

REALTORS® Utilize Technology to Market Homes

BY JOANNE DIMAGGIO

In today's rapidly changing real estate market, REALTORS® are constantly seeking new and innovative ways to distinguish themselves in an increasingly competitive environment.

This two-part series will explore how Charlottesville-area REALTORS® are developing new ways of marketing properties that create enthusiasm on the part of buyers—to find them the right house at the right price—and confidence among sellers to entrust their property to a REALTOR® who knows the market, can generate the traffic, and sell their home quickly and for its maximum value.

Today, REALTORS® across the Charlottesville area are pointing to one increasingly important tool that enables them to accomplish that goal—technology—a field that changes as rapidly as the real estate market itself.

“Our job is far different than it was even two years ago,” said Jim Duncan, a REALTOR® with Century 21 Manley Associates, Inc. (www.jduncan-realestate.com). “Technology changes are phenomenal. There’s an article I have that says: ‘Technology won’t replace agents. Agents with technology will replace agents.’”

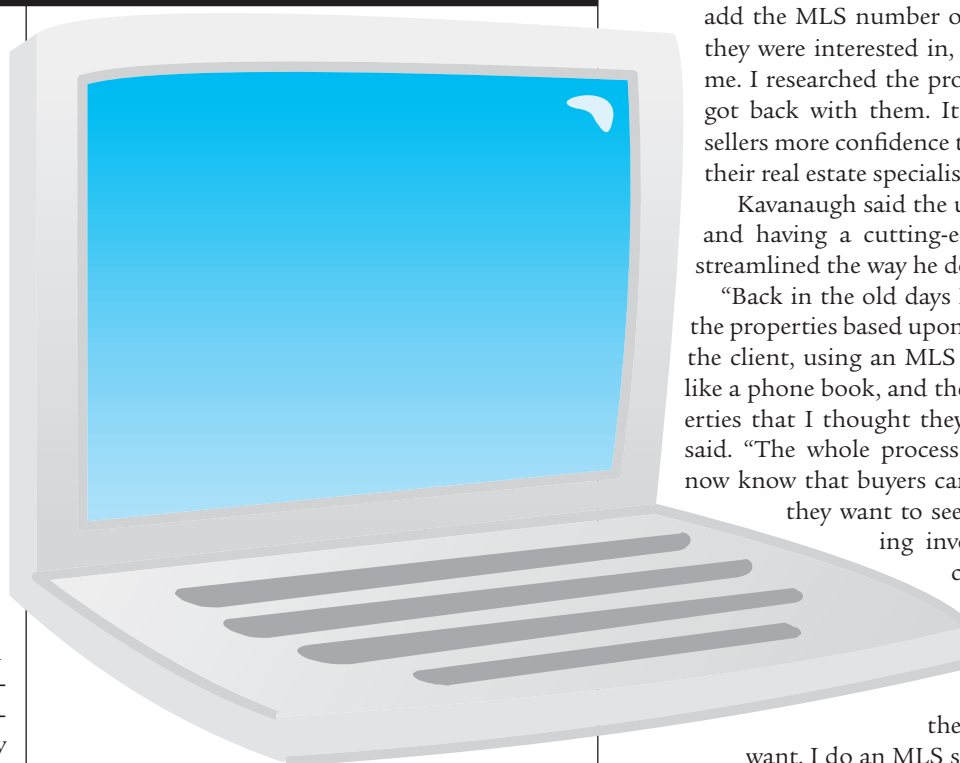
That quote, by Burke Smith of Prudential California Realty, states the growing truth that agents who are investing smartly in technology—be it online real estate marketing tools, lead generation systems, Blackberries for fast response to leads, blogging, or search engine optimization—have a distinct advantage over fellow agents who have yet to embrace technology as part of their marketing plan.

Web Sites

Nearly all REALTORS® are using Web sites in one form or the other. The challenge for them is how to make a site stand out from all the others and create features that will enable them to better serve their clients.

Pavel Dovgalyuk, a REALTOR® with Roy Wheeler Realty, wants his Web site (www.cvilleExpert.com) to establish his credibility and differentiate himself from other REALTORS®. To do this, he is creating a Web page for each of his clients that is embedded with a custom search through the MLS system.

“This gives my clients immediate access to exactly the type of property they are looking for,” he said. “All they have to do is go to this one URL and they see the homes that match their search criteria.



membering the URL is really easy: type in www.cvilleExpert.com/lastname (for example www.cvilleExpert.com/smith). You can do that already through what CAAR MLS offers, but this takes it one step further by personalizing it. Then I can link the custom search to their e-mail so if any new property shows up, an automatic e-mail will be sent to their mailbox. My ultimate goal is to make my Web site a personalized portal where my clients log in and any useful information I want them to have will be there. I love providing my clients with quick and reliable results. They value and appreciate that.”

Carol Costanzo, a REALTOR® with Real Estate III (www.finevirginialiving.com), is well-versed on the value of a Web site and focuses on keeping hers fun, easy to use, and hassle-free. “We want our clients to be able to come to our Web site and do everything from find the home, apply for the mortgage, get their profile set up, and search for homes so we can let them know what’s added to the market.”

One of the tools on her Web site is virtual market analysis. “It’s great for general information,” said Costanzo. “All you have to do is enter your Zip code, the size of your house, and what you think your home is worth. Press “enter” and the homes

in your area in your size pop up and you can see exactly what the cost of those homes are.”

Cliff Kavanaugh, a REALTOR® with Keller Williams Realty (www.cvillehomesearch.com), has come up with an online form on his Web site that enables people to send a text message to his cell phone from their computer and within minutes, get a call back from him.

“It’s a fun listing tool,” he said. “When you’re sitting down talking to a buyer or a seller, they love the bells and whistles. To be sitting right there with them during a listing and have them log on to CvilleHomeSearch and type me a text message, send it, and have my phone ring in a matter of moments, it really wows them. I had an out-of-town buyer and they used it to text message me while they were at their computer in San Diego doing a property search. Instead of picking up the phone, all they had to do was click the text message link, add the MLS number of the listings that they were interested in, and send it on to me. I researched the property and quickly got back with them. It gives buyers and sellers more confidence to choose me to be their real estate specialist.”

Kavanaugh said the use of the Internet and having a cutting-edge Web site has streamlined the way he does business.

“Back in the old days I used to pick out the properties based upon an interview with the client, using an MLS book that looked like a phone book, and then I selected properties that I thought they might want,” he said. “The whole process was inefficient. I now know that buyers can zero in on what they want to see and they like being

involved in the process.

Today, I still interview my buyers to get the basic criteria from

them on what they

want. I do an MLS search and send an

e-mail to them that has a link to all the properties that I believe meet their criteria and then they’re able to select from those properties. I can remove myself one more step from the property selection process and set up an automatic e-mail notification to the buyer. Every morning when they wake up, any new listings that come on the market that meet their criteria pop up on their computer. I’ve sold properties where the listing agent has submitted it to the MLS and we showed up before they actually completed the listing process. I can think of three instances in the last 18 months where I got my people fantastic deals because we got to the property first!”

Kavanaugh said one of the benefits of encouraging clients to use the Internet to select properties is that it reduces agent liability.

“Fair Housing violations can occur if REALTORS® improperly select houses for people who may be within a protected class,” he stated. “A well-meaning REALTOR® may decide on their own to not show a property with stairs to an elderly or handicapped buyer or a family with small children—that could be a Fair Housing violation if the selection was not clearly the buyer’s choice. The way I do it, sometimes I am not involved in the initial property selection at all. By encouraging

buyers to use www.cvillehomesearch.com, I can be taken out of the initial selection process. In this day and age with the kinds of things you can get from the MLS, as long as somebody has a computer it's not a very involved process. Buyers can e-mail me the MLS numbers of properties, I make arrangements to show the properties and everything is much more efficient. I've reduced my liability and I help them quickly find their dream home and my buyers can get more value as well."

Another innovative marketing tool that Kavanaugh utilizes on the World Wide Web involves having his toll-free number appear in the title tag on his Web site and his title tag when people are doing an online search.

"When they do a Google search for Charlottesville real estate, instead of seeing Cliff Kavanaugh or www.cvillehomesearch.com in the title tag and description, they will see my toll-free number instead," he explained. "They can call my toll-free number directly from the Google search results and ring my cell phone just as the text message does."

Virtual tours are another marketing tool that has grown in popularity. Recognizing their value, Carol Costanzo has taken the basic virtual tour to another level by adding voice and music and discussing neighborhood amenities. This has spun off into a completely different benefit for sellers.

"When we do virtual tours of people's homes, we put it on a CD they can keep so if they have a fire, they'll be able to show their possessions," she said. "That's something I do as a service to the community."

Costanzo also utilizes Palm Pilot technology when she's in the field. "If you as a client have ever been out looking at homes and wondered why we weren't going to a specific house, or if there were any other houses we may have missed, I have a Palm with the MLS on it so I can answer those questions. The information is at my fingers."

Costanzo said another way she has taken advantage of the Internet to help her clients find homes is by linking to other Web sites. "Eighty-three percent of buyers start their home search and use the Internet to find their house," she said. "When clients list their homes with me, they get put on nine different Web sites (including Realtor.com, Yahoo.com, HomePages.com, and HomeSeekers.com) so that they are getting a tremendous amount of exposure on the World Wide Web around the world."

Blogging

Blogging—or online journaling—is a marketing tool that is catching on, although very few REALTORS® are using it. Jim Duncan started blogging two years ago (www.realcentralva.com).

"I do it primarily as an outlet for my opinions and my knowledge and to share information about the local real estate market," he said. "Some bloggers blog with the intent to gain business. Blog readers appreciate transparency and will see through those who blog without substance. That was not my intent. I did it to express my opinion because I tend to be fairly opinionated and if anybody wants to read it—great. I refer to it all the time, just because it is where a lot of my knowledge goes. There's pretty good content there and that's why

people come back. It's not because I have the most comments and flashy stuff and I get a lot of offline commentary, but it benefits my career in that I'm more knowledgeable about my subject matter."

Daniel Rothamel, a REALTOR® with Strong Team REALTORS® (www.strongteamrealtors.com) is another fan of blogging.

"As a REALTOR® you get a lot of questions all the time," Rothamel said. "I know a lot of people in the area have real estate questions and they don't want to call a REALTOR® to get answers. I wanted to have a place where people can get real estate information about the Charlottesville area and the industry as a whole because what happens nationally impacts people around here."

Rothamel, who described himself as "an information junkie," started his blog (www.cvillearearealestate.com) several months ago and has found it to be invaluable in working with potential clients living out of town. He posts information relative to buyers, sellers, lenders, and people who aren't necessarily selling anytime soon but just want information about home renovations, or refinancing mortgages. It includes basically anything and everything relevant to real estate.

The one thing he doesn't put on his blog are listings. "The blog is about information," he said. "There are plenty of outlets for listings. It can be difficult to find specific real estate information without doing a lot of searching. Looking for topics for the blog, you have to do quite a bit of research to find good information and that forces you to go out there and be educated about the industry. This way it's one place for people to go as opposed to eight. I can do the legwork and they can go there to get the information."

Rothamel says blogging is an ideal way for sellers who have houses on the market in other states to keep tabs on what's going on in Charlottesville. "They check out the blog and if they have questions they let me know," he said.

Reaction has been favorable among his Internet-savvy clients and he said it is fascinating to see where people are logging in. Some have been as far away as Australia. "It's interesting that people all over the world will come to this little spot in cyberspace to gain information," he said.

Carol Costanzo also has a blog on her Web site called "Let's Blog" which she updates five days a week. "Monday through Thursday I do fun things, news events, area info, and trends—truly a unique look at things," she said. "On Fridays I do a Charlottesville tip of the week and it lets people know our area secrets. It's great for out-of-town people or those here who want to expand their horizons."

A recent example was Costanzo's posting about the fire that ravaged the University of Virginia's Rotunda in 1895. Costanzo provides an interesting history lesson about the Rotunda, Mr. Jefferson's design, the bravery of students who saved some artifacts, and efforts to rebuild it.

"The blogging has gotten quite a bit of repeat traffic because people are trying to find out what's going on in our area and just seeing new things that they hadn't thought of before and interesting pieces of information," she said. "I've had clients I haven't seen in a year or more that have called me just to discuss something I've got on my blog or let me know when a neighbor is thinking of selling their house. It's a really casual, friendly way of staying in touch with people."

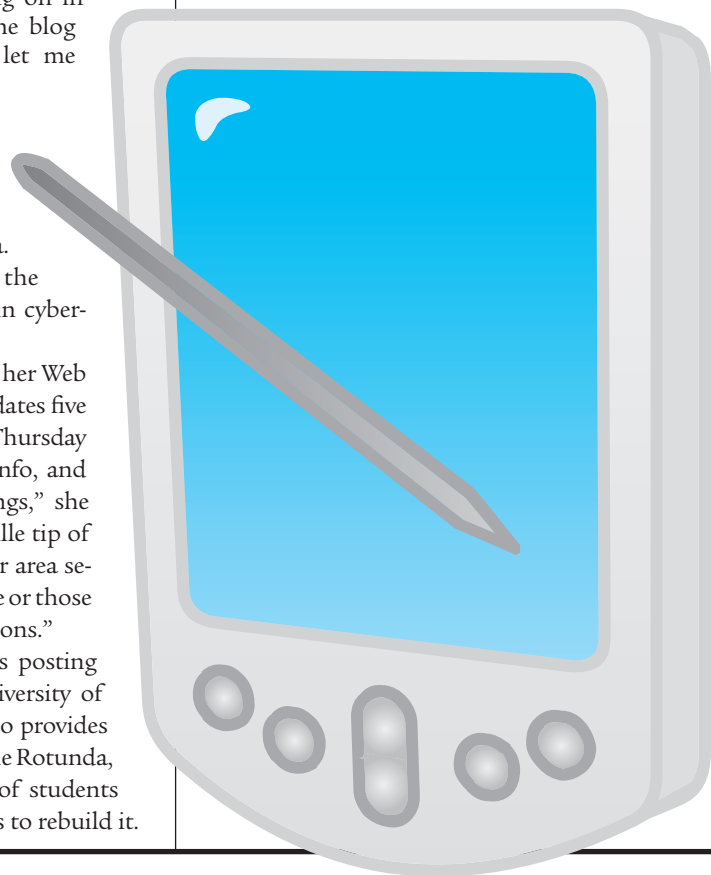
Staying Ahead of the Curve

No matter what direction they take, today's REALTORS® know that to stay in the game, they have to stay ahead of the curve, especially where technology is concerned.

"Technology has changed the real estate industry a lot and really can break down a lot of barriers," said Daniel Rothamel. "It can go a long way in making it a lot easier for buyers to buy homes, sellers to market homes, and for agents to stay in touch with their clients."

Jim Duncan says that using technology is becoming even more important for REALTORS®. "Staying ahead of the curve is something I subscribe to do. It's one thing to be ahead of the curve, but another to be two steps ahead. With any technology curve, you look at it and you see who's catching up. If you do not understand the implications of changing technology and the impact that technology and open information are going to have, you will be stunned and you will be left behind."

In next week's issue, we will explore other innovative technologies—such as podcasting—that REALTORS® are using to market homes in today's competitive marketplace. 📱



Technology won't replace agents. Agents with technology will replace agents.