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Designing Top-Notch Real Estate Sites

This new series begins by looking at real estate site design as a fall-out of my own personal experiences this summer. I have literally spent hundreds of hours scouring real estate sites of all kinds as I went through the process of house-buying. The Internet has definitely made this whole process both interesting and much more enjoyable. Who would have thought ten years ago that one could perform most of the steps of house buying while sitting in the comfort of their own homes? The actual experience has helped me both as a buyer and a designer to appreciate the great real estate sites and to identify the multiple problems that exist on the not so great ones.

Most designers are aware of the multiple characteristics that are inherent in any quality web design: excellent clear-cut navigation, quick loading time, visual appeal, great use of "white" space, titling, graphics and color; usability and so on. All of these characteristics are imperative in assuring a high quality, easy to use real estate website. In the process of navigating hundreds of real estate sites, I have been able to identify several suggestions for designers who are fortunate enough to get real estate contracts.

Blitz Development offers excellent advice to designers and realtors in their article Problems with Real Estate Websites. Some of the pitfalls described in detail include:

- Poor Use of Frames
- Misuse of Pop Up Windows
- Flash Intros
- Use of Backgrounds
- Animation and Sound
- Not enough or inaccessible local content
- Information by request only
- Email Address not displayed
- Broken Links and Pages Under Construction
- Lack of Listing Photos

I totally agree with all of the points introduced above, though I have noticed that a brief well-timed Flash introduction or even Flash heading did enhance my visual experience. Long and irrelevant ones just got annoying though and made me search quickly for the "Skip Intro" link. Other than that, most of my pet peeves were touched on by the list - make sure to read their article (link above) for the nitty-gritties of each point.

Realtors are not tapping the Market

The biggest problem that I observed with real estate web sites is the lack of them. All major companies are plugged into the MLS listings, but only a small percentage of realtors are capitalizing on this fact - only a few actually have their own web site,...and if they do, a much smaller percentage has an appealing, effective one. Realty Times explains: "..., much potential online business is being lost -- if 41 percent of all buyers are getting real estate information from the Internet but most brokerages obtain 5 percent or less of their business from the web, someone isn't answering their e-mail, designing effective sites, or sending out localized newsletters." This is good news for designers though - if you can design crisp, efficient, perpetually updated web sites for realtors, there is a wide-open market!
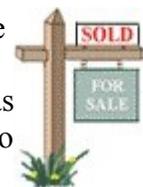
Suggestions for Creating Your Local Niche

My recommendation is to start locally. Go to "Google" and browse your local real estate market. Really analyze the existing web sites (again, the ones you see will likely belong to big companies with only a few actual individual realtor sites). Unless you live in a town with only one or two realtors, there should be a very viable market waiting to be tapped.

Start working on some generic designs. Think of your geography to start. Do you want to target an urban or rural market, or both? Think of how you can portray this geography visually. For instance, if you live in a desert climate, you will want to emphasize the beauty of the area. Think beautiful sunsets, vegetation, wide-open vistas with a wonderful home nestled within it all. If you live in a mountainous region, you would of course show that. You want to entice the buyer to "feel at home" - to think,.. "this is where I want to buy a house and create a home." Include useful tools such as mortgage calculators, maps to the featured properties, printable versions of the listing, and enlargeable photographs of the property.

You need to carefully plan out real estate sites to neatly and professionally provide all of the details of the property (tables and organized data fields are essential) as well as present lots and lots of pictures. One of my biggest disappointments while viewing online properties was the lack of photos. You will need a good digital camera obviously if you are going to offer to be the photographer as well as the designer (a package that really appeals to realtors!). Transportation and flexibility are also important in order to coordinate times for photo shoots and so on.

Make sure your java, CSS, PHP and XHTML is flawless. There is nothing worse than clicking on a very appealing property and getting an error message, which stumps the buyer's ability to savor the potential home. I can not stress enough - test, test, test your code! And keep it generic enough so that

all browsers and access modes (including dial up) can easily open each page. Active X and excess codes can be a real drawback too, which load up the viewer's cache and temp files with all sorts of code "left overs". I can not count the number of times I had to dump excess files from my Local Settings after doing a stint of real estate viewing. Very annoying!

Make sure contact is easy and stream-lined. Forms and email addresses should be readily available as soon as the buyer gets the urge to seek further information. Delivery must be flawless - the realtor needs to get a clear message from the buyer in record time. You also need to remind the realtor that it is imperative that they check their email on a consistent regular basis. I found some realtors were right on top of things - I would get a reply the same day. Others seemed to read their email infrequently and would not respond for days. Others didn't respond at all which irked me, causing me to try to contact them twice by having to phone them. If they are going to have a website, they need to be attentive or risk scorn from potential buyers.

Make a few mockups to use in your marketing campaign as well as flyers, brochures and web advertisements. Approach each realtor individually - no spamming! If you make your available packages attractive, reasonably priced, and comprehensive: chances are, a few will bite! Once you get a couple of contracts under your belt, you can gain a local reputation with realtors in your area, and continue to draw more business. Again, if you offer comprehensiveness, including photog sessions to take the pictures yourself, you will probably gain more consistent loyalty from realtors. You want them to not only hire you to design the website, but maintain it too. That's where the long-term income comes from in this particular niche. As you can imagine, this sort of site needs continual updates. Each day (for the busy realtors anyway) new properties come on the market, existing properties get sold - it could become a full time job for you if you offer the best package. When properties are sold, please tell your clients to let you know! There is nothing worse than cruising out-dated listings. It is very disappointing to find out an appealing property was sold last month! You can also include marketing in your package: offer to handle all of their online marketing initiative including search engine optimization and email marketing templates.

Examples of Effective Real Estate Sites and Sage Advice

Realty Goodies.com offers some interesting examples of effective real estate sites. You can view a Sample Real Estate site that shows one effective layout commonly used by realtors. Don Bell, a Web Learning Consultant offers a useful Powerpoint that outlines the characteristic of an effective support site, called Designing an Effective Support Site. Jeremy Horelick wrote an appealing article for realtors and real estate investors that encourages them to seek an effective designer for their site. As he points out, "Anyone can set up real estate web sites, but actually attracting visitors is a whole separate game, and one that's often best left to the pros. If you're not exactly a marketing whiz, you may benefit from contracting a real estate web site designer to handle your advertising needs. He or she can build your site from the ground up, starting with a private and secure database. Then comes the work of designing the pages, writing the code, and composing the

pictures and text."

There are literally hundreds of web designers who offer real estate and other business related designs. The trick to creating your own niche, especially if you wish to work on an international basis, is to create your own unique look. Work on designs that stand out from the rest, that go beyond the classic multi-column "template" look. By simply plugging "real estate web design" you can find hundreds of companies that offer effective but rather standard design. You want to make yours stand out from the rest. One good example of a company that does stand out is Design for Real Estate. Their use of color, layout, images and coding offers an exciting, contemporary look that inspires confidence in their ability to present a realtor with professional dignity and savvy. Rechannel Communications, Inc. also offers some interesting and appealing real estate designs. Re Data creates unique web sites for realtors, agents, brokers, appraisers, and other real estate industry customers. Metal Software not only offers interesting design, but also lengthy tips for realtors to consider when choosing to use the online environment for marketing their listings. These tips are useful to you too! Notice how these companies present an online "demo" as well as their portfolio to attract realtor clients. You too can become a real estate design "guru" - test the waters in your local area: this in itself could give you more work than you can handle. In time, you could go state or province-wide, even national or international as your skills and reputation grows. This can be a very viable niche for the creative, careful designer. Why not You?