

Does the Internet really help sell houses?

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Before the Internet, prospective home buyers relied almost entirely on real estate agents for information about homes for sale. Today, many home buyers know the inventory of homes for sale in their price range before they even connect with an agent.

Recently, a couple made an appointment to look at property with an agent who had been referred to them. They arrived at the realty office with a tour already mapped out of the listings they wanted to see. They had previewed the inventory in their price range on the Internet ahead of time. This process saved them hours of wasted time previewing homes they'd never buy.

A recent study conducted by the California Association of Realtors (CAR) compared the differences between traditional buyers and Internet buyers. The findings of the study show that Internet buyers used the Internet to gather information. They better understood the home buying process and were more satisfied with the entire home buying experience than were traditional buyers.

In Northern California, a major tech center, an astonishing 70 percent of home buyers begin their real estate search on the Internet. According to CAR, 30 percent of these buyers will actually purchase a property that they first saw on a realty Web site.

Not all marketplaces will have this high a percentage of realty Internet users. Even so, if you're selling a home, Internet exposure should be an integral part of your marketing program. Internet advertising is a powerful tool that can significantly enhance your sales effort.

The Internet was the catalyst that resulted in the sale of a Piedmont, Calif., listing. The buyer wanted to buy a home in Piedmont because of the good school system. She searched the Internet for Piedmont homes for sale. The search pulled up an agent's Web site that featured a Piedmont listing, complete with a photo tour of a dozen photos of the property. After previewing the listing on-line, the buyer sent an e-mail to the agent, made an appointment to see the house, and bought it.

HOME SELLER'S TIP: To be effective, the Internet advertising of your home should include photos. Descriptive adjectives can't be relied on with certainty. Adjectives like "charming," "beautiful" and "wonderful" are so over-used in real estate advertising that they have become meaningless. What's charming to one buyer may be trite to another. Adjectives are sometimes used to camouflage defects. Cozy is often used to describe a room that's way too small.

Print advertising doesn't tell you much that you can rely on about a property other than its location, size and list price. Photos portray much more about the condition, ambience and décor of a listing. These are the qualities that often trigger a buyer's decision to buy.

To be effective, however, the photos of your home must be high quality. Some Internet home photos are so amateurish that they do the sellers a disservice. Make sure to look at the photos of your home on the Internet. If you're not happy with what you see, let your agent know.

Another advantage of Internet advertising is that it has a much longer shelf life than conventional newspaper advertising. Typically, realty companies advertise properties in the local weekend papers. At the end of the weekend, the papers are usually recycled. An Internet advertisement of your home can be viewed by anyone, anytime, from anywhere for as long as your home is on the market.



THE CLOSING: Before deciding on a listing agent, visit the agent's Web site to see how your home will be displayed online. If your agent doesn't have a site, visit the company's site.

