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## Should You Outsource Your Online Presence?

You can save time and money by leaving social media marketing to the pros.

By Lydia Dishman | July 07, 2009

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Between blogging, tweeting, Facebooking and updating a LinkedIn profile, it's a wonder how a business owner has any time to answer e-mails and phone calls, much less run a company. But the time invested in [social networking](#) is well spent in this age where maintaining a social media presence can be a necessary piece of a successful marketing strategy.

Trouble is, as the number of platforms grows, so does the time it takes to feed and groom each account. Not to mention the front-end investment of setting everything up.

For those caught up in a social media blitz--and those contemplating taking the plunge--why not consider outsourcing? A virtual assistant can tackle those time-consuming tasks.

### What Can a Social Media Virtual Assistant Do?

Many administrative professionals who provided support services such as correspondence, search engine optimization and event planning via the internet are now expanding to include social media. Now they can help with everything from recommending the right SM platforms and setting up profiles, to finding potential clients and [networking](#) groups and maintaining communication with them.

### Conduct a Cost/Benefit Analysis

Busy [business](#) owners may be tempted to add those social media duties to an existing employee's responsibilities. But Kimberly LeRiche of JK Virtual Office Resources cautions that keeping a personal profile on Facebook is very different than understanding how it can be used for branding.

"Unless they already have an employee who is well-versed in social media for marketing and increasing online visibility, the only advantage would be that they already know the business," she says

Another advantage is [cost savings](#). The business owner can save hours trying to add widgets to blogs or searching for relevant industry links and put them back into running the show.

LeRiche points out SM virtual assistants usually charge by the hour, only for the time spent working. Though average hourly rates vary, a 2007 survey from the Virtual Assistant Networking Organization lists median fees between \$30 and \$40 and information from AssistU indicates rates can go up to \$70 per hour depending on specializations and certifications.

The hidden costs of full-time staff disappear also. Business owners won't have to pay for employment taxes, benefits, office space or equipment. If the relationship with the SM virtual assistant doesn't work out, their contract can

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"A virtual assistant is also a business owner," LeRiche says. "They often view themselves as a partner in the success of their client's business." She adds that this dynamic creates an entirely different working relationship than the one between an employee and an employer.

#### Have a Plan

If analysis favors hiring an assistant, it is time to think about goals. LeRiche says it is important to determine if help is needed beyond creating and maintaining profiles, such as implementing an overall social media strategy. "Having an idea of what they want the SM assistant to do will help guide them to the person with the right skills, qualifications and knowledge."

She says business owners should be comfortable delegating and communicating consistently. "It can typically take between 60 and 90 days for an assistant to fully integrate and understand the client and their business so it's important for them to be prepared to provide information and be responsive during the early days of the working relationship."

#### Find the Right SM Virtual Assistant

Dawn Pigoni, owner of Be Social Worldwide, says one of the best ways to investigate a potential SM virtual assistant is by checking that person's existing social media profiles. "They need to show that they are participating in conversations and providing value," Pigoni says, adding that they should also have excellent references. Active participation is the way for any business to grow quality content, Pigoni says, and if the virtual assistant is already involved, they are more likely to be able to do the same for the business.

Chris Brogan, president of New Media Labs, believes the assistant should understand the operations and online etiquette of the top social media sites, as well as the mechanics of maintaining a blog and other current tools. For novice users, Brogan advises asking for past results. "If the results simply involve using the tools themselves, skip them. Ask them to show business objectives that were met by their efforts," he says.

Brogan also says the assistant should know when not to use certain tools. "This is worth more than someone who makes a business jump through every hoop like they're checking boxes," he says.

#### Avoid Phony "Experts"

"Unfortunately the rapid rise of social media has seen an equally rapid increase in the number of experts, gurus and evangelists," Pigoni says. "If someone has to call themselves a guru, there is a good chance they are not."

LeRiche recommend SM virtual assistants who clearly present themselves as business owners. Ask if they do this full time or in addition to working another job, and find out if they have clear policies and pricing structures.

Pigoni adds that having certification from the International Virtual Assistant Association shows a commitment to the industry standards.

#### Put Your Best Face Forward

Opinions vary as to who should be creating the social media content. Lon Safko, author of *The Social Media Bible*, says he had an intern do the administrative set up for a lot of his accounts. However, he says, "Social media is about authenticity, sincerity, and transparency. Having someone write your blogs and tweets can be dangerous unless you are honest about it."

Safko says it can be done if an SM virtual assistant is open about the relationship, or if a busy executive dictates ideas into a digital recorder and the assistant transcribes them directly into blog posts.

Whether going it alone, or with the help of a virtual assistant, Howard Lindzon, entrepreneur and creator of Wallstrip, says, "We are in 'Day One' of social media and your customers are now everywhere. Knowing how to leverage the tools gives you an edge."

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