

Web-based real estate has its advantages

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Thomas Harpointer is co-founder of AIS Media, an Atlanta-based technology firm that provides Internet solutions to businesses. He has some advice for those who buy and sell houses on the Web, where it is estimated more than 80 percent of home buyers start their searches.

Describe what potential home buyers expect from real estate sites.

They are technically more sophisticated and are raising the bar in terms of the level of functionality, interactivity and customization they expect. They're highly visual, intolerant of delays and deeply unimpressed with "typical" brochure sites. They eagerly use the Web to find information on listings, financing and to locate a reputable Realtor.

How do virtual tours affect sales?

The average online listing with a virtual tour receives 40 percent more views than listings without tours. More than 90 percent of home buyers consider the addition of property photos to an online listing to be "very important." Providing a virtual tour helps build buyer confidence, generates more leads and can save the agent/broker valuable time by better educating the potential buyer about a property prior to the site visit.

Are Web sites more cost-effective than other marketing strategies?

When considering the costs of other marketing methods, the cost of developing and maintaining a professional Web site is minimal. A Web site is operational 24/7/365. Changes and updates can be made on the fly. There's no limitation to the amount of content you can provide. Listings can be updated immediately and results are easily tracked. Most advanced Web site features and functions have already been developed. Therefore, the cost of developing a feature-rich site is significantly lower today than just a few years ago.

Along with virtual tours, what types of information should sites offer?

To effectively compete and cater to the growing demands of today's more sophisticated buyer, developers, brokers and agents need to upgrade their Web sites with modern features that enhance the user experience:

- * Advanced search (state, home type, bedrooms, price, size, location, amenities, etc.)
- * An extensive number of high-resolution photos
- * Comprehensive descriptions of properties
- * Financing tools
- * Buyer tips and resources
- * Automated e-mail alerts
- * Local school information
- * Builder/broker/agent information: reviews/testimonials
- * Map property display