

What is a Virtual Assistant – Part 3

August 1, 2012 By [Geraldin](#) • [4 Comments](#)

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So far in this series of virtual assistant interviews, we have talked to Janet Barclay, who specializes in **blog support**, and Angel Lebak, who focuses on **social media marketing**. This week's guest is Ruth Martin of Maplewood Virtual Assistance. Let's find out how Ruth helps other small business owners.

x-x-x

GT: Ruth, how long have you been a virtual assistant?

RM: Thanks so much for having me here today, Geraldin. I've been working virtually for nearly 13 years. For a few years I didn't realize that others served their customers in this way – virtually, never setting foot in their office. I'd been working as an independent contractor under my personal name for several local businesses – working from my home-based office and utilizing email for project pick-up and delivery. While browsing through the course registry for my local community college I saw a course titled, *Becoming a Virtual Assistant*. I'd realized that *this* is what I'd been doing all along. I was eager to meet others who were doing the same thing so I signed up for the online course. That course opened my eyes to how large of an industry this is – spanning every corner of the world. It wasn't long after that I jumped onboard with getting a full online presence developed, expanding my marketing, and joining industry associations. My 20+ years of marketing and project management skills were being pulled together for maximum impact to work for me in ways I'd not imagined *before* reading that registry. It was full steam ahead.



GT: What types of day-to-day tasks do small businesses most often decide to delegate or outsource?

RM: Typically, the kinds of tasks that aren't direct, first-line revenue generators. These details and supportive administrative duties must be done to keep everything in check and running smoothly, but aren't required to be done by upper management. I often work with creative types who have an idea but need assistance in coming up with exact steps to bring this from idea to developed project. In any given day you may find me working on emailing, scheduling, handling correspondence, working on the bones (or implementation) of a marketing campaign, or internet research.

GT: At what point does it make sense for someone to hire a VA?

RM: I believe there are three pivotal deciding factors: 1) at the *bursting point*, 2) when a specific skill is lacked, or 3) when you want fast business growth. First, the bursting point comes when keeping track of the backend details prevents you from bringing in new customers, from product development, and keeps you stagnant in your business. You work hard daily but can't see yourself moving forward because you're trying to do it all. It's time to bring on support.

Secondly, it's typically more cost effective to hire for skills you don't have rather than shift your time and focus to learn something that you won't be doing daily and could be handled in less time and more efficiently by using an expert. The time taken to learn, practice, and make mistakes can be replaced by hiring the skill set you're seeking.

And lastly, virtual assistants are known for keeping their clients on track, focused, and driven towards reaching their goals. Suddenly you're working with a VA (a like-minded business owner who understands what it takes to operate a business) and you have some accountability for keeping projects in the pipeline. For taking planned steps forward towards your goals. Several of my clients have expressed how hiring my business to support them in their efforts has moved them to the next level and attained higher income earnings. They are no longer shouldering things alone but have an expert level of support in place and can now focus their energies and interests on other areas of the business.

GT: A lot of small business owners have trouble delegating tasks they're used to doing themselves. How do you help them to let go?

RM: It can be hard to let go when you've been the one-person-show since the beginning. It helps when this person comes to you as a referral from a friend. They can see how their colleague has benefited from your services and will find comfort knowing you'll be treating them with the same quality and attention.

Sometimes we find beginning with a small project to test the waters and build trust is a good approach. As the client experiences reliable consistent work they will open up more and rely on more and more support services to streamline their business practices.

GT: How many clients do you currently have?

RM: Geraldin, that's a hard question to answer, simply because the number varies based on the client's needs during a specific month. I work with monthly retainer clients (keeping this group to just a handful since we work very closely during any given month), project clients that drop by for a solo task that has definitive start/finish dates, and on occasion as a subcontractor to other virtual colleagues who may need a helping hand for a time-sensitive project.

Glancing at the map I keep on my office wall to pinpoint client locations across the U.S. and Canada, I'd guess I've connected with fifty clients since developing my online presence in 2007. Many of my clients have been with me long-term, between four and six years. I'm happy to say that the majority are repeat users of these services.

GT: How do you stay in touch with your clients?

RM: Email is my number one way for communicating. I enjoy having a document of our conversation and task list which helps in clarifying the various aspects of a project. From time to time we may have a Skype text chat/live call or an actual phone call.

You may be surprised to learn that I have clients I've worked with that I've never had a conversation outside of email. One of my longest on-going clients has been with me for six years and we've only spoken on the phone twice but we burn up the email lines nearly daily.

GT: What do you like best about being a virtual assistant?

RM: It's immensely satisfying to be a small part in helping others achieve their business goals and be an essential part of their support system. I enjoy knowing I've made a difference in their day and how they are able to run their business. That's not to say the other perks such as flexibility in planning my schedule, being able to control my earning's ceiling, and having no barriers to limit my creativity in my own business aren't amazing.

GT: What is one tech tool you just can't live without?

RM: Great question, Geraldin. Because my business relies so much on email I must have my Microsoft Outlook. This houses not only my Maple email address but the POP3 accounts of my clients' email addresses. I use this for RSS feeds, contact lists, task reminders, calendar management, and love the form templates for frequently used email messages. For the way I like to work, Outlook has it all.

My favorite online resource is Hootsuite. Working from this dashboard keeps me in touch with my social media sites, allows for easy automation of posts, and keeps the stat analytics at my fingertips.

*Ruth Martin, aka the **Details Diva**, is the owner of Maplewood Virtual Assistance, an online business support services firm with a focus on marketing, writing, project management and administrative support. Her clients are creative types who relish developing products and services but can't be bothered and weighed down with handling all the details. To learn more about MaplewoodVA's services or to subscribe to her newsletter, **In the Details: Looking at your business with new eyes**, visit [her website](#) or [connect with her on Facebook](#).*



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Ruth Martin says:
August 1, 2012 at 1:56 pm

Geraldin, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me about being a virtual assistant and how a VA helps a small business owner. I truly appreciate being able to share a bit about how virtual assistants operate and about my business.

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Katherine Ortiz says:
August 2, 2012 at 1:23 am

Love this! I have been in business as a VA for almost 3 yrs and I have to say, you have taught me a few things in how to help my business grow 😊 Thank you! I would like to add also that I have learned as a VA that one way to get the experience I need to gain confidence of my clients, is to subcontract out for other VA's and gain experience from them. 😊
I do agree with you also though that another way to gain their confidence is to do a small project to start, then move up from there once you have show them how you work.
Thanks again!

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Mary H Ruth says:
August 2, 2012 at 6:26 pm

Great interview, Ruth! Especially like your breakdown of when it makes sense to hire a VA. The way you put it seems like a great way to organize a VA website – around those 3 common business needs. And certainly it's a concise way to explain your services!

Keep up the excellent work, madam!

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August 1, 2012 at 5:43 pm

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