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Certified News

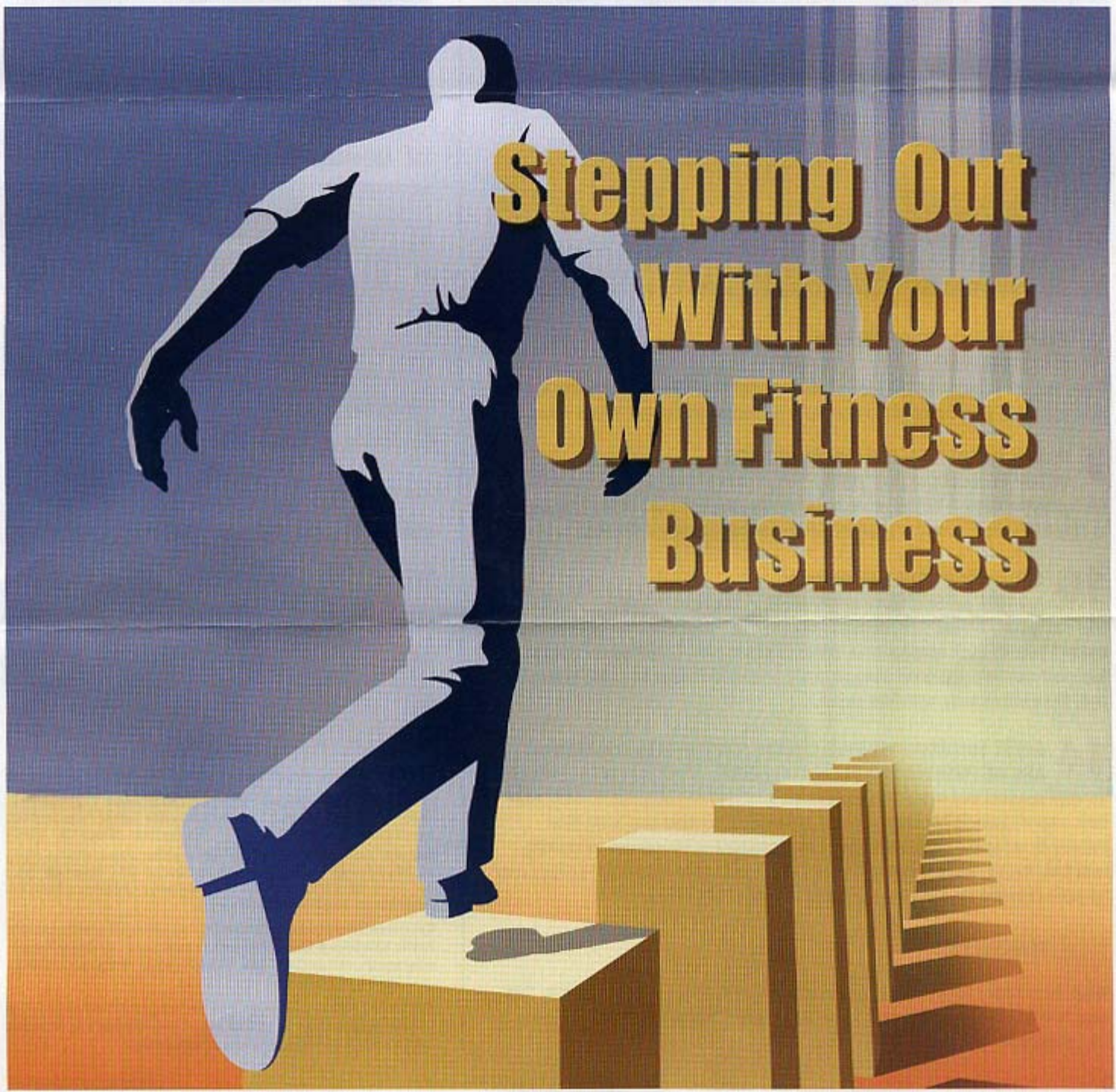
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Stepping Out With Your Own Fitness Business

BY AMANDA VOGEL, M.A.

Get it Done With the Help of a Virtual Assistant

It's 6:00 a.m. and Trainer Joe is awake. In the hour before his first client, he answers e-mails, pays bills online, prepares invoices (while eating breakfast), updates his Web site and organizes programs for the day's clients. At the gym, he frantically catches up on voice-mail between sessions. During lunch, he rushes home to check e-mail and do Internet research.

Like many busy fitness pros, Trainer Joe could use an assistant—but one that doesn't take up desk space in his home or at the gym. Enter the virtual assistant. Find out how having one can help you grow a bigger, more profitable fitness business in less time and, more importantly, with less stress.

What is a Virtual Assistant?

A virtual assistant (VA) is an independent contractor (not a company employee) who delivers administrative services, skills and support to entrepreneurs and business managers. They communicate with their clients through the phone, e-mail, fax, mail, online messaging and more, typically from a home office. "If the request can be made online, it can be done by a VA," according to Tawnya Sutherland, founder of the Virtual Assistant Networking Association (VANA) based in Surrey, British Columbia.

Most VAs specialize in one or more areas, such as bookkeeping, marketing, computer software, technology, Web design and maintenance, and customer service, to name a few. Many worked as secretaries, assistants or office managers in a former job. You may hire a VA to help you complete a short-term project, such as integrating a new computer system, or to handle ongoing tasks, such as responding to e-mails, bill payment, bookkeeping and customer orders.

Virtual assistants are small business owners. Their "virtual" appeal lies in the fact that they don't have to live in your city or state/province. In fact, you might never meet face-to-face with your VA.

What Can a VA Do for You?

The idea of a VA sounds promising on paper, but how does having a VA help you in the fitness industry, especially if he or she resides nowhere near you and your customers. The benefits depend on the scale of your business and the tasks you need accomplished.

Most medium and large companies have at least a handful of employees on payroll. Contracting work to a VA takes the place of hiring yet another employee, such as an office assistant or marketing manager. "The two biggest reasons [to hire a VA] are for skills needed that the company doesn't have in-house and to save money," says Sutherland. The fee for a VA varies, but the average rate is \$30 to \$50 per hour. Of course, some charge more, some less. A virtual assistant may command a higher hourly rate than a full-time staffer, but having a VA can still be more cost-effective when you eliminate overhead expenses, such as equipment and supplies, desk space, health benefits and vacation pay.

What's more, virtual assistants generally charge by the minute. "When you pay a VA for eight hours of work, you get eight hours of work," says Sutherland. "With an employee, you pay for break times, water cooler chit-chat, phone calls, bathroom breaks, late starts and early departures."

Fitness pros who work independently may not have employees, so a VA doesn't save money in overhead costs; in fact, it's an added business expense. But one that's well worth paying, says Joey Atlas, M.S., an exercise physiolo-



gist, book author and creator of multiple fitness DVDs. Atlas, who is based in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla., utilizes a VA to help make his business larger. "The [money] invested in the services of a VA allows me to spend time doing things that bring back several times [the VA's] hourly rate of pay," he says.

Jim Labadie, a busy fitness entrepreneur and owner of TrainAndGrowRich.com in Jupiter, Fla., hired a part-time VA to manage everything from customer orders and bill payments to sending reminders about clients' birthdays. "If I was spending hours trying to maintain my books or dealing with customer-service issues I'd never have time to grow my business," says Labadie. "Because of my virtual assistant, I have more free time to do what I want, whether it's taking time off or taking time to promote my businesses and find ways to make them more profitable."

This is the biggest benefit for independent fitness pros: A VA saves precious time. If you long to spend more hours training clients and less time on administrative tasks, a VA can help you satisfy this goal. "I no longer check e-mails every four minutes because I don't have to worry about them piling up," says Atlas. "My VA handles them at certain times each day. I can let calls go to voicemail because I know she will retrieve them and take care of the messages just as [effectively] as I would."

As the saying goes, time is money. "Having [a VA] handle the day-to-day tasks has freed me up to focus on marketing the business and making it easier for prospects and potential clients to find me and the products and services I offer," says Atlas. "On the personal side," he adds, "it has made a difference in keeping my free time 'free.' I am more relaxed knowing that someone is handling the small but important issues that are crucial to my business."

How to Start Working with a VA

One clue that it's time to enlist the services of a VA is when you constantly focus on the minutiae of your business. "Keep a journal for a week, recording exactly how you spend your time," says Labadie. Then evaluate what tasks someone else could be doing on your behalf.



What a Virtual Assistant (VA) Can Do for You

Wondering how a VA can help you in the fitness industry? Below are just a few examples.

- track, schedule and book client appointments
- respond to voicemail and e-mail messages
- handle client leads and process sales
- manage online orders and product returns
- pay bills and prepare invoices
- take care of bookkeeping
- create and/or update Web sites
- prepare and launch marketing campaigns
- proofread written communication
- research material for client programs

You can search for a compatible VA through Google or online directories from organizations such as the International Virtual Assistants Association (www.ivaa.org), Virtual Assistant Networking Association (www.vanetworking.com) and the International Association of Virtual Office Assistants (www.iavoa.com). Examine the prospective VA's Web site. Does he or she reflect how you would want to be represented?

When it's time to make contact, Sutherland suggests asking qualifying ques-


tions such as: How do you prioritize work (on a first-come, first-served basis or by client size)? What's the turnaround time on projects? Do you have examples of similar work I can see? Can I contact your current clients for references?

While there are presently no official standards for those who call themselves virtual assistants, many have completed a VA business course. However, it's a VA's background and experience that might benefit you most. "Each VA brings [his or her] own skill set to the marketplace from past work life or post-secondary training," says Sutherland. For best results, find a VA that best matches your business goals and the tasks you want to delegate.

It's also wise to look for a VA who has "an interest, passion and love for your industry," says Sutherland. This criterion was at the forefront of Atlas's mind when he hired a VA. "I wanted someone who valued a fit and healthy lifestyle so she could understand the business the way it needs to be understood," he says.

Virtually Stress-Free

If you like the idea of working with a VA, don't wait until you're overly busy, advises Atlas. "Do it when you are not so stressed and pressed for time. Feel free to 'look over their shoulder' for the first few weeks, so both of you are comfortable about the way things are being handled." But then step back and allow your VA to make your life easier. "You need to let go of some control to be a successful business owner," says Labadie.

And expect a natural period of adjustment. "It took me about four or five weeks to get used to the fact that I didn't have to do all these little things throughout the day," says Atlas. "It was almost hard to believe that someone else could and would be handling all that for me—and doing an incredible job at it." 

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