



Outsourcing Marketing, Accounting and More

by Miguel Berger, CRB, GRI

I am a bit of a rarity in the real estate business. Most broker-owners have a background in sales or in management. My background is a little different. It started like many others. In 1994, I was working as a salesperson, but then I discovered the Internet. I found my passion. Soon thereafter, I was managing a couple of offices and creating the whole technology plan for the entire company. I left my position and started a consulting firm for technology and real estate. I quickly realized that most brokerages didn't recognize the importance of technology to this industry's future. In October 2001, I decide to open my own brokerage and enjoy the fruits of my own understanding of what an important and profitable tool technology can be in the real estate industry. I knew my aptitude with technology would be a real advantage. I was right.

In a little more than three years, my brokerage has grown from just two people to 26 agents. With current figures, our gross sales volume this year should reach \$60 million. Technology skills have been a real asset, but I know that another key factor to this success is my willingness to let go. I hire other people who are experts in their field to do what they do best. I don't try to do it all.

Combining technology and my ability to delegate has led me to outsourcing key business functions and has helped to leverage the business. It has enabled us to accomplish a lot with a little. Perhaps because of my technology background, I am a real fan of virtual assistants and offsite specialists. I currently use three (one for the Web, one for marketing, one for accounting) and am interviewing for a fourth (for relocation). My initial reason for outsourcing was a simple one: Even though these specialists typically charge \$70 to \$100 per hour, they are the most cost-effective way to get what I needed done. (Note: most general VAs and free-

lancers don't charge this much—those that are just beginning can be much cheaper—but they don't have the skills you seek.)

When I first opened, I needed to make an impact in my market area, but I couldn't afford a local public relations or marketing firm. Virtual assistants were just beginning to make their mark in the industry, and I was comfortable with the idea. To be happy using virtual assistants, you can't be a micro-manager; you have to see the "big picture". I don't like to be managing people all the time. I don't want to work with people who need hand-holding. I prefer that they have their own initiative. I look for people who will understand my thinking, get the task down and deliver on time.

When I first opened, I needed a company brochure, a customized quarterly newsletter and a continuously updated Web site. So I looked for a virtual assistant with a good marketing background. I believe in specialists. I don't buy the line that one person can do it all. I know I can't!

I quickly discovered that a good virtual assistant brings many advantages to the table, in addition to lower-than-conventional cost.

Opportunity to try them out. Right off the bat, the first benefit is that you can try out a virtual assistant on a small project and see how it works. When you think about the amount of time you spend interviewing employees, training them, and trying to make a go of it when they don't first work out, the little-or-no initial commitment is a huge plus.

Minimizing management time. While some people might miss the interaction and give-and-take of having someone in the office, I don't. In fact, I appreciate the fact that outsourcing my projects forces efficiency and reduces inefficiencies. When someone is being paid by the hour and only gets paid when the job is done, they

develop the skill of managing you. My marketing specialist chases me down, gently hounds me for information when needed, keeps me on track and helps me meet deadlines. By the same token, we don't waste any time chit-chatting over the water cooler.



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Availability and flexibility. A virtual assistant can extend your day and improve your productivity, giving you greater availability and flexibility. I'm on the East Coast but my Web specialist is on the West Coast. That means if I am working on a transaction in the evenings, she's still within her normal working hours.

Many independent specialists are also flexible. Once, a reporter called me after 5 p.m. asking for a TV interview the next morning. I needed to pull together some facts about the company quickly. All it took was one phone call to my marketing specialist (she gave me her private number for just such situations and opportunities) and two and a half hours later the reporter had what he needed even though it was close to 9 p.m.

Protection from competitors. By using a VA who is across the country, I protect my intellectual assets, my ideas. I don't want my agents or staff to be lured away by a competitor, and I know no matter how loyal someone is, more money is a great enticement. When key staff go, one's ideas go with them. And that's not good when they are just going across the street to another brokerage. Professional outsourcing specialists will not accept assignments from competitive clients—in real estate, that's usually a geographic proximity issue—they consider it a conflict of interest.

A broader perspective. On the other hand, when you deal with a good VA, he or she can bring ideas to you based on experiences in working with other clients, both in and out of real estate. This is a huge benefit. I get ideas from California, Hawaii, all over. I appreciate knowing what's going on in other parts of the country and certainly don't mind my ideas being shared there.

Currently, I continue to outsource marketing, including creation of company brochures, our quarterly printed newsletter and Web site updating and maintenance. I now count my accountant as a virtual accountant since we never meet; we just e-mail files back and forth or post them on the accountant's Web site. He prepares payroll and quarterly taxes, reviews our QuickBooks files every quarter and prepares tax returns. Until recently, I had a third VA handling relocation tasks. But she simply didn't have the drive and initiative to be truly virtual so we parted company. That's easier too when the relationship is virtual! I currently am searching for a replacement.

With outsourcing specialists and virtual assistants on my team, I can relax a little more. I can focus on what's at hand, knowing that they are working for my benefit and that will call me when they need additional information, have a brilliant idea or see an opportunity that would benefit me. It's like having my marketing department, my Internet management group, my financial officer and my relocation expert in another office. They aren't underfoot; they don't use my resources or require considerations for expanding my physical plant. They do promote my business, keep my approach fresh and help me to stay on track with the projects I define as priority. And, they are always a phone call or an e-mail away. ■

How to Select an Offsite Provider

Always require and check references. Check every single one.

Don't hire a generalist. Outsourcing specialists are a benefit to your company only if they bring the specific skills you need. You can hire generalists for onsite work or use temp agencies as needed for general or clerical work.

Hire people who work full-time. Part-timers only dedicate a few hours a day or a week to your needs, and you will split that with any other clients they may have.

Get information. Ask about background and real-life experience in the areas you need and a history of delivering those services via digital means. Consider and weigh formal education, professional experience, longevity in business and client references. Check into the certification requirements if you seek certified individuals.

Recognize that you get what you pay for. Rates will vary, but your end cost is what matters. Recognize that specialists may accomplish in 15 minutes what it could take two hours or more for a beginner to accomplish—and the pros will deliver a better end product.

Do they seem too eager? If so, you may not want them. Hungry often = new or less than experienced. Sometimes you strike gold with a wonderfully experienced newcomer, but often your projects are merely their training ground.

Do they interview YOU? Most professional providers will. If they aren't asking questions to help you define how you see their role in your business, you should be concerned. Excellent outsourcing providers ask excellent questions.

Do they educate you about this way of working? If you are new to outsourcing, most professionals will take a few minutes to ascertain your level of comfort and will help to explain to you how it works, and how they (or someone they recommend) may help you.

Are they busy? Most professional providers of a certain caliber have a full client load. You know the old saying, "If you want something done, ask the person who is busy" -- not the one just standing there. They accept only the "cream-of-the-crop" new clients — and only those they believe they can help.

Don't be offended if you are referred on. Most professionals will send you to another provider if they don't have the time in their schedule or if they don't have the specialized services they feel you need. Professional referrals will help you find a good match. Someone in this business is careful about referring work to others. It puts their own reputation on the line. Not every referral is a perfect match, but your chances are improved when a professional outsourcing specialists makes a recommendation.

Source: www.remoteprofessionals.com