

Being There: Make Social Networking Work for You

By Jim Parsons

Success in real estate comes from finding customers and referrals and, perhaps more importantly, making it as easy as possible for them to find you. As communications channels have evolved over the decades, industry professionals have quickly incorporated them into their marketing strategies, from newspaper display ads to direct mail, from televised “home showcases” to websites.

The 21st century has brought perhaps the most exciting — and sometimes intimidating — collection of communication tools yet. Known generally as “Web 2.0” or “social networking,” these technologies tap the power of Internet search engines, interactive blogs, discussion forums, maps and near-infinite server and broadband capacity. Agents cannot only share information with prospective buyers and sellers, but also establish a Web presence and forge productive professional relationships among people they may otherwise never even see or speak with.

While real estate-oriented Web 2.0 applications take many forms (*see sidebar*), they all share a common goal — to help real estate professionals sell homes by connecting them with the widest possible network of customers and colleagues. The only fundamental difference from traditional marketing and networking efforts is that it takes place in cyberspace rather than in the mail, in the media or in person.

“More than 80% of buyers use the Web as the starting point for researching new homes and markets,” says Robert Jenson, CEO of The Jenson Group, Las Vegas. “Even buyers who are working with an agent are still going to websites to get additional information.”

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And it's not just computer-literate Generation Xers and Millennials who are making social networking so popular. “You’d expect them to embrace these sites, but use is growing among other demographics too,” notes Mitch Levinson, owner of MLC New Home Marketing, Atlanta.

OPEN FOR OPINION

One of the fastest-growing Web 2.0 tools for real estate professionals are blogs — online journals maintained on their own websites, or at industrywide sites such as ActiveRain, Zillow and many others. Through blogs, an agent can share information about, well, anything — local or neighborhood information, general and market-specific buying trends and considerations, architectural styles, amenities and even personal opinions and experiences.

Along with talking to each other, blogs allow real estate professionals to communicate to customers and prospects either through their own entries or by responding to a question on one of the growing number of blogs and forums dedicated to assisting consumers.

“Blogs also help get answers to your questions with a quick turnaround,” says Sabrina Kizzie, owner of SKL Properties of New York, LLC, whose recently launched blog, “NYC Short Sales Expert,” assists real estate professionals with questions about short-sales techniques. “They are uncensored and unedited, and unlike other mediums, there is no real limitation on space.”

Of course, knowledge matters in the blogosphere. But the true “secret weapon” that makes them so valuable as marketing tools are search engines such as Google and Yahoo!. Because a search engine user can plug in an infinite range of keywords, nearly any topic stands a fair chance of being picked up for the results list.

“Search engines eat blog entries up,” observes Jay Thompson, owner of Thompson’s Realty, Phoenix, who maintains his blog, “The Phoenix Real Estate Guy,” and contributes to several others. “I can do a post and within five minutes, Google will find it.”

It’s that effectiveness in driving traffic to an agent’s website that makes social networking so popular. Thompson can attest to that, noting that his three-year-old blog accounts for 90% of his business. “It has eclipsed the traffic on my website because it’s marketing 24/7,” he says. Blogging



“Lots of agents are jumping on the blog bandwagon, thinking it’s the perfect answer,” says Jay Thompson of Thompson Realty in Phoenix. “It’s not; it takes a lot of work.”

It’s Not Called ‘The Web’ for Nothing

What can you do with real estate-oriented online tools? The answer is simple: What do you *want* to do?

With every iteration and enhancement in search engine, mapping and communication technology, it now takes real estate professionals a matter of seconds to gather and share information that once took innumerable hours, phone calls and library visits to compile — not counting time used for dead-ends, other business responsibilities and that wonderful invention called sleep.

Users have their choice of listing sites such as Craigslist, Rehablist, MyHouseDeals and SubmitTheOffer to so-called aggregator sites such as Trulia, Zillow, e-neighborhoods and Propsmart that consolidate listings from several sources. These sites also serve as IT convergence zones of sorts, using mapping technology to display regional, citywide and even neighborhood-level demographics, home values and pricing trends.

Then there are the real estate networking sites such as ActiveRain, Inman’s Real Estate Connect and Zillow’s Home Q&A section where real estate professionals can exchange information, opinions and trends.

And for every one of these sites, there seems to be an infinite number of success stories. Vicki Lobo, an agent from Realty and Lending Concierge, Rancho Cucamonga, CA, is an enthusiastic user of RealtyTrac, a national listing of home foreclosures.

“We realized that almost everything a person wanted to know about the market and available properties [is] on that site,” she says. “People interested in a particular property e-mail us for help in putting in an offer. We don’t have enough agents to handle all the leads that come in on a daily basis.”

Sabrina Kizzie adds that the most rewarding part of using these sites is “the opportunity to reach national and international markets, which I never thought possible before Internet marketing became such a powerful tool.”

Kizzie adds that while these online marketing tools allow her to sell more properties in a shorter amount of time, not every site works for everyone.

“It is important to research the sites or even try them out a few times to be sure they fit your market needs,” she says.

John Ha, Sales Manager for the Weichert Realtors team that’s marketing the Residences at Dixon Mills in Jersey City, NJ, has found Craigslist to be an ideal way to reach the development’s 25- to 35-year-old target market.

“This demographic is extremely Web-savvy and utilizes Craigslist when making other purchases,” Ha says. “When we list open houses, we’ll get at least four to five leads a weekend.”

Despite the obvious impact of these online tools, Ha isn’t ready to abandon print media. “You can’t rely on a single vehicle to drive traffic,” he says. “You have to develop a market plan and use all the tools available. Doing print and the Internet collaboratively has been a strong point in our marketing plan.” It’s worked very well, he adds, noting, “Both feed off of and leverage each other.”

has also helped Thompson network with other real estate agents around the country. “I know blogging agents in most every city and state who I’d be comfortable referring customers to, and they’re comfortable referring people to me.”

Thompson started his blog to complement his existing website, and provide an outlet for his interest in writing. “When I first started, there very few other real estate blogs,” he says. “Then, about 18 months ago, they exploded to the point where there are hundreds being added every week.”

A blog also helped real estate author/trainer Jennifer Allen resume her career as an agent last fall. Having heard other success stories about real estate bloggers, she dedicated her blog, “Charming Old Denver,” to reach buyers, sellers and referrals for properties in the city’s central neighborhoods.

“I received a call on February 1 — the same day my real estate license was activated,” marvels Allen. “Over time, referrals started to come in from other agents and from the blogs I maintain on ActiveRain.”

Whether customers find the agent first through the blog or his/her home offerings is a “chicken-egg” question that’s not easily answered. While Thompson’s blog includes forms for visitors to submit questions via e-mail, “they usually just say that they ‘found me on the Internet,’” he says. “They don’t remember exactly where, which attests to just how many sites they’re visiting while doing research.”

PREP WORK

Of course, nothing good comes easy. As with any other marketing tactic, successful blogs and social networking don’t happen on their own.

“Lots of agents are jumping on the blog bandwagon, thinking it’s the perfect answer,” Thompson agrees. “It’s not; it takes a lot of work.”

According to Mary Kurek, an Atlantic Beach, NC-based real estate visibility consultant, one of the first concerns agents express is the amount of time involved to learn how to create and maintain a successful blog.

“Realtors are comfortable with traditional marketing methods such as ads and postcards, and this is something new that they have to get used to,” she says, adding that despite the seeming immediacy of the Internet, “it takes time to develop a successful online presence, which goes against many people’s desire to get an instant response.”

Jenson agrees, calling blogs a “breadcrumb approach.”

“People keep coming back and recognizing you as a valuable source,” he says. “Once they get to know and trust you, they’ll hire you.”

The time required to prepare and post entries, and respond to questions

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is also a concern for many, Kurek says, but it's really no different from putting stamps and labels on postcards, "which are likely not generating a lot of responses these days."

Then, of course, there's the matter of what to blog about. A good place to start is the customer's point of view.

"Think about information that other Realtors and customers may be looking for about a particular area, current issues or things related to the buying and selling process," Kurek advises. "Make sure the content includes the keywords and browser titles that will catch search engines' attention."

Sincerity and individuality are important ingredients to a successful blog, which is why writers should simply be themselves rather than adopting false personas.

"If you don't like writing, you shouldn't blog," Allen says. "Otherwise, it's a matter of getting into the habit of doing it. Write for yourself and your audience will find you. Don't feel like it has to be perfect. What one reader may consider dull may appeal to someone else."

There are some obvious blogging don'ts as well, such as plagiarizing other sources without credit, consistently running long (briefer is better, but four to five paragraphs is a good limit) and misrepresentation.

However, writing on non-real estate topics is acceptable and, often, beneficial.

"Real estate is still a people business," Thompson says. "People pick agents because they connect with them at some level, and blogs are a powerful tool for doing just that. Several customers have hired us to sell their homes without the need for a presentation. They simply got to know us by reading the blog."

STARTING POINTS

With literally thousands of real estate blogs and industry forums already online, agents who are considering putting in their two cyber-cents on a regular basis have plenty of models to draw on.

"Look at agent sites in your marketplace and nationally, as well as the blogs on ActiveRain and Trulia and see what other people write about," Levinson advises.

Thompson adds that while technical expertise is helpful for blogging, many sites are available to help newcomers get started for little or no cost. "You can be up and running in five minutes," he says. "While the ultimate goal is to have a self-hosted blog with distinctive style and content, these sites are a good way to see if the concept is for you."

Could the ease and popularity of social networking squeeze

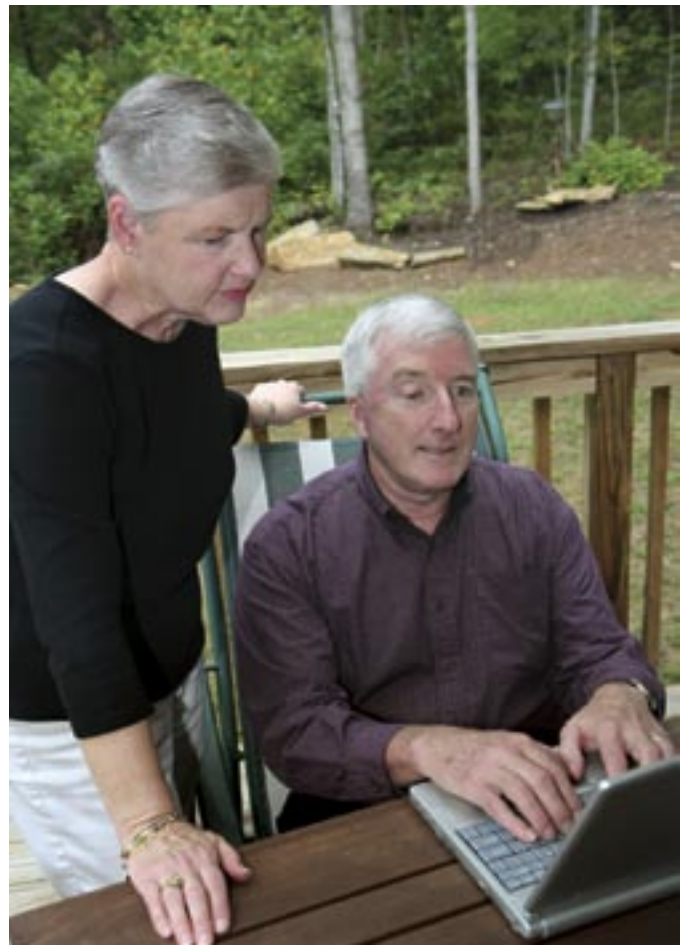


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out more conventional forms of real estate marketing? Kizzie thinks so.

"Printing materials have become costly and have a limited distribution, whereas the Web and social networking sites allow for a much more cost-effective way of marketing your company while reaching an endless amount of potential clients," she says. "People want immediate access to information, and that type of need can only be served using websites and social networking tools."

Others feel that ads, direct mail and, most importantly, face-to-face opportunities still have a place in the real estate professional's marketing toolbox. Each needs to choose the mix that works best for his or her target market.

"Social networking is like any other type of marketing — part science and part art," Levinson says. "It's up to each person to find the right balance."

Are there consequences to not making the most of social networks?

"You're not doomed if you don't," Thompson says, "but you had better watch and understand what's happening with them, because they're going to change this business."

Jenson agrees that social networking will only increase, particularly among the next generations of home buyers. "They're the ones who'll be using these tools," he says. "Wherever they are, that's where I want to be too."

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