Facebook page, it feeds your Twitter account. You should still check in on both sites to respond to comments, of course. Your fans want to connect with you; that connection is what puts the "social" in "social networking."

A VA can also set up FBML pages to help promote your books on Facebook. An example of an FBML page can be seen on Kate Carlisle's Facebook page, www.facebook.com/katecarlislebooks. At the top of Kate's page, click on the tabs to see how Kate's fans can easily find out more about her books and even buy them online.

- *Website* – While most VA's are not website designers, a VA with writing skills can help you create content for your website that will keep readers coming back for more.

Susan Mallery, best-selling author of *Already Home* (Mira Books, April 2011) and the ongoing series of Fool's Gold romances, asked me to work with her website designer to create www.FoolsGoldCA.com. On the Fool's Gold website, you'll find a history of the town going back to circa 1300, a map of the town, and regular updates on what's happening in the characters' lives, all of which I created so that Mallery could focus on writing more best-selling books.

Designing a website is art; updating it is not, so many web designers limit the number of updates they will make to your site. A VA with some website skills can help in this area, as well. Mallery writes a weekly Dear Reader letter but sends it to me so that I can format and upload it.

- *Review Requests* – A VA can contact book bloggers to line up reviews on your behalf. It's not difficult work, but it is one more thing that takes time away from your writing.

Harlequin Intrigue author Dana Marton hired a VA to help line up reviews of her October release, *The Spy Who Saved Christmas*, and was thrilled with the increase in book sales. "I'm a true believer in the power of promotion," she says.

- *Blog Tours* – Blogging can be a fantastic way for authors to connect with new readers. A VA can coordinate a blog tour for you, setting up visits, helping you to brainstorm possible topics related to your books, and reminding you when you need to go online to respond to comments. (You still get to do the fun part!)

Regan Hastings, author of *Visions of Magic*, is a *USA TODAY* best-seller under a different name. Her blog tour to promote the first book of her Awakening series of paranormal romances centered around the mystery of "Who is Regan Hastings?" Having a VA approach bloggers helped Regan to maintain the mystique and drive readers to www.reganhastings.com to guess her true identity for the chance to win a prize.

- *Advertising Campaigns* – A VA can set up and monitor pay-per-click ad campaigns for you on Facebook, Google, and other sites. She can do legwork for you to find out the requirements and cost of advertising on various book blogs. If your VA has some graphic design skills, she can create the ads for you, too.
- *Bookseller Outreach* – VA Kim Castillo encourages her clients to send book release information to her extensive database of chain and independent bookstores. Your VA can build a similar database for you, then create, order, and send off your mailings.

- *Marketing Materials* – Bookmarks, sticky pads, pens and other goodies make great little gifts for readers at conferences and book signings. Your VA can help brainstorm giveaways, get quotes from various vendors, place the order, and ship the goodies to conference coordinators.

Secretarial

- *Sort E-mail* – The authors I work for love responding to fan mail and would never want to give that up. However, a VA can sort your e-mail to get rid of junk mail and leave you with the part you enjoy. Your VA can also check for time-sensitive messages so that you can focus on writing without worrying about missing something that needs an immediate response. That will help you stay away from e-mail until after you have finished your writing for the day.
- *Research* – Sometimes a minor research question gets in the way of you moving forward with your story. Let your VA wade through all the search results that are not on point and send you only the information that is germane to your question.
- *Character Bible* – Susan Mallery is contracted through nine Fool's Gold books so far, and there may be more beyond that. (We can only hope!) That's a lot of characters to keep straight. If you're writing an ongoing series, your VA can create a character bible for you to make sure that your heroine's eyes don't suddenly change color midway through a series.
- *Printable Backlist* – It's easy to keep track of your backlist when it consists of a handful of books. But many authors – especially category authors – have written well into the double digits. Readers want to know the title and order of publication of each of your books. You can create a plain list of your own, or you can ask your VA to create one that is attractive and engaging. Remember, everything you give to readers makes an impression about your professionalism.
- *Contest Coordination* – Contests are a powerful way to gain readers' attention, but they can be inordinately time consuming. A VA can track entries for you, draw a random winner, and mail the prizes.

Pros and Cons of a Virtual Assistant vs. a Traditional Assistant

If you're looking for someone to water your plants when you're away, then a VA is probably not for you. You may never even meet your VA face to face. On the plus side, you aren't limited to the local talent pool. Even if you live in a remote corner of a national forest, you can find a VA with amazing technological skills. It's also not uncommon for authors to hire multiple VAs with different specialties.

“The key difference is flexibility,” says VA Lauren Hidden of Hidden Helper. “If an author needs 10 hours of help one week and 5 hours the next, a Virtual Assistant can accommodate that, whereas a traditional assistant may have periods of dead time the author is paying for.”

The downside to this, of course, is that the reverse is also true. When you hire a traditional assistant with a set salary or a set number of hours, you know what to expect. With a Virtual Assistant, you must have a frank discussion about your budget so you’re not surprised when the invoice arrives.

One of the greatest advantages of hiring a VA is that she is not your employee. She’s an independent contractor, self-employed. That means that you don’t have to deal with payroll taxes or workers’ comp insurance. She is responsible for her own office equipment and expenses.

How Much Does a Virtual Assistant Charge?

Each VA is an independent businesswoman and sets her own rates. My rate is \$35 per hour. Others charge \$50, \$75, \$20, \$15. During my research, I even saw \$5 per hour quoted online, but honestly – how professional do you think an assistant might be who charges less than she would make working at McDonald’s? Many VAs offer a discount for large-scale projects and monthly retainers. You and your VA should discuss her rates and services in advance – and your budget. Don’t be afraid to set limits!

How to Find a Virtual Assistant

By far the best way to find any professional is through word of mouth. Ask your friends for recommendations, post your request on writer loops. Remember that you aren’t geographically limited, so your VA can live anywhere with a fast internet connection. In fact, it could be advantageous for you to hire someone from out of state. I’m in Texas, and I must charge state sales tax to clients who also live here.

It costs nothing to post a Request for Proposal (RFP) to IVAA.org, the website of the International Virtual Assistants Association. The submission process couldn’t be easier, and your RFP is emailed directly to IVAA members who will contact you with an estimate.

I recommend starting with one small project to test the waters. Find out for yourself whether your VA has the skills you need, and whether she follows through on her promises. Limit your commitment in the beginning to give both of you the opportunity to determine whether you’re a good fit.

Hiring a VA for the first time might feel strange, but once you do, you might never go back. A professional Virtual Assistant can be a powerful ally as you build your career.

Bio: Jenel Looney has a Masters in Writing Popular Fiction, a real estate certificate, a paralegal certificate, a B.A. in Spanish, and years of indecision in a variety of jobs and countries. Her current career as a Virtual Assistant makes use of every skill she gained. Although she is not currently accepting new clients, she would love to hear from fellow

author VAs for networking and sharing ideas. Write to her at jenel@hometowngeorgetown.com.