

Virtual Ally

A Success Story Written By Angela Clements Cattell

Faith Andrews loves to solve problems. When describing herself, she will list the ability to persevere as one of her top traits. Her unofficial tagline has always been: Plan B is to make plan A work. With that in mind it is no wonder that Ms. Andrews has turned her entrepreneurial vision into the successful small business that she now owns and operates.

As a virtual business services consultant, Ms. Andrews works with her clients to develop successful business strategies by leveraging the benefits of outsourcing back office, marketing, and administrative tasks. Her focus is helping entrepreneurs and small business owners reclaim revenue-generating hours, or perhaps simply enjoy a better work/life balance. The name that Ms.

Andrews chose for her small business says it all: 'Virtual' meaning she and her independent contractors can support anyone from anywhere and 'Ally' meaning friend and partner. Assignments are typically communicated through e-mail, phone, text or fax. Some of the services Virtual Ally provides include board management, inbound and outbound marketing, corporate/luxury travel planning and booking, event planning, meeting planning, estate management, project management, database creation and management, basic administrative, and documentation. Virtual Ally also provides operations-level consulting services including business strategic planning, marketing and positioning, coaching and process improvement.

Prior to starting her business, Faith Andrews spent the bulk of her career working with high level executives of corporations (the C-Suite) and managing partners of law firms. In her most recent position before becoming an entrepreneur, Ms. Andrews was the Executive Assistant to the CEO and CFO of Hilite International, a \$500 million manufacturer of automotive and trucking parts with plants in the U.S., Germany, France, Hungary and China. But in early 2011, the company sold and the new owners were taking no prisoners. Anyone with a high level title was fired. Ms. Andrews was asked to stay and help with the transition so she agreed. However, her growing concerns about job security increased her desire to not only make a career change, but to also seriously consider entrepreneurialism. Plus, having someone else always determining her worth further inspired her to break out on her own.

Realizing the need for all of her qualifications in the modern world, she started researching what it would take to become a virtual assistant and formed her LLC in July of 2011. Her first two clients were the former CEO and CFO of Hilite. She also joined the International Virtual Assistants Association (IVAA). Unfortunately, she spent a great deal of money with very little return on her investment.



Shown here is Faith Andrews, owner and operator of Virtual Ally, LLC

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In late 2013 Ms. Andrews joined the Painesville, Ohio Chamber of Commerce where she attended 'Coffee Contacts' networking events and was introduced to the Lake/Geauga Small Business Development Center (SBDC). By then she had created her own website, and had found a few new clients by advertising through Google Plus and Craigslist. However, she knew she needed to do more to really grow. Ms. Andrews became aware of the many free or low cost seminars that the Lake/Geauga SBDC offered and became intrigued.

In February of 2014, she attended a "Business Plan Roundtable" seminar created by the Lake/Geauga SBDC where six different experts spoke and answered questions about banking, accounting, legal issues, marketing and research as they apply to planning a business. She was amazed by the wealth of valuable information taught. "I was especially impressed with the market research knowledge shared at the seminar which taught me a lot about the wonderful databases at the library," emphasized Ms. Andrews. To this day Ms. Andrews still uses that resource at her business from time to time.

Ms. Andrews continued to attend the many seminars/workshops that the Lake/Geauga SBDC offers including 'Intro to Government Contracting' which introduced her to PTAC. That seminar led her to meet with PTAC on another date and has enlightened her on another possible income generating source that she plans on exploring in the near future.

She also attended seminars at two Small Business Symposiums created in collaboration with both the Lake/Geauga SBDC and Lakeland Community College's Entrepreneurship Center. At those events she learned a great deal about engaging, selling and types of effective social media marketing. These events also provided tremendous networking opportunities to gain new contacts and potential clients.

Faith Andrews came to several more Lake/Geauga SBDC 'Lunch and Learn' seminars where she gained even more knowledge on marketing and selling. Her favorite one was 'Email Marketing to Help Your Small Business Grow' presented by Diane Helbig. According to Ms Andrews, "I took one of my clients to that workshop as well and much of what she (Diane Helbig) had to say validated what I was recommending to my client. Even though I ultimately did not choose Constant Contact as my email marketing application, the information that I learned at that workshop about inbound marketing and building a good database the correct way was priceless."

In March of 2015, Ms. Andrews met with Jim Gray, a business advisor from the Lake/Geauga SBDC. Jim helped Faith explore new opportunities and discussed doing more market research. They reviewed how to define her target market. "We did some scenario planning and identified a few test markets," stated Mr. Gray.

"Meeting with Jim Gray gave me great feedback, expressed Ms. Andrews. Besides exploring new opportunities, Jim gave me great referrals."

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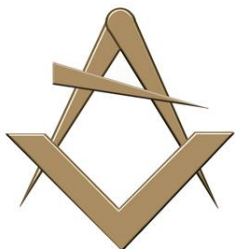
More recently, Faith Andrews met with Angela Clements Cattell from the Lake/Geauga SBDC. Angela taught her how to work with constant contact and create content articles that fit her customer's target market including adding helpful links, adding photos, and creating subject lines to help increase opened emails. "With Angela from the SBDC sitting down with me, I felt more comfortable being able to offer email marketing as a service to my clients," expressed Ms. Andrews.

Virtual Ally continues to grow every year. Right now Faith Andrews even has an anchor client which was referred to her by the business advisors of the Lake/Geauga SBDC and generates a reliable ongoing income. She has built her business up from just a few to 14 clients.

Faith Andrew's best advice to other entrepreneurs is to "attend as many small business workshops as you can and network!" As Ms. Andrews knows all too well networking and workshops can go hand-in-hand. "The SBDC has helped me in the way of small business development education through seminars, workshops and the Annual Small Business Symposium, which I attend every year; and the networking opportunities before and after all of those events are wonderful," she explains. Faith goes on to add, "You need to network/market yourself in person, not just online. You need to look folks in the eye and actually shake hands, form relationships and build trust."

Ms. Andrews also highly recommends joining your local Chamber of Commerce. "Go to your local Chamber, find out and take advantage of the many free resources out there." After all that is how Faith Andrews discovered the Small Business Development Center. According to Faith, "The Lake/Geauga SBDC stays current and progressive. The SBDC has been a great resource."

The Lake/Geauga Small Business Development Center, now located out of Lakeland Community College, offers start-up business trainings, monthly small business seminars/workshops on various topics and one on one free business counseling. The Small Business Development Center is not only a great small business resource but will also be one of your best advocates in helping you reach true success.



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