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Making Every Pixel Count



Left, Lucie Thompson; right, Robert Bradley

PLAYING THE ANGLES Lucie Thompson, an agent at the Corcoran Group in Palm Beach, Fla., photographed a house on Jupiter Island, left. The company later hired a professional photographer, Robert Brantley, to shoot the same house. The results, right, speak for themselves.

By VIVIAN S. TOY
Published: February 11, 2007

IN real estate, a picture can be worth more than a thousand words. Much, much more. When selling properties online, agents and Web designers say that the pictures buyers see of houses and apartments for sale are often the first — and sometimes the only — chance for a seller to make a good impression. Less-than-flattering pictures can turn buyers off and lead to lonely open houses.

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A Picture Is Worth ...

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Top, Meredith Maxfield; bottom, Lauren Brown

MORE DEPTH AND CONTEXT
Meredith Maxfield, a sales associate with the Briggs-Freeman Real Estate Brokerage in Dallas, took the top

“Good photos will grab people’s attention and help you sell a home,” said Jacky Teplitzky, an executive vice president of Prudential Douglas Elliman Real Estate in New York.

“Bad pictures will absolutely give you trouble, because you won’t have any calls on it, and nobody will come to see it.”

Eighty percent of people across the country who bought a new home last year used the Internet while house hunting, and they rated photographs as the most useful tool in their search, according to a survey of buyers and sellers by the [National Association of Realtors](#). The survey also found that 24 percent of home buyers got their first glimpses of their new homes on the Web, up from a mere 2 percent in 1997.

In many cases, it is the agents themselves who are snapping the pictures and posting them on the agency Web site. Because of this, it is important that sellers choosing an agent know who will take and pay for the pictures and whether a professional photographer is available.

“It’s so important to have photos that are professionally presented,” said Rosalind Clarke, a senior sales associate with the Corcoran Group in Palm Beach, Fla.

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picture of this dining room. Then she brought in Lauren Brown, a professional photographer, who stepped back to show the archway and staircase in the adjoining hall.

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Top, Alan Nickman; bottom, Evan Joseph

THE RIGHT LIGHTING When Alan Nickman, an executive vice president of Bellmarc Realty, took a picture of this kitchen, the flash made the lighting look harsh. Evan Joseph, a professional photographer, used the warmer natural light and chose a more flattering angle to show the window and the depth of the room.

She added that she uses only pictures taken by professional photographers, because “if things look shoddy or unprofessional, not only are buyers going to find the property unappealing, they’re going to associate you with being shoddy and unprofessional.”

Real estate agents who represent large and expensive homes say that virtual tours, which to provide a 360-degree view of a room, are another crucial tool for attracting buyers. “They’re a really great way of seeing a property without actually being there,” said Meredith Maxfield, a sales associate with the Briggs-Freeman Real Estate Brokerage in Dallas. “Buyers use them to narrow out the properties they would absolutely not want to see.”

The Realtors’ association survey found that when it comes to Web features that buyers considered “very useful,” 83 percent cited pictures, 81 percent cited detailed property information and 60 percent cited virtual tours.

[New York City](#) is something of an anomaly in this case.

Real estate agents here generally agree that floor plans are more useful than virtual tours, because understanding the way rooms flow within an apartment’s limited space is

often more important than getting a panorama of any single room.

But there is little point in having good photographs or beautifully written prose describing a home if you don’t have a Web site that is easy to find and easy to use — and this holds true whether you’re using a broker who will list your home on an agency Web site or you’re trying to sell your home yourself and are creating your own Web site or listing your home on a site like Craigslist.

“The key to any successful Web site is to make it easy to find what you want; otherwise, the user will just go away,” said Staci Roberts Beam, the director of Web communications at [Northwestern University](#). “So in the case of a real estate site, make sure the architecture of the site tells you that even if it takes three or four clicks, you’ll eventually get to see an affordable house in a place where you might want to live.”

The Pictures

Unless you are selling your home yourself, your real estate agent will ultimately decide which photographs will go up on the agency’s Web site, but agencies vary greatly in their policies on pictures. Some send their agents and brokers out armed with digital cameras, but others use only pictures taken by professionals. Still other agencies let brokers decide whether to take their own pictures or pay a fee to use the agency’s recommended photographers.

All of which explains why there is such a wide range in the quality of photos found on real estate Web sites.

“When you look at the difference between professional photos and ones taken by brokers with digital cameras, it’s not hard to see that you get what you pay for,” said Lauren Cangiano, a senior vice president of Halstead Property in New York.

Halstead uses only professional photos, and its agents reimburse the agency from their commissions after the properties have sold. The same pictures will be used on

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commissions after the properties have sold. The same pictures will be used on

information sheets, in the agency's storefront windows and in advertising brochures.

"Professional photographers have top-of-the-line equipment, and they have an eye for making a place look its best," Ms. Cangiano said. Their equipment can include a high-resolution digital camera, special lenses, a tripod and lighting equipment.

When real estate agents hire photographers through their companies, they pay the fee, which can range from \$100 to a few hundred dollars, depending on the size of a property.

In New York, hiring a professional photographer on your own can run to \$1,000 or more, depending on whether you want prints as well as Web photos or if you want extremely high-resolution pictures.

Since the photos are meant to be a sales tool, they will probably not showcase a property's negatives. Diane Ramirez, Halstead's president, said: "Our Web site is going to be the face for your property, and we're not going to put you up there without your makeup on. We're going to make sure you're ready for your photo opportunity."

But while agents will help by urging owners to get rid of clutter or by bringing in flowers to add color, most advise against making a property look better than it really is.

"Every apartment has a birthright to have its best features shown," said Mark Neuwirth, a senior associate broker at Bellmarc Realty in New York. "But you can't be deceptive. If you take a shot that's not within the realm of reality, buyers aren't going to talk to you when they come and see it, and they're going to distrust the whole process."

Still, there are some common mistakes that brokers and sellers make with photos: taking pictures on a rainy day or at night, for example, or photographing a room that is too cluttered to actually show the space.

Mr. Neuwirth takes his own photographs, but he has bought high-end equipment and will spend hours trying to capture the perfect angle "to make sure the pictures tell the story the right way."

He tries to take pictures using as much natural light as possible. "Shooting at night is always a mistake because the light will come out dreary, and a flash that bounces off a window is just horrible," he said.

When it comes to clutter, Ms. Maxfield, the Dallas agent, said she does a preliminary walk-through with a dispassionate eye at every home, sticking Post-it notes on every item that she thinks the seller ought to get rid of before pictures are taken.

"I tell them, 'I know this is how you live normally, but you can't live like this for the pictures,' " she said. "The focus has to be on the beauty of the property and its features, not on what's in it."

But there is a fine line between showing a place off and making it look like something it isn't. Ann Rothman, an agent with Bellmarc in New York, said that when she was trying to sell a two-bedroom apartment in 2005, she had initially taken her own pictures. But then the agency decided that it wanted to picture the apartment in an advertising brochure, so it sent in a professional photographer.

"The professional used a wide-angle lens and made the living room look like a ballroom, and it really wasn't like that," Ms. Rothman said. "So people were very turned off when they came and said things like, 'Where's the rest of it?'"

The property eventually sold after she put her own, more modest, pictures back up on the

Web site.

The Words

Once you've caught a buyer's eye with the pictures, you have to reel him or her in with the written description. Some real estate agents say that over-the-top superlatives like "XXX Triple Mint," followed by a string of exclamation points, can actually drive buyers away. On the other hand, words that are more descriptive and that give a better sense of what a home looks and feels like can be very inviting.

But one broker's idea of a cliché can easily be another's idea of poetry.

"I'm not a writer, but what I try to do to set myself apart is write descriptions that somehow evoke a feeling instead of just describing a space," said Ms. Cangiano of Halstead. So a high-rise apartment becomes "contemporary yet classic," and the galley kitchen "spills onto a windowed dining room."

Robert Schulman, a senior managing director of Warburg Realty in New York, said the text should walk people through the apartment in words and help them understand what they saw in the photos, but without exaggeration.

"Everybody knows you're selling, but you dilute yourself when you use too many superlatives that are common," he said. "Like what does 'triple mint' really mean?"

There are some common buzzwords that brokers have trouble avoiding because they are used to soft-pedal a home's negatives. Words like "cozy" and "charming" are often used for small spaces, and "private" and "quiet" usually means an apartment faces the back of a building and has no views.

"Of course, you're not going to say an apartment is dark as a dungeon," said Alan Nickman, an executive vice president of Bellmarc. "You say it's quiet and private because you need to indicate what it really is, but you don't need to overemphasize the negatives."

Ms. Clarke, the broker from Palm Beach, said some words like "estate," "mini-estate" and "European" can breed suspicion and should be avoided. "I'm from England originally, where an estate is about 100 acres with a beautiful mansion on it, but here, brokers will call something on a 100-by-125-foot lot an estate," she said.

Others will describe something as European to give it cachet, she said, "but I'll go in with a European client who will raise their eyebrows and say, 'This broker has obviously never been to Europe.'"

Buyer Beware

Real estate agents said there were a few marketing tricks they might use for a home that needs work or otherwise just doesn't photograph well.

"I've represented dreck in really drecky buildings," Mr. Neuwirth said. "For those, we might include a picture of something in the neighborhood that looks good" or just an exterior shot of the building. So buyers who come across listings that have only one or two photos should be prepared to ask why there aren't more. The answer could be that the broker is waiting for professional photos to be shot, or it could be that the property is a real fixer-upper.

It also doesn't hurt for buyers to read descriptions with a skeptical eye.

When faced with a property that might have limited appeal, Mr. Neuwirth said, he will

use words that address the home's shortcomings and that might attract a certain customer — words like “pied-à-terrific” and “Tyrannosaurus wreck.”

But listings are often not quite so forthright. So bear in mind that extremely vague descriptions could translate into a home that hasn't been renovated in decades or has other weaknesses. Something described as “a gem” without reference to any jewel-like qualities could mean it's small. Likewise for a property that is “cozy” without reference to a wood-burning fireplace.

User-Friendly Web Sites

If you're looking for a broker to help sell your home, one of the first things you should do is visit the agency's Web site and travel through it as if you were a buyer.

“By looking at a Web site and how much they put into marketing a property online, you can pretty much tell the level of service you're going to get from that agency,” said Ms. Maxfield, the Dallas agent. “You want the site to be very sophisticated, very interactive and easy to navigate.”

A good site will have many roads that can lead buyers to it, said Ms. Ramirez, the president of Halstead. Her company's site, she said, is linked to many other sites, including ads on local newspapers' Web sites and on search engines like Google and Yahoo.

“You want to be on as many sources as you can that will lead people back to the seller's property,” she said. “That's the kind of Web presence that will attract buyers.”

Ms. Beam, the Web communications director at Northwestern, said that a good site also doesn't “do stuff that is annoying — things like pop-up windows or design elements that look like advertisements.” She also warned against using sites that have information that can be accessed only with technology that not every user might have, like Flash software or very specific media players.

At the same time, since Web technology is constantly improving, it's important to have a site that doesn't look dated and that stays current with widely used Internet tools. Shaun Osher, the chief executive of Core Group Marketing in New York, said he recently redesigned his firm's Web site to make it easier for his brokers to input information and for buyers to use.

To that end, he said, he decided to put the site at the fore of technology: it's now one of the first in real estate to incorporate the Internet phone service Skype. The service allows a buyer who likes a listing on the site to have a live chat with a broker about the property or to send the broker an instant message. This works as long as the broker is online or carrying a BlackBerry.

“We don't want people to have to pick up the phone to call because they can get distracted,” Mr. Osher said. “This way you can get in touch with us directly from the Web site, and you're able to get instant gratification.”

The Latest Technology

Real estate Web sites have changed significantly in the last 10 years, and new technology is sure to continue to change the way property listings are presented on the Internet.

Virtual tours and video slide shows, for example, have already led to the use of videos, complete with written scripts and background music, to showcase and describe listings.

Until about five years ago, most Web sites were little more than billboards for advertising

the virtues of different agents and brokers, but they have evolved into sites designed to help buyers search for a new home, said Mark Lesswing, the chief technology officer for the National Association of Realtors.

At first, the focus was mainly on putting as many listings as possible on a Web site, he said. But now agencies are shifting gears and trying to provide additional tools that will help buyers analyze the information provided by the listings. That means including maps that can help a buyer figure out which neighborhood schools provide special-education services or showing house values and average taxes paid in an area.

"The trend is to provide information that helps consumers get a real sense of the neighborhood," Mr. Lesswing said.

Next on the technological horizon is electronic transaction management, a service that allows brokers and buyers to track and complete a sale electronically, from the moment a contract is signed until the deal's closing. A broker essentially creates a Web site where all the parties involved in a sale — from the appraiser and surveyor to the termite inspector and lawyers for every party — can file their reports. So instead of having to send legal documents back and forth, buyers and sellers can scan their information and post it on the Web site.

The posted documents include the purchase agreement, disclosure forms, appraisals and inspection reports. Companies that provide the transaction service use a variety of security measures to make sure the information remains confidential.

Buyers and sellers would still have to schedule a closing to sign all the documents, but that could happen just a few days after an offer was accepted, not weeks later.

Mr. Lesswing said only a few hundred out of more than 20,000 real estate agencies across the country now use an electronic transaction system. "It's really a consumer convenience, but there's still huge reluctance on the part of consumers to putting their personal information online," he said.

"But the reluctance is very generational," he added. "The younger generation of people who were raised on computers would use it in an instant, and a lot of them are just about getting old enough to become home buyers."

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