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PROVEN TECHNIQUES TO TURN YOUR WEBSITE INTO A LEAD-GENERATING MACHINE

By Dan Gooder Richard

Only 3% of homebuyers and sellers last year found their real estate agent through the Internet, according to the recently released 2002 National Association of Realtors Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers. Yet, that same survey reports 41% of consumers used the Internet to gather information during their home search.

These latest NAR figures put the Internet near the bottom as a lead-generator, but near the top as a widely used property resource during the home search — along with agents (79%), newspaper ads (41%), yard signs (32%), open houses (29%), homes magazines (24%) and builders (11%). The discrepancy between lead-generation and information gathering is even more dramatic when you learn almost 80% of future homebuyers expect to use the Internet as an information source next time they move.

What are our prospects telling us?

That consumers have adopted the Internet as a homefinding tool faster than real estate professionals have adopted the web as a marketing tool. Simply put, there is a tremendous untapped opportunity to capture tomorrow's customers with effective websites. Now that the dot.com meltdown has cleared the air of its "online marketing" versus "traditional marketing" (read: old fashioned) 1990's hype, what is really working today in e-marketing? Here's what we found when we asked some of the top agents around the country who are making the Internet work for them right now.

FOUR FUNDAMENTALS OF E-MARKETING

It's not surprising to discover there is no one "right way" in e-marketing because a wide range of individual approaches and tactics work. Yet the most successful agents use one or more of the fundamentals of successful e-marketing. The four core principals of successful real estate e-marketing are:

- Response offers of real value to the consumer
- A sophisticated, yet consumer-focused website
- Rapid response to inquiries
- Consistent follow-up online and offline

1. Real value response

Response offers of real value to the customer can cover a wide range of tangible premiums and intangible services. Free services such as online home price evaluation, virtual tours, or a direct link to financial calculators and the Multiple Listing Service database have proven to attract serious homebuyers. Rich content of practical assistance can include community information, demographic profiles, school scores, mortgage interest rates and relocation assistance. Printed brochures and reports are popular, especially those that address a buyer's or seller's particular concerns.

Ron Henderson, CRS and a top performer with Century 21 Properties Plus in Charleston, SC (CharlestonExpert.com), favors offering a wide variety of quality content on his site. Henderson said, "There is something on my website for everyone in any stage of the homebuying, selling, relocation or move-up process.

This time last year I averaged 1,674 weekly hits with 3.6 page visits. After upgrading my site with links to interesting and relevant sources of real estate facts and figures, my average is now 6,641 hits per week and 7.35 page visits. My biggest problem is handling and screening the 15-25 inquiries per day."

Internet-savvy consumers turn to real estate sites early in their buying cycle to gather information to help them make educated decisions down the line. "My website is a one-stop resource center," said Frank Jacovini, a leading Associate Broker with DiGennaro Real Estate, Inc. in Philadelphia (Philator.com). "I pack my site with tips and tools to provide as many answers as there are questions."

2. Specific website focus

A sophisticated, yet consumer-focused website invites prospects to interact. Effective sites compel visitors to request information, study and compare listings, and drill into a number of pertinent links, all in the privacy of their home. Web-smart pros report specific features attract potential clients and keep them coming back such as financial calculators, virtual tours, links to MLS and the winner of them all, free updates by e-mail of new listings that match the buyer's profile.

Experienced cyber agents know, however, you can offer any number of helpful services and attractive materials, but if a potential client has trouble getting past agent-centered biographies and team profiles or navigating to the information they want, impatient prospects jump to other sites just a click away.

Reese Stewart, a leading agent with RE/MAX Select in the Orlando area

(ReeseStewart.com), credits his lead-capture success to his easily navigated website and his easy-to-complete Home Search Form that redirects prospects to his Internet Data Exchange (IDX) site where they can search area listings. "I recently wrote an offer which was accepted for a \$1.1 million home. This was a direct result of a lead I received from my website form," Stewart said.

Another fan of customer-centered websites is Gary Marshall, a top producer with Assist 2 Sell Realty in Newnan, GA (GaryMarshall.com). Marshall says his most successful lead-capture technique is offering a free, over-the-Net home evaluation that often captures as many as three prospective sellers a day. "A site that gives clear instructions, lets potential buyers and sellers register easily and gives me the details I need to expand my lead file" is his key to success.

3. Rapid response to inquiries

Rapid response to inquiries is critical no matter how you obtain the lead. Internet buyers and sellers who make instant requests via a website have come to expect instant replies, and top producers comply. Bill Renaud with The Renaud Otten Team, one of Canada's top real estate teams based in Ottawa, Ontario (RenaudOttenTeam.com), uses their "High Energy Home Buyer Program" to respond to online leads. The program is a free service for buyers who complete a profile listing their home preferences and requirements. Renaud Otten's program continually searches the MLS for matches to a buyer's profile. Any property match is instantly sent by e-mail, fax or phone, according to the buyer's preference. "This program was put into place four years ago," Renaud reported, "and it continues to be our #1 lead generation source. It provides us with approximately 10 to 20 buyer leads a week. It's incredible."

Joe Valenti, at CBS HOME Real Estate in the Omaha area (CBSHome.com), stresses the importance of providing real value, and adds, "But information alone is not enough. The consumer wants a rapid response to an inquiry." CBSHome uses the ShowingTime program that allows consumers to schedule showings 24 hours a day. "Our company has the highest conversion rate for this program — 13%," Valenti said.

The New Generation of Realtors' website in Philadelphia receives more than 20 thousand hits a month, according to Antonio Atacan, a top agent with Prudential Fox & Roach (CenterCityRealEstate.com). Atacan

believes Center City's ability to provide accurate information quickly is the key to their success. "The site is updated daily and potential clients receive immediate responses. Approximately 40% of our business is generated from our website. So far this year, my team has closed over \$35 million in sales."

4. Consistent follow-up

Consistent follow-up online and offline is essential. The difference between a large lead file and a large "Sold" file is consistent follow-up. The Internet enables real estate professionals to automate the follow-up process. As soon as top producer Reese Stewart receives a completed home search form, he adds the lead to his online database service using Gooder Group's Rainmaker E-Central® automated e-mail program and assigns the client a "drip" marketing follow-up campaign.

Richard Hiers, the prime mover behind the Real Estate Help Desk with First Team Real Estate in Long Beach, CA (HomesThruEmail.com), takes another approach. He reports his most successful website-lead capture technique is drawing buyers to his website through print publications. Once at the site, buyers can register to receive a comprehensive list of homes for sale. "The website attracts approximately one thousand unique visitors a month," Hiers said, "with 35-50 accepting the invitation to register."

Hiers phones registrants immediately to pre-qualify them on the basis of move-date motivation and financial ability. Using information gleaned during the phone calls, he assigns each buyer to one of three priority levels for follow-up attention. "All potential buyers receive some form of consistent follow-up over the next few months, either by phone, e-mail, or regular mail. I closed 24 buyer sides in 2001, using this technique," Hiers added.

Diligence in follow-up behind an interactive webpage is the secret to success for John Pinto, an innovative team leader with Realty World John V. Pinto & Associates in San Jose, CA (JVPinto.com). "Since getting an appointment is the objective for all of our promotions, we are persistent in following up every request for brochures, newsletters and updates," Pinto said. "Whatever the consumer wants we give them: virtual tours, CMA's, e-mail home tours, free reports, school scores. Second we cross promote the website everywhere from homebuyer seminars and print ads to on-hold messages, signs, flyers, e-mail newsletters and updates."

BACK TO THE FUTURE

Clearly the Internet is here to stay. Not "ending real estate marketing as we know it" as we were once told in the last decade, but adding a powerful new tool into the marketing mix. Perhaps the future is best summarized by the success of Tom and Patti Wilser, a top husband and wife team with RE/MAX Equity Group in Portland, OR (Real-Estate-Portland-Oregon.com). "Out of our last 38 inquiries, 18 have been webform requests, nine were phone calls for additional information on properties viewed on the Internet, and 10 were requests to be automatically updated as properties came up for sale. One inquiry was for general information about the real estate process."

As before the Internet, property information attracts consumers and appealing offers capture prospects. At the end of the day, good old-fashioned principles of prompt, personal attention, and persistence, persistence, persistence never go out of style.

Dan Gooder Richard, author of *REAL ESTATE RAINMAKER*®, (John Wiley & Sons, ISBN 0-471-34554-7) is a popular speaker, author, publisher and consultant for the real estate industry. He has made it his personal crusade to share with real estate professionals exactly how they can generate more leads, more sales and more profits for financial independence, now and at retirement. Richard is founder and president of Gooder Group, a Fairfax, Virginia-based publisher of marketing materials for real estate professionals and lenders since 1983. Richard's trademarked *RAINMAKER LEAD SYSTEM*® has become an in-demand, step-by-step guide to planning for success in the real estate industry.

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TWELVE HOT OFFERS TO MAXIMIZE WEBSITE RESPONSE

Ever wonder how top websites capture visitors? The first secret is always ask prospects to complete their contact information. The second secret is to use as many of these effective website offers as possible designed to grab attention and compel replies:

- **Gateway Option:** Ask for name and e-mail in return for access to sections of your site (response is voluntary; not required to click through).

- **Free Reports:** These include printed brochures, booklets, homes magazines and newsletters sent by regular mail. Not only do you capture accurate addresses, but consumers receive proof of your responsiveness.

- **E-Reports:** An auto-responder sends text links to electronic reports on specific topics by e-mail. Works equally well with

“ready” shoppers and “arms length” information gatherers.

- **Dream Home Search:** Automatically send new property listings that match the buyer’s dream home profile. If your MLS does not provide the service, check out SOAR eMLS (SOARsolutions.net) and their new seller CMA update service.

- **Price Estimate/Market Value:** For prospective sellers who ask, “What’s my home worth?” CityBest (info@CityBest.com) offers a new “How Much Is Your Home Worth?” website service with online valuations.

- **Open Yesterday:** Prospects who couldn’t get to other broker’s open houses advertised in the newspaper can submit the addresses to you and receive one-stop property information by e-mail.

- **Schedule a Showing:** A prospect fills in the day and time they want to view one or more properties, such as the service from ShowingTime.com.

- **Sweepstakes/Contest:** Capture contact information by offering something

of value related to homebuying or selling, such as Curb Appeal Makeover or Full House Power Wash (check state and local board regulations on contests).

- **In-file Credit Report:** Prospects can learn their credit score quickly and easily. Often done with a link to a lender’s website.

- **Interest Rate Alert:** Clients register their current interest rate, loan balance and monthly payment to receive regular comparisons with current interest rates to determine when it’s time to refinance. Consider lead-swap with mortgage lenders for service.

- **Calculators and Other Financial Tools:** Offer access to online calculators for subjects such as Buying vs. Renting, Moving Cost Estimates, Selling Cost Analysis, Budget to Buy (pre-qualification), and Trade-Up Down Payment Analysis (seller’s equity).

- **Market Update:** Offer an online tool that will track home sale values by specific neighborhoods.

— Dan Gooder Richard