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The Point Of Virtual Tours

by Stephen Canale

Virtual tours, what's the point? That's the question, or so it would seem, as industry insiders estimate that fewer than 10 percent of all current listings have any type of virtual tour, and visits to a variety of real estate web sites appear to affirm this observation.

While "virtual tour" technology offers incredible marketing opportunities this apparently has not been clearly communicated to the real estate industry, based on the current implementation rate.

Common misconceptions

Before the real value of virtual tours can be understood, two common misconceptions must be addressed.

First, photographs that simply "spin" or "rotate" do not truly qualify as virtual tours. While such graphics are cute and clever, their appeal to consumers is primarily as a novelty. Once the "newness" wears off, these technologies do not add as much value as many might think, simply because they are not actually "tours" by any definition of the word.

The second common misconception is that virtual tours sell homes. This statement is no different than saying that classified ads, yard signs or "just listed" postcards sell homes.

While it is true that all of these marketing methods may result in the sale of a particular home, the reality is that such marketing is valuable primarily because it creates opportunities with prospective customers and clients. Whether these opportunities result in the sale of the specific property being marketed, or another one altogether, is not really an issue of much importance.

What's the point?



Columnist Stephen Canale

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Like other useful marketing tools, virtual tours offer opportunities that are so persuasive that their use cannot rationally be discounted by any real estate professional who markets residential (or even commercial) listings.

First of all, virtual tours offer great value as a listing tool. It can be expected that potential sellers will hear promises of classified and magazine advertisements, MLS exposure, yard signs, open houses and broker tours from every agent they interview.

While each agent no doubt stresses the quality of their efforts regarding the above, when one competitor can visibly demonstrate a compelling marketing tool that is significantly different than what has been presented by other agents, that difference speaks volumes to the potential client.

Interviewing for a seller's business without a compelling virtual tour is to "expose your throat" to the competition. As long as none of the other agents vying for the seller's business demonstrates an effective virtual tour, you may survive the competition. However, this is a very risky way to approach business.

The second, and perhaps more important, reason to use virtual tours for each and every property that an agent brings to market can be summed up rather quickly: virtual tours add significant "stickiness" to real estate Web sites.

If you understand the nature of buyers who look to the Internet for property information, then you understand that they typically begin their search on the Web long before they are ready to view homes and meet with agents. The significance of this is that owning the first Web site a prospect visits isn't nearly as important as owning the site that they visit most often.

A compelling use of virtual tour technology (whether to market specific listings, individual subdivisions, or your entire market area) will keep visitors on your site, and will also keep them coming back.

When the time comes, and the prospective buyer is ready to initiate contact, the agent and Web site that have been most successful in "branding" and "bonding" with the potential buyer can be assured an opportunity.

Virtual tours defined

As has been already mentioned, simply using photographs that spin or rotate does not qualify as a true virtual tour. Unless the images are linked together in a meaningful way that offers the viewer the ability to control the "tour" through a property or neighborhood, they are nothing more than disjointed images that rotate.

One method that could enable the use of such images to provide a meaningful "tour" experience would be to create a web page that presents such images in a logical, but user controlled, order.

For instance, if the exterior image is presented first, and includes links that allow the consumer to "Enter Front Door" or to "Enter Garage" this sense of control would be appealing to viewers. Naturally, once either selection has been made, then additional and logical navigation options must be offered.

This allows the viewer to view otherwise disjointed images in a manner that presents the experience of actually touring the property.

Simply listing links to images of each room or feature on one page does not provide this needed sense of order and virtual presence. While all images may be viewed, without cohesion, the effect of previewing the property is incomplete, and the entire process can become quite uninteresting.

While constructing such a navigational scheme will take a considerable amount of effort, the rewards in creating Web site "stickiness" are well worth it, and sellers will certainly appreciate this approach when demonstrated as a listing tool, as well.

More attractive options for conveying the sense of previewing a home are systems such as VisualTour.com.

These types of Virtual Tours allow for the ordering of still and panoramic images into a single presentation which can either be presented through web sites or distributed as stand-alone self-running presentations via email, floppy disk or CD-ROM.

What distinguishes VisualTour.com's product from most others is the ability to add "Hot Spots" within the tour. These circular red "targets" can be placed within any of the views, and allow the viewer to make navigational choices similar to actually previewing a property in person.

For instance, when viewing the exterior of a property, Hot Spot targets may be visibly placed on the front door, the garage door and the bay window. Each Hot Spot controls the next image that will be displayed, truly offering the viewer control over the Virtual Tour. Naturally, each interior room can then present Hot Spot targets that lead to adjoining areas of the home.

Additionally, these Hot Spots include "pop-up" descriptions so the first time viewer can tell which door leads to the family room and which leads to the den, prior to actually continuing the tour. A demonstration tour on the vendor's [web site](#) even includes a blueprint layout of the home with Hot Spots leading directly to each room.

The VisualTour application offers a truly compelling way to present and preview homes, all without physically being present.

Other features such as the ability to zoom in and out, auto-run the tours or allow for manual advance also provide greater control to the viewer, which is fundamental to consumer acceptance.

Perhaps most compelling is the ability for agents to record "voice over" descriptions for each image, coming as close to the experience of an actual property showing as is currently practical. These too can be turned on or off by the viewer, thereby offering meaningful content, but only for those who want it.

While using the VisualTour.com solution does require that agents take their own digital pictures and then assemble the tour, the software provided makes the task obtainable, even for novices.

This investment of time turns out to be quite the bargain when you consider that the immediacy provided by self-creation means that agents could attend listing presentations with the prospective tour already created for the seller's approval.

Because the tours themselves are hosted on VisualTour's servers, and they also now offer unlimited Virtual Tours for a flat fee of just \$30 per month, the value is further enhanced.

A business necessity

Regardless of what type of technology is ultimately used to present real and meaningful virtual property tours, choosing not to use a compelling virtual tour as part of your marketing is as

strategic as ignoring the use of Web sites, yard signs or even classified advertisements.

You might still sell a good deal of real estate without any of these marketing tools, but not nearly as much as you would with them!

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