NAR's e-PRO® Certification: Day 2

Student Manual

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V 1.2

Introduction

WELCOME

Congratulations on successfully completing Day1 of NAR's e-PRO® certification program and welcome to Day 2. In Day 2, we will discuss how to develop a social media strategy that is sustainable. You will also review how to make yourself more mobile, more efficient, and more profitable by integrating technology into your current business.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN

The modules in Day 2 are self-paced. The content of the course is organized in six modules with the following learning objectives.

1. e-Strategy

    –   Develop a Hub for your business to capture and convert potential customers and clients.
    –   Connect with consumers through non-real estate–related sites and turn those connections into clients.

2. Content and SEO Strategy

    –   Identify strategies for developing content.
    –   Optimize your Hub so that consumers can find it on the Web.
    –   Use analytics tools to measure consumer traffic to your Hub.

3. e-Office

    –   Become familiar with cloud computing.
    –   Learn how to use portable and mobile devices to do business anywhere, anytime.

4.   Twitter and Foursquare

–   Learn about location-based services and how they can help you engage with your chosen community and improve your business.

5.   Rich Media

–   Choose equipment to create still photos, video, and audio files to enhance your communication.

6.   Technology Toolbelt

–   Get up to speed on the latest hardware.
–   Identify hardware that will enhance your business and make you faster, more efficient, and cost effective.

Unique Learning Experience

What differentiates Day 2 Online from Day 1 Classroom is the online learning environment. In Day 2 Online, you will have:

>   A media-rich learning experience

>   Hands-on discovery of tools via Field Trips

>   Online discussion forums with your peers

>   Access to a library of resources

12 Months to Complete Day 2 Online

From the date you register and pay for the Day 2 Online Course, you have 12 months to complete it.

Final Exam

The final exam consists of 30 multiple-choice questions. The required passing score for the final exam is 80%. You will have an unlimited number of attempts to meet or exceed the passing score criteria.

Application Requirement

After passing the exams for Day 1 and Day 2, you'll need to complete the application process. NAR's e-PRO® Certification requires a one-time application fee (payable online) of $110.50. After submitting your application, members who meet the criteria for the certification will be conferred as an e-PRO®.

Benefits Available When You Earn NAR's e-PRO® Certification

Benefits for REALTORS® with NAR's e-PRO® certification include:

> Usage of the e-PRO® logo and name

> Differentiation at Realtor.org and the White Pages at Realtor.com

> Customizable marketing materials

> Online referral directory

> Downloadable certificate

> Lapel pin available for purchase through the REALTOR® Team Store

1. e-Strategy

In this module:

> Hub and Spokes

> Different types of Hubs

> Picking a custom domain name for your Hub

> Traditional website as your Hub

> Blogging as your Hub

HUB AND SPOKES

Now that you've developed a high-level understanding of marketing and connecting with modern consumers, it's time to learn how to take the abstract concepts you've learned and apply them to concrete strategies. One of the most important strategies for electronic marketing is called simply Hub and Spokes.

As shown in Figure 1.1, your Hub is the foundation of your Web presence. It's your home base—the place you want to drive consumers to so that you may do business with them. Your Hub is used to demonstrate expertise, build community, and capture and convert clients. Spokes are touch points where you interact with your community or communities in all of your online activities and, in many cases, your offline activities as well. The engagement and interaction that occur in the Spokes can be used to drive traffic back to your Hub.

Figure 1.1: Visualizing Hub and Spokes
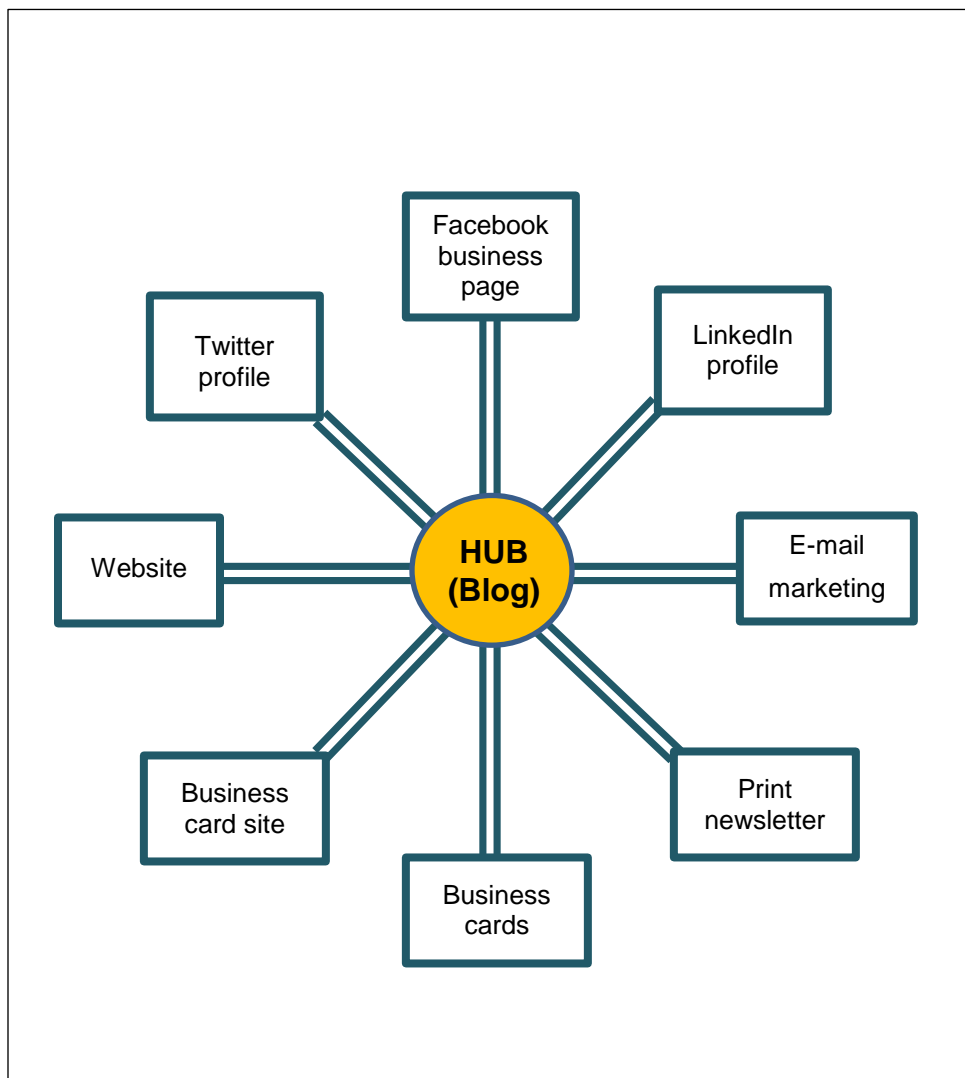
While participation in a variety of places is essential to building a strong online presence, many real estate professionals are getting disappointing results from their online activities because they don't have a way to capture information and convert connections into clients. The Hub is the vehicle for the essential capture and conversion process to take place.

Key Components of Your Hub

Your Hub is the one place online or the central location where all your online and offline marketing sends clients and prospects. The information you have used in your various online profiles is amplified and reiterated

here. While the audience for any of your online profiles may be restricted to participants in that community only, this is a more public place to display and promote your personal and business information. Since all of your online profiles should be consistent and reinforce each other while being appropriate for the online venue they are provided for, you should be able to repurpose some of that information for this deeper and more thorough location. Your Hub should demonstrate in a professional manner:

☐ Who you are

- – What are your core values?
- – What are your interests?

☐ What you know

There are many agents who say they are number one. Telling consumers that you're number one doesn't demonstrate expertise, it demonstrates ego. Today's consumer doesn't care what you claim; they care about your expertise.

If you're a buyer's agent, consider articulating:

- – Your negotiating expertise
- – Your ability to obtain difficult financing
- – Your experience working with investors

If you're a listing agent, consider discussing:

- – Your ability to market or expose the property to a wide pool of buyers
- – Your sources of incoming traffic or your historical marketing statistics

☐ Where you are

Real estate expertise is local. Practice varies from state to state, region to region, and sometimes even town to town. Consumers want to hire someone who understands the area and community as

well as the customary usages and laws. Demonstrating your connections to the area you serve is important.

☐ Why they should care

People need to be able to connect with you. You learned the concepts of social objects (things you have in common) and social capital (a predisposition to want to connect with and do business with you) in Day 1, and they should be considered in all your online activities; reinforcing them here at your Hub is important. You'll remember that a social object is anything two people have in common. It could be a sports team, a favorite restaurant, a place you grew up, or the high school you attended. The more complex the object, the more handles you have for discussion. This common ground is the beginning of a relationship. Think about how consumers may react to content you share on your Hub because it's something you have in common with them, and how they will feel if you are providing them with something they want and value. These social techniques predispose people to like you and trust you, making them more likely to contact you.

☐ How you do what you do

Many consumers think that all real estate licensees are created equally. However, as salespeople we strive to be different and to set ourselves apart from the pack. Here is where you can establish your point of differentiation. Are you an investment expert? A specialist in historic homes? Someone skilled at working with first-time home buyers? Or, do you utilize technology in a unique manner that makes it easier for the buyer or seller to work with you? Whatever your business model or methods, here is the place to exhibit them so you stand out.

☐ How to contact you

When you interact with consumers on other sites, they may head back to your Hub to find out more information about you and how to reach you. Make it easy for them to contact you.

Calls to Action

Your Hub should offer consumers something of value that inspires them to take action. For example, you might offer white papers on topics that interest your target market or a means of subscribing to your property feed or blog. Calls to action are where real estate professionals can capture and convert consumers to clients.

Calls to action may include:

> Sales:
  – Learn more
  – Register

> Marketing:
  – Sign up
  – Feedback
  – Share

For example, your Hub might include any of the following:

> Search for properties

> What is our home worth?

> Receive e-mail updates on market statistics

> Request more information

Registration processes should be kept as simple as possible. Registration forms that are overly detailed can turn consumers away. Fields for first name, last name, e-mail address, phone number, and the ability to enter a specific message are generally sufficient. Only require them to submit an e-mail to contact you.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF HUBS

There are many different types of Hubs that be used as the home base of your business. You may already have one or more of them that could be enhanced to include the key components of a successful Hub.

Traditional Website

A traditional website can be used as the Hub of your business, but don't make the mistake that many agents did in the early 2000s. If consumers go to your website, they aren't going to be compelled by a large glossy photo of you and generic home buying and selling tips. Your website should be customized to include the key components for your Hub.

Property information is key to many websites such as this, and creating a larger inventory of properties has long been thought of as a fundamental need. As a result, IDX was developed.

IDX (Internet Data Exchange) gives MLS participants the tool they need to display each other's listings on their Internet websites. Under IDX brokers consent to display each other's listings online.

Home search and the display of property listings are a beneficial element of a website, but they have been diluted because of the proliferation of property information on the Web. There is significant competition between aggregators, corporations, companies, and agents to be found in property searches. A search for "San Francisco Homes for Sale" returned almost 2.8 million results. A search for one sold home on Birch Way in San Rafael, California, returned 62,400 results. In an MLS system with 1,000 IDX feeds to brokers and agents websites, each property is in over 1,000 places on the Web since many of those sites also feed the aggregator sites previously mentioned. With that much competition for a limited set of consumer's eyes, it's very difficult for real estate professionals to differentiate themselves through home searches.

IDX home search can be a valuable tool to capture and convert clients once they land on your site, but it's not enough. By demonstrating who you are, what you know, and how you work—as Maria Babaev, MBA, does with her website, LuxuryLongIsland.com (Figure 1.2)—you have an opportunity to gain the attraction and the trust of prospective customers

most likely to work with you because of your unique personality and skill set. It's more likely that someone will choose you because they like or trust you than because they happened to see a property on a site you're attached to.

Figure 1.2: www.LuxuryLongIsland.com

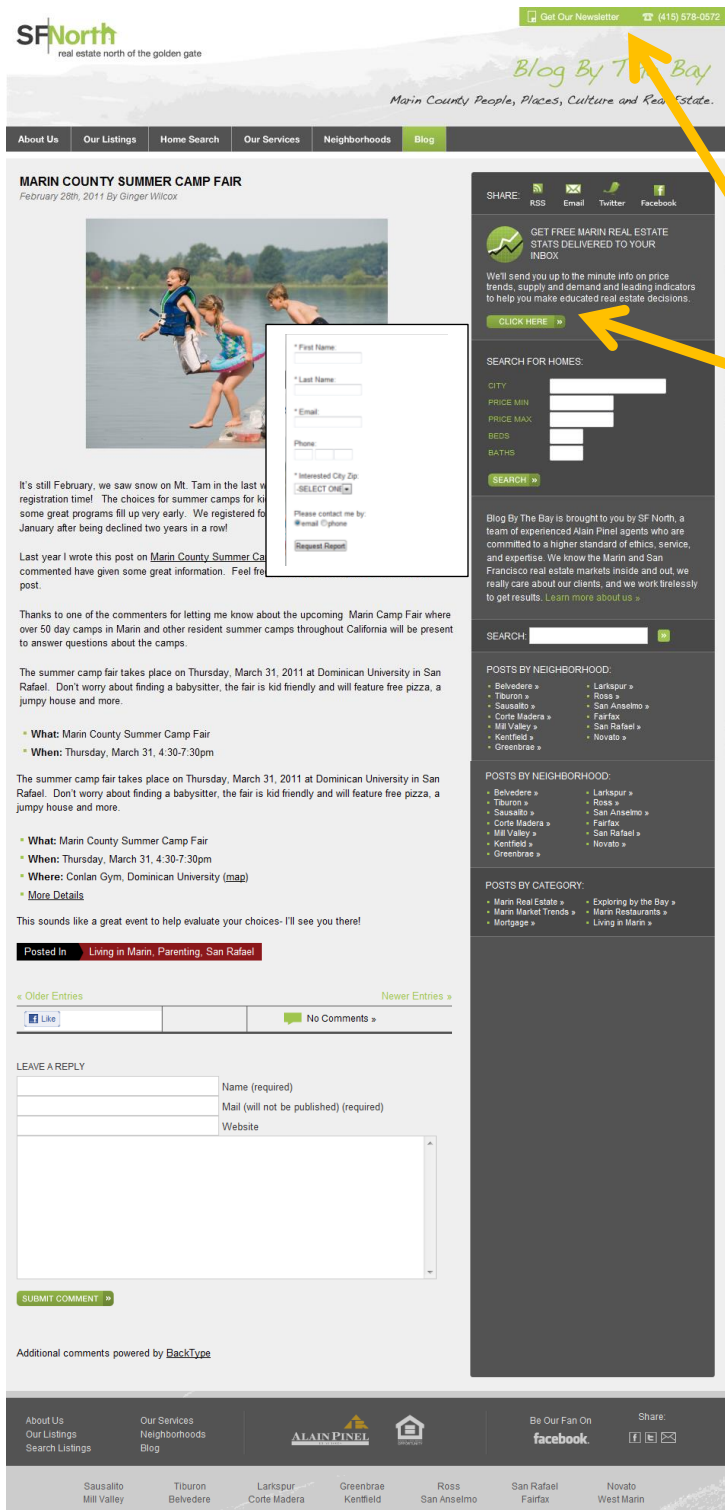Source: Reprinted with permission of Maria Babaev, MBA, SFR®, e-PRO®.

Blog

A blog can be defined simply as a website with regular entries, which are typically displayed in reverse-chronological order. While blogging is time consuming, it's also one of the most effective methods to demonstrate the key elements of the Hub. Using a blog as your Hub is also an excellent way to increase your rank in organic (unpaid) searches.

The differences between a blog and a website have been vanishing in the last few years as blogging platforms have changed and websites have become more fully featured. The WordPress blogging platform has morphed into a full content management system. Many blogging platforms have added features enabling them to have the journaling function of a blog combined with the features of a more traditional website with multiple pages, and the ability to add video, photos, documents, and real estate listing information plus area information as well.

When blogging first became popular in the real estate industry, most real estate professionals had a static website and a separate blog. Today, you will find many bloggers now use one platform, or Hub, that includes both the elements of the blog and additional pages of content, including an IDX property search to make a full-featured site.

A blog is a useful Hub because it's easy to personalize, easy to change, and very flexible. For an example of an effectively designed blog, see Blog by the Bay (Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3: www.blogbythebay.com

This blog offers consumers an option to sign up for a newsletter and market stats, which requires a simple registration.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Ginger Wilcox, GRI, CRS, e-PRO®.

Facebook Business Page

A Facebook business page is a type of blog because it's updated with regular entries as part of the News Feed feature. Facebook business pages are differentiated from the personal profiles because they are dedicated to a group or business rather than being someone's personal space. With a good Facebook page it can be easy to gain traction because it is positioned on a platform that has mass adoption. Though a Facebook business page could be a Hub, we must caution you that Facebook is a free platform that is rapidly changing. If you don't own the platform and you don't have specific rights to control the space or its content, you don't have control of your Hub. However, Facebook business pages can be a great Spoke to drive traffic to a Hub built on a platform you own or control.

For an example of a Facebook business page, visit Linda Davis's Ledyard CT page: www.facebook.com/LedyardCT/. (Note that you need to log in to your Facebook account to visit this page.)

"Squeeze" or Landing Page

These pages are single-page sites that make an offer of a product in exchange for contact information, and in other businesses, money. In the real estate business, we are in a position to offer information that is of value to the consumer. So you can take some of the questions that you are most commonly asked and generate a white paper. If you write a few of these (and they don't need to be too long), you can create materials with your personal, company, and licensing information that can be sent to consumers as a PDF file after you collect their contact information and permission to stay in touch with them.

For example, Century 21 Gold Advantage has landing pages (see Figure 1.4) that offer consumers a free list of up-to-date foreclosed and short-sale properties in the greater Philadelphia area.

Figure 1.4: Landing Page Example from Century 21 Gold Advantage

In exchange for contact information, this landing page offers a free list of foreclosed and short sale homes for sale.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Century 21 Advantage Gold.

"Business Card" Site

Business card sites can act as a Hub for agents who have a wide variety of interests and a broad online presence. Business card sites are an aggregator for all of the places you can be found on the Web. For an example, see Figure 1.5.

Figure 1.5: Business Card Site for Anne M. Rubin, CRS, GRI

Source: Reprinted with permission of Anne M. Rubin, CRS, GRI.

The most obvious benefit of sites like these is the ease of modification and the ability to make changes quickly and simply with little or no technical training. It is the equivalent of an electronic billboard and should be a part of any real estate professional's electronic marketing tool kit. Even if you choose not to use a business card site as your Hub, there is a benefit to having a website devoted to you, bearing your name, and informing consumers about your experience and services, which makes it easy for them to find you when they search for you by name.

Business Card Site Vendors

> **Follr**

Follr (www.follr.com) is a free service that enables you to create a branded social card that includes all of your online profiles, résumé, and offline contact information on one page. The free version lets you put six social identities, two activity streams, and two custom links. The Pro version includes 100 social identities, 10 activity streams, ten custom links, search engine optimization, Google Analytics for tracking effective links and more template options.

> **WordPress Business Card Templates**

There are a number of templates available on the WordPress blogging platform to create a business card theme for yourself, including the Digital Business Card WordPress Theme: http://john.do/the-digital-business-card-WordPress-theme.

Field Trip

Create Your Own Business Card Site

Take advantage of the free business card site offered by Follr.com:

Instructions

> Visit www.follr.com.

> Select "Create a Free Account."

> Fill out all the registration fields, select "REGISTER WITH EMAIL," and follow the prompts.

PICKING A CUSTOM DOMAIN NAME FOR YOUR HUB

It's advisable to have a custom domain name for your Hub. Some platforms do not give you this option, which should be consideration when choosing your platform. Your domain name sets the tone for your website and will identify it forever. Make sure your domain name is consistent with your branding. Descriptive names can help visibility in online searches; if it isn't interesting, people won't click on it! Consider the following when selecting your domain name:

> Pay attention to copyright, licensing, ethics, and association rules.

> Be memorable and catchy when possible.

> Be careful of length.

> Avoid abbreviations and punctuation.

> Avoid commonly misspelled or mispronounced words/terms.

> Consider keywords related to your niche in your domain name, for example:

- www.kansascityrealestate.com (residential properties in Kansas City, Missouri)
- www.bestchicagocondos.com (condominiums in Chicago)
- www.lakeshoredreams.com (lake properties in Wisconsin)

In choosing your domain name, the .com extension is the one most often associated with business, though it is advisable to own as many variants as possible (.info, .biz, .net, .me, .co) to have the most control over your domain name).

Be cautious when using your own name as your domain name on any site other than a business card site. It generally does not work for other types of Hubs since it is, by itself, not indicative of your specialty, your product, your services, or your market. Consider what would be interesting to your target consumer. If the Hub is not a business card, consumers are less likely to be intrigued by yourname.com than whattheyareinterestedin.com.

Field Trip
Check Domain Names

GoDaddy is a popular domain name registrar. If you don't have your own website, but are thinking you will purchase one, what domain names are available?

Instructions

> Visit www.GoDaddy.com.

> Enter a domain that you would like to register and then select "Search Domain."

> Next, consider the following questions:

- Are you able to register this domain and are there others that are available for sale?
- If yes, how much do those domain names cost?

TRADITIONAL WEBSITE AS YOUR HUB

A traditional website can be the Hub of your online presence, but remember that your website will be what people see when they look for you. This online presence must include all the key components we discussed before—who you are, what you do, where you are, why they should care, and how you do what you do.

The homepage will generally be the initial point of contact with your consumers. A good homepage will answer the questions "What do you do?" and "What kind of information do you have that I need?" Consumers will make a split-second decision on whether they'll stay to learn more or click on to the next website. Make your page "sticky" with content they need and want.

An "About" page can further reinforce the trust factor. Explain what you do, in-depth. Today's consumer wants to know who you are, why you do what you do, and what makes you special. Get creative and reach beyond a traditional bio. Consider video testimonials for a third-party recommendation. This page should make an impact and impress your potential clients. Remember that today's consumers don't just want you to say you're number one, they want to know what you know. Prove it!

1. Always work with a website company that allows you to own your own domain and the content on your website so if you decided to go somewhere else, you can take your content with you. This is called a "fee for hire."

2. Keep the content fresh. Set aside a few hours each month to review your site and make any updates. Outdated content is the quickest way to bounce a potential consumer off your site.

3. Have unique content. Template content will not set your site apart from others in your industry. Take the time to customize the content on your site to fit the needs of your target market.

4. Make sure to have a call to action and your contact information on every page.

5. With traditional websites, it can be hard to showcase your personality. Let visitors see your personality in action by connecting them to your social media accounts. If you have a Facebook business page, you can include a widget on your site so they can join your Facebook page. Also have a link to your Twitter, LinkedIn, and YouTube accounts so they can connect with you on these sites as well. This can help turn a visitor into a connected prospect.

Resources for Design/Hiring a Designer-Developer

Hiring a designer or developer can be costly in terms of both time and money. Before hiring someone to design or finetune your website, thoroughly check references and review sites that person has created for others. If you don't like what you see, don't hire the designer or developer. When checking references, ask about the design process as well as the satisfaction level of the final product.

It is important to have an idea of the functions you need and the types of content you will include on your website. Have a written contract in place with whomever you hire that details exactly what you can expect from the final product. If the price sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Hire someone as "fee for hire," so you own all the content and make sure you are the registered owner of the domain name. Make sure that you spell out all of the details you want with your contractor so that both of you are 100% clear as to what services will be performed.

A website can be your own or can even be provided by your company or your association. Some companies offer agents free websites and blogs. If you can create a site that tells potential clients who you are, what type of real estate you sell, and how to find you online, you may want to consider one of these sites. Check with your company and board to see what they offer. In the next section, we will discuss blogging platforms. Many of these platforms can also be used to easily create inexpensive (or free!) Websites.

BLOGGING AS YOUR HUB

There are benefits and drawbacks to developing and maintaining a blog as the Hub of your online strategy. Blogging can take a significant time investment on a weekly basis and results will not be immediate. Bloggers open themselves up to commentary from their readers and even their management and competition (although comments can be turned off). Many real estate practitioners are fearful of blogging because they are not trained writers. They don't want to produce content that is unprofessional or silly. And then, there is the challenge of what to write about. Even the best and most experienced bloggers get blogger's block.

While blogging has significant barriers, it's also one of the most rewarding online activities a real estate professional can undertake. Real estate professionals who are able to maintain a consistent blogging schedule with quality content have greater chances to:

> Establish their expertise as a valued member of their local community.

> Demonstrate their unique personality and interests.

> Develop a following and establish trust with prospective clients.

> Keep existing clients by educating them and staying in front of them.

> Exert influence over the decisions of their readers who develop a relationship over time.

> Gain exposure to potential clients by ranking high in search engines. Search engines love websites with consistently updated, relevant content!

The ongoing effort required to have a successful blog discourages many real estate professionals. Blogging is not a get-rich-quick type of activity, as is really any other activity a real estate professional many undertake. Developing a following of people who trust you takes time and energy to build, regardless of whether it's online or offline. Real estate professionals who have been successful with direct mail farms say it generally takes two years to generate regular results. While generating results through a blog generally takes significantly less than two years, the concept is the

same. Success through blogging or really any other social media channel comes from consistency and repetition over time.

Choosing a Blogging Platform

There are many blogging platforms to choose from, and none of them is perfect. When picking a blogging platform, consider:

☐ Who owns the content?
☐ Can you take it with you?
☐ How easy is it to take it with you?
☐ Can you brand it to your own domain?
☐ Can you make it look the way you want?
☐ Can you integrate it with your MLS search?

If you are brand new to blogging, get a free one first. Test it out. Play around and write a few posts before you announce it to the world or make a large financial investment. Most people get all fired up about blogging and then forget the commitment it takes to make a blog work. Don't make the blog your Hub until you have been doing it long enough to know that you won't abandon it easily. The most beautifully designed blog in the world will be completely wasted if you don't use it. The best blogging platform is one that you will easily use.

When choosing a blog platform, there are platforms maintained by others and platforms that you maintain yourself.

Generally, platforms maintained by others require less technical skill. They will handle software updates and maintenance, saving you time and money. The downside is that you generally have less control and flexibility with both performance and design, which is why many bloggers start on free platforms maintained by an outside firm and eventually switch to a self-hosted platform that they or their Web developer maintain.

The challenge using platforms maintained by others is lack of control. If you use a free platform, someone else owns the Hub of your business. You need to be aware of the terms of service for platforms outside of your control. You should also pay close attention to how frequently they make changes, how those changes may impact your content or site, and how

frequently the site goes down. Your Hub is your 24-7 office. When it's down, your online office is closed for business.

Platforms Maintained by Others

> **Facebook Business Pages**

Facebook business pages (https://www.facebook.com/business) allow you to create a presence for your business and promote it within the Facebook community. Facebook users can opt in to receive messages on Facebook about your business by becoming "fans." Facebook business pages can be used to share information and engage in discussion with fans.

Facebook allows you have tabs with different types of content. These tabs allow visitors to see different pages of content within your Facebook business page. Tabs can be customized to match your branding. Unless you are comfortable editing HTML, you will probably need to hire a designer to customize your tab(s). Note that Facebook business pages also allow you to add third-party applications to syndicate your posts to Twitter and other networks.

Facebook business pages are currently free. Ads will be displayed on your page, but you have no control over which ads will be placed on your page, including your competitors. Facebook changes its design and features regularly, so extensive and/or expensive customization may quickly become obsolete.

> **ActiveRain**

Setting up an ActiveRain blog is easy. You don't need to know how to write HTML code, and themes can be installed with one click. ActiveRain blogs (see Figure 1.6 as an example) use internal systems to help the blogger automatically ping Google, and create keyword-rich URLs so the search engines can find them. In addition, ActiveRain offers widgets that enable you to add content to the sidebar of your blog. (Note: If you use widgets on your ActiveRain blog, the advertisements will go away.) At this time, you cannot add multiple pages on your ActiveRain blog. ActiveRain offers additional services for a fee.

Figure 1.6: Jennifer Fivelsdal's ActiveRain Blog

Jennifer's ActiveRain blog allows consumers to search specific geographic areas for homes.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Jennifer Fivelsdal, GRI, ABR®, SRES®, SFR®.

> **Blogger**

Blogger is a free and simple blogging platform from Google. The setup process is very user friendly. You can edit your blog posts in a simple WYSIWYG (What You See Is What You Get) format or in HTML format if you have basic HTML skills. You can also e-mail blog posts to the blog using a service integral to the platform called Mail2Blogger, which generates a specific e-mail address. For an example of a blog created using Blogger, see Figure 1.7.

Google blogs are created on a blogspot domain (yourdomainname.blogspot.com) unless you pay for a custom domain. You can buy your own custom domain and add it through the Google dashboard or buy directly from Google for $10 a year. Blogger enables you to have more than one contributor on your Blogger blog. It accepts images, audio, and video files. You can add multiple pages with Blogger's pages features and there are plenty of widgets available.

Figure 1.7: Tami DeLand and Steve Hansen's Blogger Blog

Tami and Steve's blog has a widget that allows consumers to contact them by TXT.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Tami DeLand, GRI, and Steve Hansen, GRI.

> **WordPress.com**

WordPress.com (http://wordpress.com) is a free, hosted blogging platform. While slightly more complicated than Blogger, WordPress.com is still fairly simple to use and has more customization options. If you plan to expand your blog later or switch it to a different blogging platform, WordPress.com is often a good starting solution because your content is simple to transfer at a later date. WordPress.com has lots of templates and a strong online support community. WordPress.com has 3GB of storage space and built-in WordPress analytics to help you track the effectiveness of your posts and pages.

WordPress.com also allows you to have a public blog or a private blog. As we mentioned before, we highly recommend you create a public-facing blog to maximize your exposure to potential customers. You can customize your WordPress.com blog, with a variety of themes and widgets, which are applications in the blogging platform that enable you to customize the content and appearance of your blog without knowing how to code. You can add multiple pages to your WordPress.com blog, such as an About Me page or a page for your home listings. You could even create a fully featured website using WordPress.com. If you ever choose to transfer your blog to another platform, WordPress.com makes it easy for you to export it.

Platforms Maintained by You

> **TypePad**

TypePad (www.typepad.com) is a blogging platform similar to Blogger or WordPress. It has an easy-to-use interface and hundreds of theme options, which can be customized. Monthly fees range from $8.95 to $29.95 a month. With TypePad you can use your own custom domain. Multiple authors are supported on the higher payment plans. If you want full control, upgrade to the unlimited or premium plans. All TypePad plans include unlimited storage space

for your files. Pictures and video and audio files are all supported on the platform.

For an example of a blog created using TypePad, see Figure 1.8.

Figure 1.8: Linda Davis's TypePad Blog
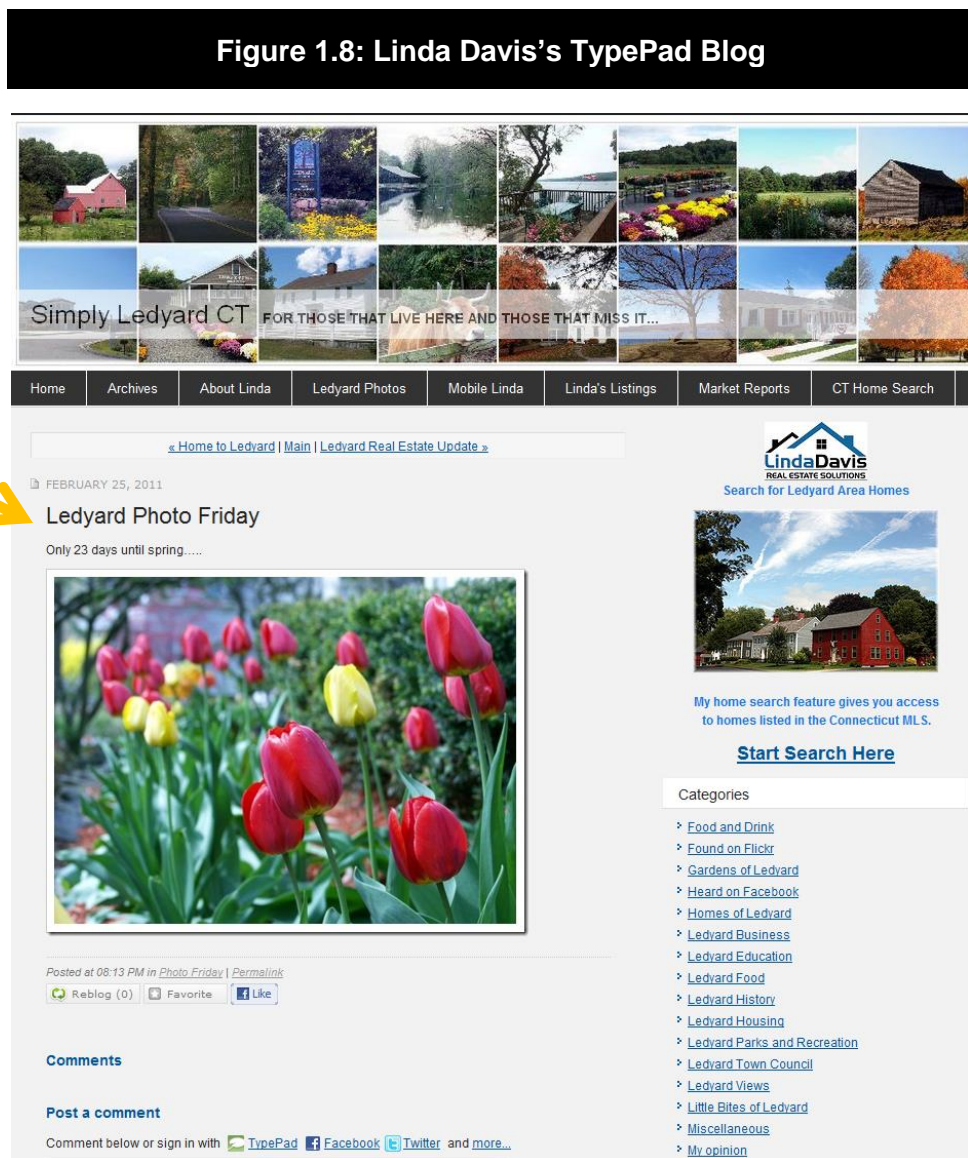
At the end of each workweek, Linda Davis peppers her blog with Photo Friday—images that reflect her love for photography.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Linda Davis, GRI, CRS, e-PRO®, SRES®, SFR®.

> **WordPress.org**

The underlying software that powers WordPress.org (http://wordpress.org) is free and open source, which means that the software is created by a community of developers and is offered free of licensing fees. Users who choose to maintain their own WordPress.org blog are responsible for hosting charges, which typically cost less than $10 a month.

For a look at http://soldbysheets.com, the WordPress.org blog maintained by Andy Sheets and his wife Andrea, see Figure 1.9.

Figure 1.9: Andy Sheets's WordPress.org Blog

Andy's blog incorporates responsive design, which means that smartphone users can navigate the content and media of his site as easily as laptop users.
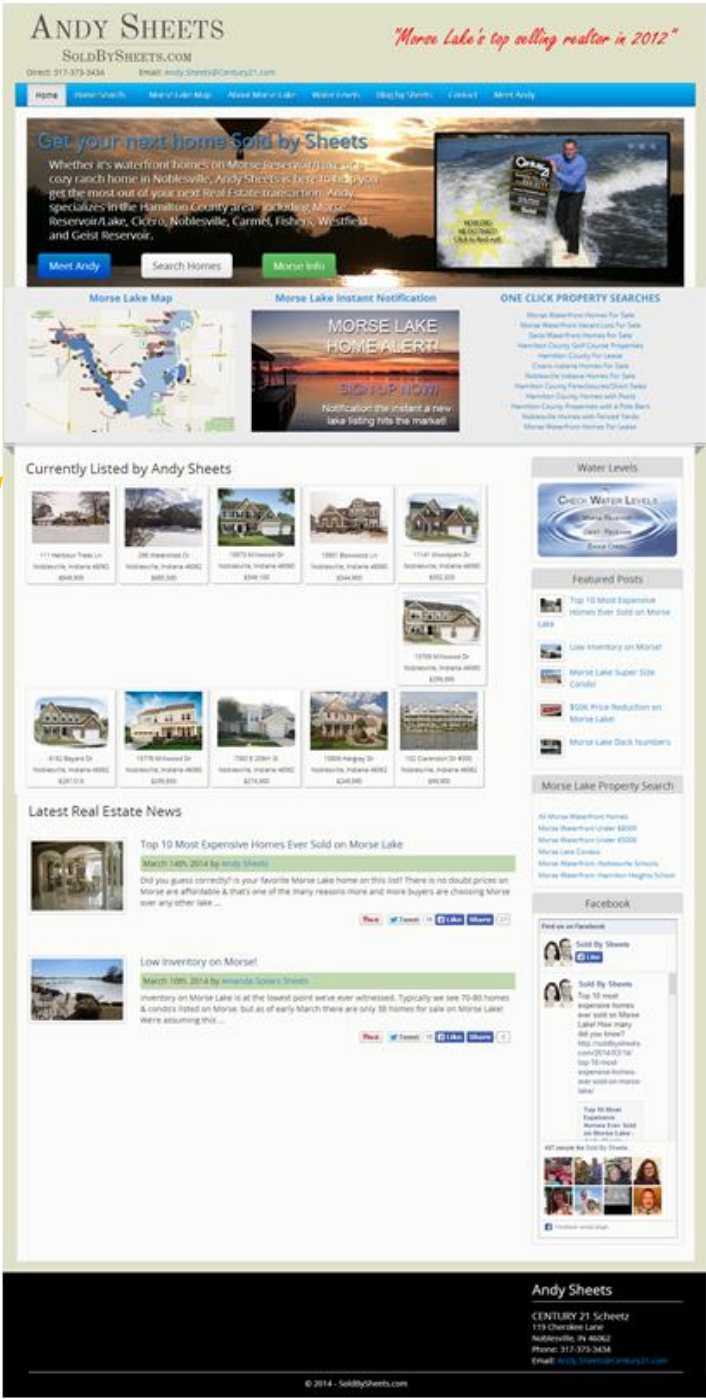
Source: Reprinted with permission of Andy Sheets, SFR®.

The WordPress.org platform has been adopted as the content creation platform of choice by many real estate professionals because of the wide variety of themes and plugins—code installed on a platform that extends the functionality of the platform. There are free and paid plugins. Many of the most popular plugins are free and are supported by donations from users; premium plugins are also available and vary in cost from $10 to $100. Must-have plugins include:

1. Akismet: Helps filter spam comments from comments that are not spam.
2. All in one SEO Pack: This all-in-one search engine optimization tool uses search engines' algorithms to create the most relevant search results. This plugin also creates metatags automatically.
3. WP Backup: This is one plugin that helps you keep a virtual backup of your WordPress.org submissions.

Note that support levels vary for plugins. Some plugins conflict with others.

Not Sure Which Blogging Platform to Choose?

For a quick reference chart that compares features and functionality of all the primary blogging platforms discussed in this section, see Figure 1.10.

Figure 1.10: Blogging Platform Comparison Chart

	Cost	Hosted?	Technical Difficulty	Custom Domain?	Design Flexibility	SEO Benefits	Portability	Ability to add IDX	Sponsored Ads?
Platforms Maintained by Others									
Facebook Business Page	Free		Easy	No	Limited	Very good	Limited	No	Yes (no control to remove ads)
ActiveRain	$39.95/mo.		Easy	Yes	Limited	Excellent	Limited	Yes	Yes
Realtor.com Featured Blog	Free	Yes	Easy	Yes	Limited	Good	No	No	No ads
Posterous	Free	Yes	Easy	Yes, addl. Fee	Customizable	Good	Limited	No	No ads
Blogger	Free	Yes	Easy	Yes, addl. fee	Template avail., limited changes	Good	Partially	No	No ads
WordPress.com	Free	Yes	Easy to moderate	Yes, addl. fee	Template avail., limited changes	Very good	Yes	No	No ads
Platforms Maintained by You									
TypePad	Varies	No	Moderate to advanced	Yes	Customizable	Excellent	Yes, although difficult	Yes	No ads
WordPress.org	$10/mo.	No	Moderate to advanced	Yes	Highly customizable	Excellent	Yes	Yes	No ads

Additional Platforms to Consider

> **Joomla**

Like WordPress.org, Joomla (www.joomla.org) is a free, open-source content management system that can be downloaded and hosted on your own hosting platform. You will need a developer to design and implement your site unless you have a technical background.

> **Drupal**

Drupal (https://drupal.org) is a free, open-source content software that enables users to publish content on the Web. Like Joomla, you will need a developer to design and implement Drupal on your site. Drupal is highly customizable with many add-ons available.

2. Content and SEO Strategy

In this module:

> Content for your blog

> Getting your Hub found

> Measuring your success

> Capturing and converting people on your website

> Property marketing on the Web

> E-mail marketing

CONTENT FOR YOUR BLOG

Now that we know where you are going to blog (your platform) we need to think about what you are going to blog about (your content). Since the primary attraction of any Hub is the content that it provides to interested consumers—not to mention the relevance of the content to their interests, needs, and desires—we need to have a thoughtful plan for what content we will provide to them.

Finding Your Voice

> Determine your target audience.

> Determine what their interests are and write about those things.

> Decide what kind of personality you want to convey.

> Read other bloggers to see what type of writing feels most comfortable to you (casual, formal, humorous).

> Practice, practice, practice—the more you write, the more comfortable you will be.

> Be prepared to evolve as a blogger.

Eight Ideas for Developing Content

1. Consumer Questions

What kind of questions do you repeatedly get from your customers? These questions are great blog posts. Answer them on your blog and the next time you get a question from a client or prospective client, send the link to your blog post. It demonstrates your expertise, saves you time, and is a good way to establish a stronger readership for your blog.

2. Questions From Other Agents

Many agents find that they spend part of their time educating their fellow agents. What questions are agents asking you? Would consumers benefit from it? If so, make them blog posts.

3. Discussions at Lunch

Everyone loves to talk about real estate. As real estate professionals, we get asked questions no matter where we go—at school, at parties and events, even at lunch. Use these questions for blog topics. The next time someone asks you a question at lunch, you might have the opportunity to say "I just wrote about this on my blog." This is a great way to take your offline relationships online. Curiosity will often create a new reader for your site!

4. Your E-mail Inbox

Your e-mail inbox is a tremendous source of blog content. The National Association of REALTORS® and your state and local REALTOR® boards e-mail you on a weekly basis. These e-mails are often great aggregators for relevant real estate content. Prune them for content you can customize and use on your blog. (Don't copy and paste unless you have permission; remember the rules of plagiarism!)

5.   Topics From What You Read

Whether you are reading the newspaper, local or real estate blogs, or national magazines and websites, your reading is a great place to find blog topic ideas. Ever notice that newspaper stories about local real estate are inaccurate? Use these inaccuracies as a basis for blog content to educate your local market about what is really happening in the real estate market.

6.   Topics From Your Community

What are the people in your community talking about? What topics are of interest to them? Hot measure on the ballot? A controversial new subdivision? Excitement over the grand opening of a new school or park? These topics can all be good blog content and may even be a good opportunity to bring in a guest blogger who is passionate about the topic.

Listen to the conversations happening on your Twitter and Facebook streams or in comments on local blogs to find out what topics are of interest to people in your local community.

7.   Regular Features

Consider regular features that your community will come to rely on:

- –   Photo Friday
- –   Weekend updates
- –   Restaurant reviews
- –   Mortgage updates

8.   Keep a "Folder" for New Ideas

Create a folder on your computer, in your e-mail inbox, and on your smartphone for new ideas. Sometimes just jotting down some key words and phrases will help you create your next blog post.

Outsourcing Content

There are times when you may want or need to outsource content. There are many resources where you can find legitimate written content for your blog. Possible sources include:

> **HouseLogic REALTOR® Content Resource**

HouseLogic (http://members.houselogic.com/start) is a free source of consumer information and tools from by the National Association of REALTORS®. You can import homeownership articles to your website, blog, or e-mail newsletter. The content cannot be changed and must be attributed to the National Association of REALTORS®.

Field Trip
Get Content—For Free!

Available exclusively to members of NAR, the HouseLogic REALTOR® Content Resource is one-stop shopping for great consumer content without the price tag.

Instructions

In order to take full advantage of NAR's HouseLogic REALTOR® Content Resource, you must login with your NRDS ID (National REALTOR Database System identification number). Don't know your NRDS ID? It's easy to retrieve. Just visit: https://reg.realtor.org/roreg.nsf/retrieveID?OpenForm. International members may login with "International" instead of a NRDS ID.

> Go to http://members.houselogic.com/start.

> In the sign-in box in the upper right corner of your screen, enter your NRDS ID, select "I agree to the HouseLogic Reprint Rights Policy," and select LOG IN NOW.

> Select GET STARTED.

> Choose one article you would like to share with your clients and select NEXT STEP.

> Choose your desired format and select NEXT STEP.

> Select DOWNLOAD.

Need help using HouseLogic? Call NAR Information Central at 800-874-6500 from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Central time Mon. through Fri. or contact HouseLogic at http://members.houselogic.com/contact.

\> **Bring the Blog**

Bring the Blog (http://bringtheblog.com) is a paid content provider that updates your blog each morning (Monday–Friday) with fresh content about real estate and finance. Bring the Blog works on WordPress and Blogger blogs. Monthly fees are approximately $57/month.

\> **Guest Bloggers**

Guest bloggers can be a great way to get content on your site that you don't have to write, but also to expand your blog readership. In many cases, your guest bloggers will want to share their blog posts with their sphere of influence (SOI) as well. Your mortgage broker, insurance agent, local business owners, and others in your community are great resources to provide relevant consumer content. If your guest bloggers do a great job, consider making them regular contributors. However, always give first-time bloggers a trial run. Never commit until they have created a few posts and you feel their blog posts complement the goals of your blog.

\> **Ghost Bloggers**

Ghost bloggers develop original content in your name on your behalf with your voice. Professional copywriter Melissa Case with Honeybee Consulting gives this tip for hiring a ghostwriter: "Hire someone who takes the time to get to know you and who is going to take the time to craft content specifically for YOU. If you are paying for ghost written content, you don't want it showing up anywhere else. Make sure your voice and opinion is interjected into posts they write."

Tip: When contracting with a ghost blogger, be sure you do so in the form of a work-for-hire agreement where the following apply:

– The ghost blogger works as an independent contractor.
– The ghost blogger agrees that the content he or she writes is original and does not infringe on the copyright of others.

–   You will be the exclusive owner of the content.

As an overall strategy, outsourcing can be a good way to fill in content, but don't outsource all of your content or you will lose the ability to connect with the modern consumer. If a consumer meets with you and finds that you are very different from the blogger represented on your blog and in your posts, it could significantly harm your credibility and therefore your ability to establish a relationship. Additionally, content from places like HouseLogic and Bring the Blog is not original. It will be posted on other websites and blogs and it may benefit you less in search engine rankings.

Blogging Is Not Just Writing

There is a misconception that you have to be a writer to have a blog. There are alternatives for people who do not write well, or do not wish to spend the time writing. The key to being a successful blogger is to generate content consistently, not to generate a specific type of content.

Photo Blogs

Photo blogs are an excellent way to showcase your community without having to write major content. Pictures on their own can tell an entire story. Walk your community and let your camera capture the essence of where you live and work.

Teresa Boardman, a broker and REALTOR® in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a talented photographer. Her photographs capture the essence of her community. Her photographs have become a social object with many in her community. Teresa leads photo walks with other shutterbugs in her community. She displays her snaps around town on a photo blog that is separate from her real estate blog. Teresa's passion for photography has now become a source for new real estate business. The strong majority of Teresa's real estate business comes from her social media efforts.

PRACTITIONER SPOTLIGHT
Teresa Boardman, AHWD, e-PRO®

> Teresa Boardman, AHWD, e-PRO®
> Saint Paul Home Realty
> Saint Paul, MN

Can you tell us how you use photos at www.stpaulrealestateblog.com?

I use photography to show people what St. Paul looks like.

What types of photos do your readers like best?

My readers like pictures of houses the most, and they like pictures of the local parks. The photograph that gets the most clicks is a picture I have of a colonial style home. The post is part of a series I wrote that continues to bring me business. Here is a link to the post: www.stpaulrealestateblog.com/2007/01/colonial_style.html. It is not the best photograph on my blog, but it is good enough and when people visit a real estate website they expect to see real estate.

What would you tell a real estate practitioner considering starting a photo blog?

I like to remind people that real estate is local and that what works in my market may not work in their market. Agents need to experiment and they need to use content that will support their business and bring them the type of clients they like to work with.

Video Blogs

Video blogs enable consumers to get to know you and your community. Videos are a rich method of communication that enables consumers to hear and see what you are saying or showing. There are multiple ways to blog through video:

> You are the subject and narrator. Whether you are discussing what is happening in the market, answering consumer questions, or talking about the latest trends in home design, video can be a powerful way to blog without writing a word.

> Others are the subject and narrator. By interviewing others, you don't have to be on camera. You could have an entire blog with others telling the story of your community. Interview shopkeepers, locals, historians, politicians, principals, and so on.

> Your community is the subject and you are the narrator. Consider commenting as you walk through your community with a video camera in hand or let the sounds of the community do the talking. Capture your community live in action and showcase it to prospective buyers in your community with a video blog.

We'll examine photo and video blogs in further detail in Module 5.

Additional Tools for Enhancing Your Blog Content

Zemanta is a plugin to enhance content you created. Any content you create (blog post, article, or webpage) can be "read" by Zemanta for context. Zemanta then searches the Web to find relevant images, links, keywords, and text. Those results are returned to the users, enabling them to easily expand and enhance their content.

Scribefire is a blog editor that integrates with your browser and lets you easily post photos and text to your blog. You can drag and drop formatted text from pages you are browsing on the Web, take notes, and post to your blog. ScribeFire's interface takes up the lower half of your browser window, and it can be resized. The Scribefire plugin is free and works on Chrome, Firefox, and Safari browsers.

Hyperlocal Blogs

A hyperlocal blog is also known as a city or neighborhood blog. These are blogs that are restricted to discussion on a single community or area, normally where you sell real estate.

Hyperlocal blogs have been extremely successful in real estate markets where there was only one blogger. When there is minimal blogging competition, hyperlocal blogs can rank very high in search engines. This is changing as more real estate professionals adopt blogging as a standard business practice. If there are 100 agents in your company working in the same neighborhood and creating hyperlocal blogs, you now have 100 hyperlocal blogs all competing for the same amount of consumer attention. This makes it very challenging for the real estate professional to stand out from the competition and reduces the chances of the real estate professional connecting and engaging with consumers.

Why Your Blog May Not Need to Be Real Estate Related

Blogs do not have to be geographically focused or even real estate related to generate new clients and results for your real estate business. Have you ever received a real estate referral or a new client because of your participation in a totally unrelated event, such as being the part of a church, playing on a community softball league, or volunteering for the local Red Cross? It's these activities and interests that often connect and bond us with prospective clients. Do you specialize in horse property or investment real estate? Focusing on your niche or special interests enables you to connect with a smaller subset of consumers on a deeper level with less competition.

If you choose to blog about niche or non-real estate–related topics, you may find that the long-term cumulative effect of a small niche may provide greater results. If 100 agents in your office are focusing on reaching a community of 50,000 people, and you are the only agent focusing on a niche of 1,000, you have a far greater opportunity to be successful. The benefit of high-volume sales is being overtaken by the benefit of marketing to lots and lots of smaller communities!

As a reminder, you don't need to reach everyone online. If you try to be everything to everyone, you end up being nothing to anyone. You need to reach the people most inclined to do business with you.

Case Studies

> 365 Things to Do in Vancouver, Washington:
> https://www.facebook.com/WhyVancouverWA

Dale Chumbley, a broker and REALTOR® in Vancouver, Washington, has gained notoriety after starting the highly read (and copied!) Facebook Fan Page, 365 Things to Do in Vancouver, Washington. At last check, Dale had more than 12,000 fans on his fan page, which focuses solely on places to go and things to see in Vancouver. His page does not include any real estate content.

How to Connect With Consumers Through Non-Real Estate–Related Sites

You should now understand the benefits of reaching smaller communities, so how do you do it? The Social Media Marketing Institute recommends you do the following:

1. Create your own niche publication by addressing the interests of your chosen market. It's much easier to find your own space than to duplicate your competition.

2. Write about what your customers want to hear about. You will attract business based on your content. People who share your same interests are much more likely to hire you. Talk to them.

3. Create a focus for your blog. People want to know what they can expect when they go to your blog.

4. Find what you are passionate about. Blogging is a lot easier to maintain if you love what you are talking about.

GETTING YOUR HUB FOUND

You have spent time thinking about or fine-tuning your niche. You've also practiced your hand at writing a blog post and finding content you can repurpose for your Hub. Now you probably want people to *find* your Hub.

Many practitioners write for search engines when the majority of their traffic may come from other sources, particularly people they may already know. If your website is new or if you are a new blogger, you probably want to wait to tell the world until you have developed a regular pattern and consistency to your Hub. Your customers won't be impressed if they look at your website or blog a month or two from now and find abandoned content. Here are easy ways to get your Hub found once you are ready to announce it to the world:

> **Word of Mouth**

Tell your family, friends, and your sphere of influence about your website.

> **Print and Online Advertising**

Include the address of your Hub on all print advertising and online advertising. If the property you are advertising doesn't fit their needs, they might still check out your site!

> **Social Media Sites such as Facebook or Twitter**

Sharing on social media sites is quickly becoming one of the most effective ways to drive traffic to your Hub. However, be careful NOT to spam your networks with pointless links to your site. Share relevant content from your site.

> **Links From Other Bloggers and News Sources**

Other bloggers are always looking for good content. If you write compelling posts, you are likely to get links to your posts from other bloggers interested in similar topics.

Search Engine Optimization (SEO)

It's important for your Hub to show up on search engine results pages (SERPs). Learning how to maximize the organic placement of your site can be an involved process. There are, however, many specific steps you can take to help your Hub rank higher in organic searches. Those steps include:

Content

☐ Write unique content—approximately 500 to 1,000 words in length— about subjects for which you want to be found.

☐ Write regularly. Search engines like sites that are updated regularly; this is why blogs rank so highly in search engines. Each new post is an opportunity to add relevant content, use relevant keywords, and create anchor text to increase your SEO.

☐ Use text! Fancy sites that require an Adobe® Flash® Player may look pretty but spiders can't "crawl" Flash files or graphics. Spiders (also referred to as crawlers or bots) are automated computer programs that search the Web to find new content for search engines, crawling all over webpages, gathering information for the search site.

Be Descriptive in Titles

☐   As shown in Figure 2.1, use descriptive titles for pages and posts.

☐   Use a good permalink structure like
http://realestateblog.com/market-stats-for-my-market, which makes
more sense for readers and is good from an SEO perspective,
rather than use numbers like http://realestateblog.com/123.html.

Figure 2.1: Using Descriptive Titles for Blog Posts
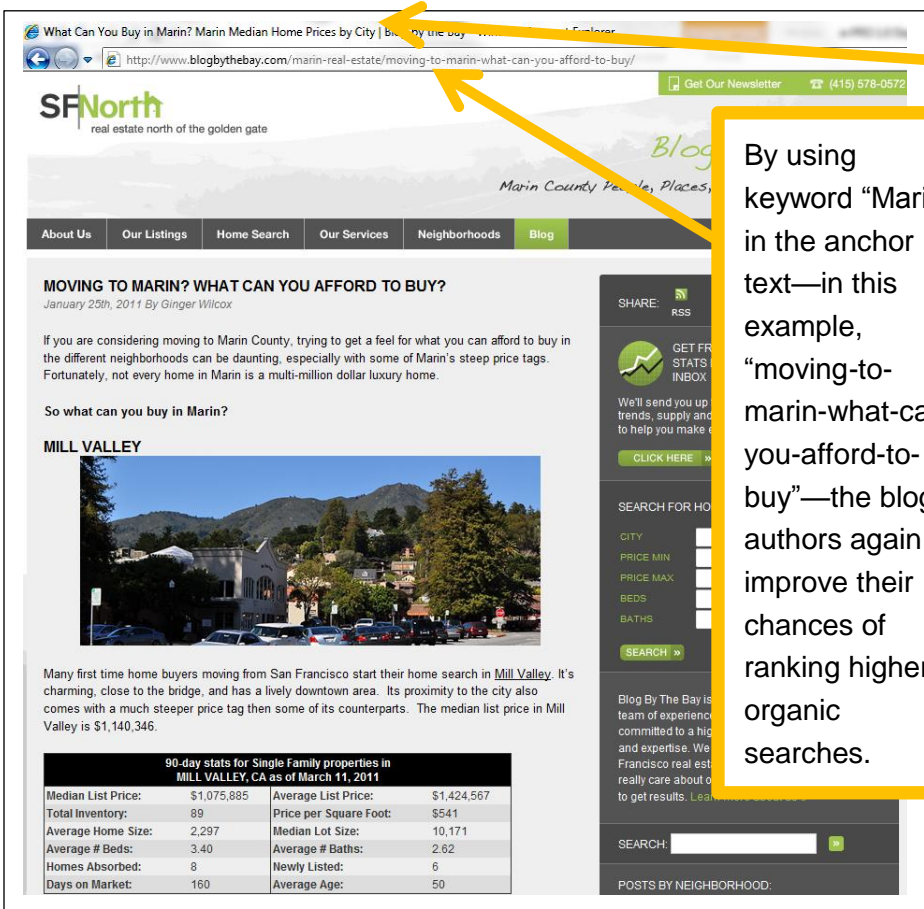
By using keyword "Marin" in the anchor text—in this example, "moving-to-marin-what-can-you-afford-to-buy"—the blog authors again improve their chances of ranking higher in organic searches.

By using descriptive titles for blog posts—in this example, "What Can You Buy in Marin? Marin Median Home Prices by City"—the blog authors improve their chances of ranking higher in organic searches.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Ginger Wilcox, GRI, e-PRO®, CRS.

Keywords

☐ Make sure your content is relevant to your keywords, which can be phrases rather than single words.

☐ Use keywords as often as possible without making your content look artificial to your users. Make sure the keywords are related to your target market and what you do.

☐ Not sure what keywords to use?

– Ask members of your community what they are searching for.
– Check out your competition and see the keywords for which their sites are optimized.
– A good tool to help in your research is the Google Keyword Planner (https://adwords.google.com/KeywordPlanner), which will let you know what is being searched for and what the competition is for each keyword or phrase.

☐ Use keywords in your anchor text (also called link label), which is the visible clickable text in a hyperlink. (For an example, see Figure 2.1.) If you sell condominiums, and you use the anchor text "luxury condos" to link to a post about high-end properties, when search engines visit your site and follow the link, they will know that you sell luxury condos.

☐ Don't put ridiculous amounts of keywords in your site. If you use the same words too many times in your content you can get penalized by search engines because they see you as a spammer. Some search engine spiders are programmed to ignore sites guilty of "keyword stuffing."

Backlinks and Interlinks

☐ Earn quality backlinks. Backlinks are incoming links to your blog or website from other sources. If you write good content, you will earn these naturally.

☐ Get other people to talk about you! One link from an authoritative site is far more valuable than many low-ranking links.

☐ Frequently link back to posts in your archive.

☐ If you have a large site with many pages, add a site map, which makes it easier for spiders to search your site.

☐ Interlink your pages. People are so aware of the need to link to their site from other sites that they often forget to link their pages to each

other when possible. It's an easy way to boost traffic to individual pages.

Captions and Alt Tags

☐ Add captions to all your pictures and be descriptive with the text in immediate physical proximity to your images. Spiders see this easily and it increases your SEO.

☐ Because spiders don't recognize images, you need to use "alt tags" to allow them to recognize what the picture represents. An Alt tag is an alternative description of your image, which can allow you to use keywords when appropriate. In the absence of Alt text, you are not providing any images to someone who may be viewing your page with images off, or if their e-mail is set not to display images.

Register with Web Directories

☐ Go "off-page" to get more optimization. Get noticed on the Web by registering with Web directories. Being placed on a Web directory means that the search engines are aware of the existence of your site.

Make It Easy for Readers to Link to Your Hub

☐ Make it easy for people to link to you through your social presence. Applications like Social Marker (www.socialmarker.com) and ShareThis (http://sharethis.com) allow readers to share your posts on a variety of sites. This way they not only provide links back to your site, which increases your SEO, but they also share your content with a whole larger sphere of people.

Other Strategies for Increasing Your Hub Presence

There are also various services that you can pay for increased Hub presence:

> **Google AdWords**

With Google AdWords, you can select the words you would like to pay for ads to be associated with. Again, when consumers search on the word you select, you could appear as a "Sponsored Link" or ad within the consumer's Gmail (or other google application) search result.

> **Facebook Ads**

You can subscribe a budgeted amount and select the words you would like to be targeted for. When a person searches or talks about "your word," your ad could appear in the right sidebar and, when clicked, you pay. Facebook ads can be targeted, and the price for the ads will vary depending upon the method you choose. You can either pay based on the number of views or the number of clicks on your ad. Either way, you will have a choice and the ability to create a budget. As with advertising, you should start with a small expenditure. Test your response and then make adjustments as you determine what works and how you can spend your money most effectively.

> **Property Aggregator Websites**

The benefit of advertising on real estate–specific sites is that the audience is highly targeted toward people looking at real estate. Sites like Realtor.com, Zillow, and Trulia aggregate listings nationally and provide a large platform for banner ads, local ads, or the promotion of individual properties. As these platforms change programs and pricing frequently, you will need to determine what the biggest "bang for your buck" is by making a comparison with all three sites if you choose to advertise in this manner.

MEASURING YOUR SUCCESS

There are many measurement tools you can use to monitor and analyze traffic to your posts and pages. These tools will enable you to see how often your Hub is visited and the content in which consumers are interested, which enables you to adjust your content over time to meet the needs of your visitors. Many hosted tools have their own analytics tools built directly into the platform, so check to see what tracking options are available for you.

Google Analytics

Google Analytics is a free measuring tool from Google that allows you to measure the traffic on your website or blog. It has a robust platform that enables you to see the effectiveness of the content placed on your site, understand where viewers are coming from, what Spokes are effective, and what keywords they might be searching for. With Google Analytics, it's fairly simple to examine traffic to your Hub (website or blog) as well as some Spokes (Facebook business page).

Getting Started

> Go to **www.google.com/analytics**
> and follow prompts to Sign Up Now.

After you set up your Google Analytics account, allow for a few days to generate results worth reading.

Dashboard

The Dashboard (Figure 2.2) is your Google Analytics control panel.

Figure 2.2: Google Analytics Dashboard

Source: Reprinted with permission of Amy Chorew, e-PRO®,
http://thetechbyte.com.
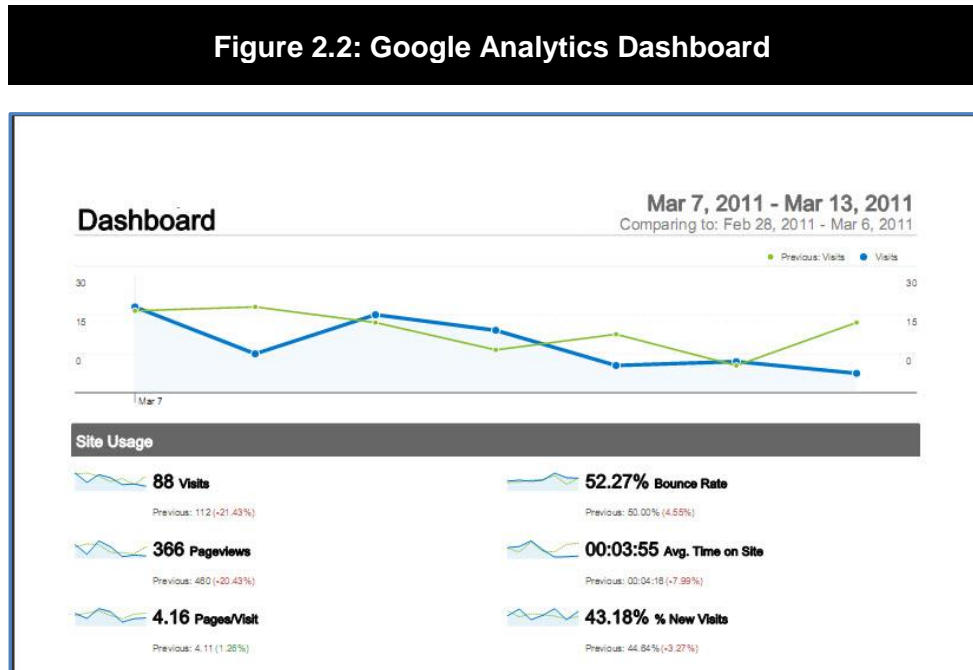
Google Analytics reporting uses some similar terms, but the underlying differences in meaning are important for end users. Let's define these terms here:

> **Visits:** The number of people who visited your site for a specified time period

> **Pageviews:** The total number of pages viewed on your site

> **Pages/Visit:** The average number of pages visitors viewed

> **Bounce Rate:** The percentage of initial visitors to a site who "bounce" from the page they landed on to a different site

> **Avg. Time on Site:** Average amount of time spent on your site. Time spent on your site is one way of measuring visit quality.

> **New Visits:** The percentage of new visitors to your site

Google Analytics offers detailed reporting. In the following section, each report is examined in further detail.

Visitors Overview

This report (Figure 2.3) allows you to examine the data found in your Dashboard but also unique visitors. By looking at these data in full view, you can identify the sources of your visitors.

Figure 2.3: Google Analytics Visitors Overview
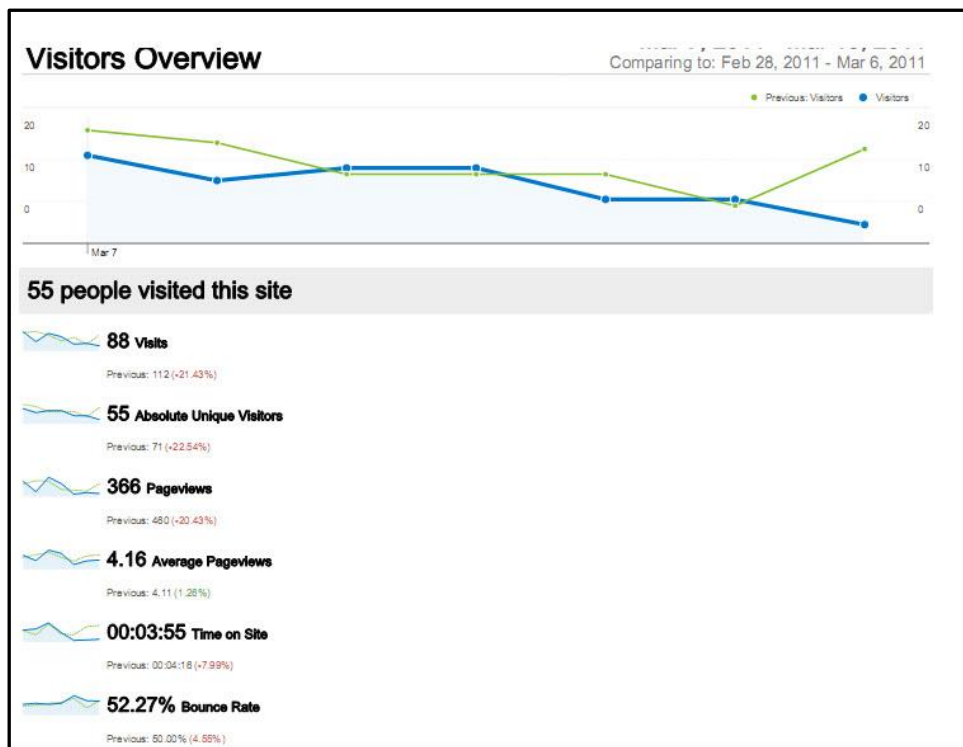
Source: Reprinted with permission of Amy Chorew, e-PRO®..

When reviewing visitor data, consider the following questions:

> **Time on site:** If certain days trend higher, keep track of what you did on that day. Did you post about financing? The community? If data trends show that people are interested, plan on adding content on that topic again.

> **Bounce rate:** If your bounce rate increases or decreases dramatically, did you change something for the better or worse?

> **New visits:** New visitors means you are marketing your website more effectively and they are finding you through various means. Are you promoting your site using print and e-mail? In your electronic communications, are you including hyperlinks that send readers back to your site?

Map Overlay

The map overlay (Figure 2.4) shows the physical location of your visitors by mapping their IP (Internet protocol) addresses. It also includes the location of the computers that generated search engine spiders as well as visitors.

Figure 2.4: Google Analytics Map Overlay
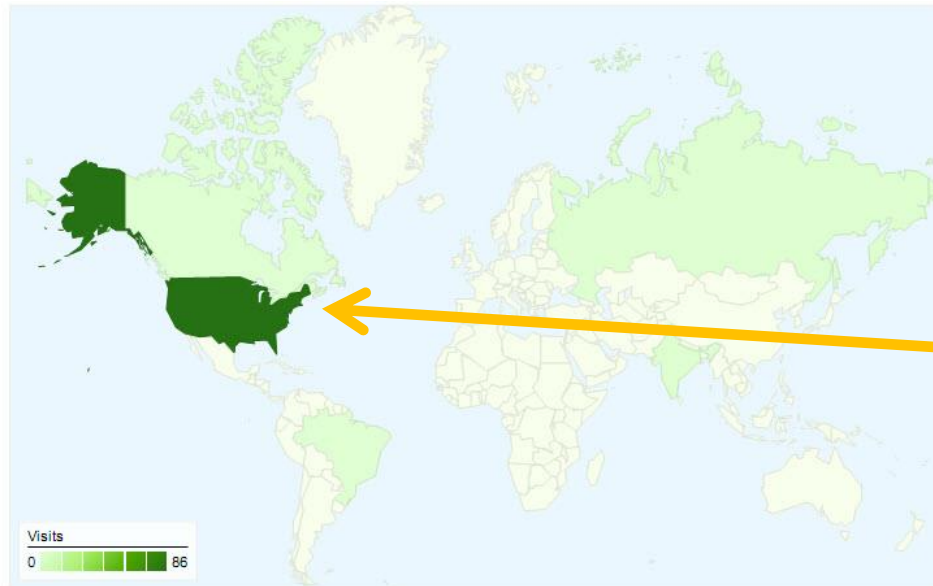
The map overlay shows that the majority of visitors to Amy's blog are from the U.S.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Amy Chorew, e-PRO®.

Traffic Sources Overview

The traffic sources report (Figure 2.5) can help in many ways. Try to test different sources and different types of pages.

> If you post the local events calendar, do you get more hits than if you post about the mortgage rates?

> Did you provide links or did your visitors find links to your site? This report breaks down the specific address from which your visitors came.

Figure 2.5: Google Analytics Traffic Sources Overview
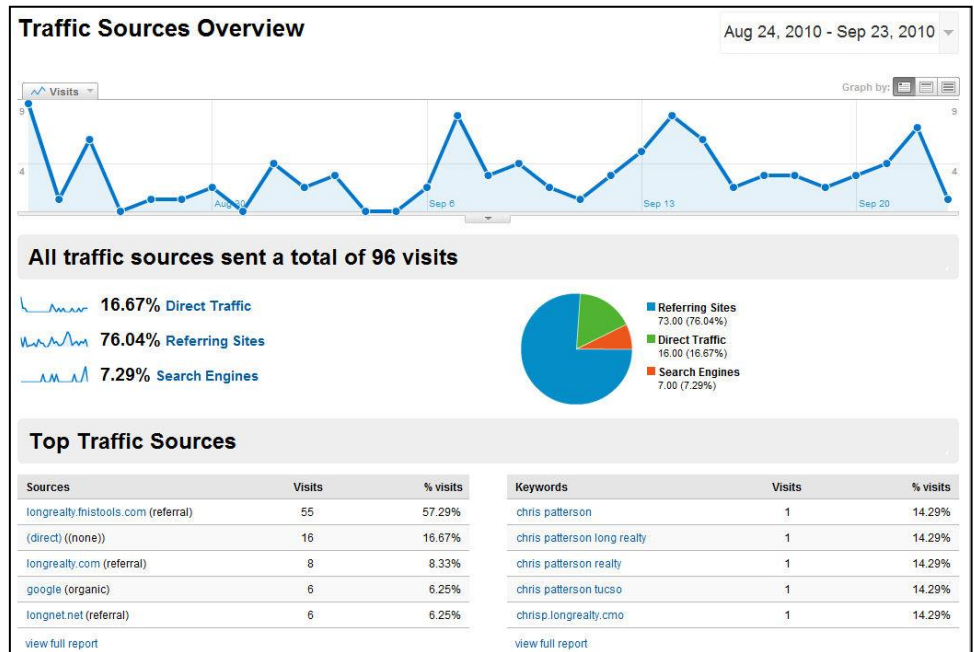
Source: Reprinted with permission of Amy Chorew, e-PRO®.

Google Analytics is a work in progress. By reviewing the reports over time you will start to get a sense of what works and what doesn't.
Pay attention to what you change or add to your website. Notice increases or decreases in traffic and lengths of stay. Track when you post new content and compare those dates to your changes in traffic. As you monitor these data, you will see which content you need to repeat and add to your site.

PRACTITIONER SPOTLIGHT
Jim Duncan, e-PRO®

> Jim Duncan, e-PRO®
> Nest Realty Group
> Charlottesville, VA

How do you measure the effectiveness of traffic to your blog—RealCentralVA.com?

I use Google Analytics to track trending information and year over year goals to ensure that my goals are being met and to make sure that I am staying on track with where I want to be. Google Analytics also allows me to see who my visitors are—what browser and what platform—desktop or mobile, so I can tailor my stories to them.

I still use Stat Counter (http://statcounter.com) for simple search insight to see what visitors are searching for. This allows me to see basic keywords to gain insight into what is on their collective minds and to get story ideas. RealCentralVA.com comes up for some odd terms sometimes that provide inspiration for stories to answer specific questions and show if anything in particular is being searched for by multiple people on the same day. For instance, leading up to certain perennial events in Charlottesville, my blog comes up as one of the top five sites, so that is a reminder to write a new story.

WordPress Statistics

WordPress Statistics is a free service for WordPress.com and WordPress.org that enables users to see quickly which posts and pages are most popular. The interface is built into the WordPress dashboard (or control panel) and is very simple to use.

Other Tools

Other analytics tools you may want to check out include the following:

☐ **Crazy Egg**

Crazy Egg (www.crazyegg.com) lets you analyze visits to your website or blog in a visual interface. You can create heatmaps to see exactly where your visitors are clicking on your website so you can track the effectiveness and improve your conversion rates. Fees start at $9 a month.

☐ **Clicky**

Clicky (http://clicky.com) has extensive real-time analytics that are simpler to use than Google Analytics. Clicky validates your website traffic reports against your domain name to increase accuracy.

☐ **Woopra**

If you like data and lots of it, Woopra (https://www.woopra.com) may be of interest to you. Woopra provides over 40 data points for you to track, all in real time. If visitors are on your site, you can see where they're coming from.

CAPTURING AND CONVERTING PEOPLE ON YOUR WEBSITE

Once you have driven people to your website, what do you want them to do? Driving traffic to your Hub is wasted if you don't capture and convert those eyeballs into real connections.

> Have valuable content your consumer needs. Remember, a stale website with outdated content is the quickest way to get a consumer to click away!

> Use calls to action on every page; prominently placed calls to action are crucial. Examples of calls to action include:

  – Call me! Put your phone number on your site. If you are too busy to answer phone calls, use a phone service like Google Voice that enables you to direct calls to someone who can answer the phone. If you don't answer your phone when new prospects call, they are likely to call someone else.

  – E-mail me! You can use a contact form, but put your real e-mail address on your site as well. Some experts will tell you that this could increase spam e-mail. Install a good spam filter. It would be better to see an increase in spam than to lose a potential prospect because they couldn't easily contact you in a manner that they find comfortable.

  – Chat live feature on your website allows consumers to ask you questions in real time.

  – Download market statistics in exchange for contact information.

  – Register for a Webinar by providing a link that gathers their contact information.

  – Receive e-mail updates or reports about market conditions, foreclosures, and "best buys" by providing you with contact information.

  – Register to download a free report in the form of a PDF.

  – Use your imagination! What content would be compelling to your target consumers? What do they want or need? By offering consumers content they want in exchange for their contact information you can provide compelling calls to action that will make them want to click through.

> Respond immediately to contacts.

  – Customers prefer personal responses made quickly. If you are unable to respond in a prompt manner, consider the use of auto-responders for e-mail contacts.

  – Call everyone who leaves a phone number. If they don't want you to call, they won't leave a real phone number.

> Be friendly and genuinely helpful. People don't want to be sold.

> Have a drip system in place to maintain regular follow-up with prospects.

> Get the appointment.

In today's market, being the first to respond is often a differentiator. Many real estate professionals successfully closing deals from Internet prospects report that their clients contacted multiple agents. The agents who respond quickly have the opportunity to get the sale.

PRACTITIONER SPOTLIGHT
Mariana Wagner

> Mariana Wagner
> Keller Williams Hope Realty
> Colorado Springs, CO

How do you stay in touch with customers after the first contact? Do you have a specific plan you follow?

We stay in contact with potential clients through a series of listing drips (through our IDX), call to action informative e-mails, and phone calls.

Do you use specific software for follow up?

We use the internal listing drip and custom e-mail templates from the IDX provider.

What advice would you give a real estate practitioner about converting customers to clients?

- Ask for the phone number on the IDX registration.
- Call right away.
- Don't try to sell a house. Sell the *appointment* to meet with you to go over their real estate goals.
- Continue to offer value through a combination of phone calls and e-mails.

PROPERTY MARKETING ON THE WEB

According to NAR's *Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers,* the Internet has become an indispensible tool in the home search process with nearly 90 percent of homebuyers using it to search for homes (Figure 2.6).

Figure 2.6: Information Sources Used in Home Search, by Age					
	All Buyers	18 to 24	25 to 44	45 to 64	65 or older
Online website	89%	92%	94%	89%	77%
Real estate agent	87	90	86	89	88
Mobile or tablet website or application	57	64	71	47	33
Mobile or tablet search engine	54	58	67	44	32
Yard sign	51	37	52	52	43
Open house	48	23	49	49	42
Online video site	29	16	26	31	32
Home builder	20	16	18	21	21
Print newspaper advertisement	20	21	17	23	24
Home book or magazine	13	10	13	14	14
Billboard	6	5	5	5	4
Television	3	2	4	4	2
Relocation company	3	1	3	3	2

Source: National Association of REALTORS[R]. *2015 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers.*

This same profile shows that properties marketed online get buyers in the door, literally. Sixty-five percent of buyers walked through homes as a result of their Internet home search. As shown in Figure 2.7, more than a third of buyers—43 percent—found the home they purchased online.

Figure 2.7: Where Buyers Found the Home They Purchased
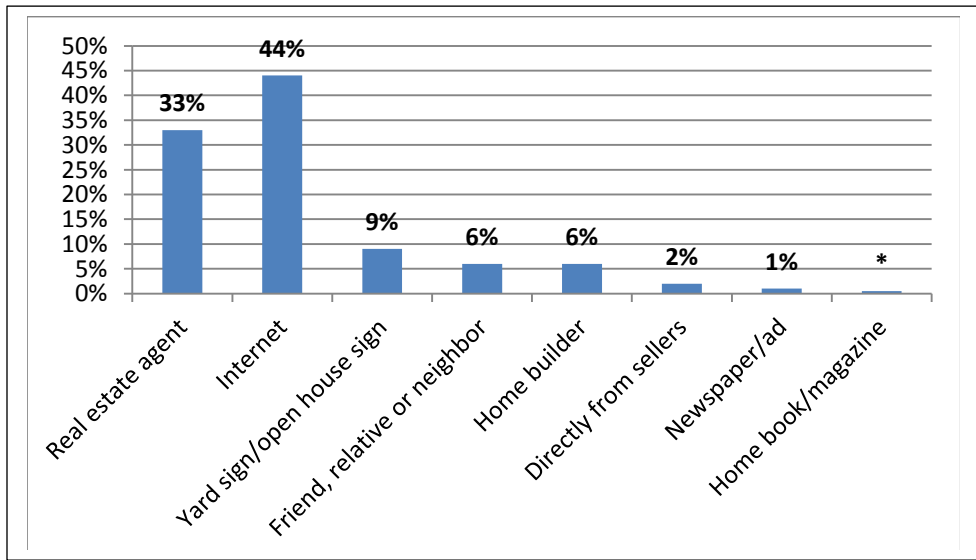
*Less than one percent.

Source: National Association of REALTORS®. *2015 Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers.*

Property Descriptions

The MLS was designed so that brokers could sell each other's listings; it was not made for the public looking for a home. Today, the MLS feed provides consumer-facing content and the descriptions for many homes are lacking. There are no full sentences; descriptive words are used poorly; and properties are not fully described.

Be sure to optimize your content when entering your descriptions into the MLS; your properties will be displayed on hundreds, if not thousands, of websites.

Make Sure Advertising Complies with Fair Housing Laws

Real estate professionals should be sure that **all** property advertising on the Web complies with the letter and spirit of fair housing laws and regulations. In 2009, the National Fair Housing Alliance and 27 member organizations found more than 7,500 housing ads on the Web that violated the federal Fair Housing Act.[1] The most common violation was advertising that discriminates against families with children. Examples of discriminatory advertising are shown in Figure 2.8.

Figure 2.8: Examples of Discriminatory Statements in Housing Ads

Discrimination based on familial status

> "[N]o couples, working persons only, no pets, no children" Visalia, CA
> 1BR: "Building is a quiet adult 4plex" Plattsburgh, PA
> 2BR: "Mature couple or single with no children" Brooklyn, NY
> 3BR: "Adults only" Colorado Springs, CO

Discrimination based on religion

> 3BR: Duplex: "Christian atmosphere" Evansville, IN

Discrimination based on national origin

> 2BR: "English speaking only please" Las Vegas, NV

Source: National Fair Housing Alliance, *For Rent: No Kids! How Internet Housing Advertisements Perpetuate Discrimination,* August 11, 2009.

In your ads:

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[1] National Fair Housing Alliance, *For Rent: No Kids! How Internet Housing Advertisements Perpetuate Discrimination,* August 11, 2009, www.nationalfairhousing.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=zgbukJP2rMM%3D&tabid=2510&mid=8347.

☐ Focus on the characteristics of the property itself, instead of characteristics of likely buyers. For example:

 – "Big backyard" is lawful. "Great home for children" is not.
 – "Studio apartment" is lawful. "Perfect for single or mature person" is not.

☐ Never describe the building, area, or neighborhood using words that relate to the race, color, religion, age, familial status, or national origin of people who live there. Examples include:

 – "Mostly white area"
 – "Jewish neighborhood"
 – "Adult singles only building"
 – "Able-bodied tenants only"

☐ Avoid mentioning religion or using religious symbols. For example:

 – "Near various houses of worship" is lawful. "Near Lutheran church" is not.

☐ Descriptions of accessibility features for disabled people (e.g., "wheelchair ramp") are acceptable.

☐ Neutral descriptions such as "great view," "near jogging trails," and "walk to transit stop" are lawful.

☐ Architectural descriptions (e.g., "mother-in-law suite," "bachelor apartment," "walk-in-closet") are permissible when used in a nondiscriminatory fashion.

☐ Catchwords such as "exclusive," "private," "traditional," or "integrated," which suggest preferential treatment for one group, should be avoided.

☐ Advertising that includes photographs or drawings of people should show a mix of ages and ethnicities and, where appropriate, families with children.

Note that the federal Fair Housing Act provides an exception to the prohibition against discrimination on the basis of familial status.

Field Trip

Test Your Fair Housing Knowledge

Put your fair housing knowledge to the test with this quiz from

ARELLO Guidelines for Online Marketing

The Association of Real Estate License Law Officials (ARELLO) has promulgated the following guidelines for real estate practitioners marketing property online:

> Promotions should disclose the company name, the city and state of the company's main office, and the states and provinces in which the company holds brokerage licenses.

> State-required disclosure messages should be included in every separate electronic unit—e-mail messages, bulletin boards, webpages. Banner ads should link to a webpage with a disclosure message.

> Online listing information should be consistent with the property description and the actual facts about the property. Any changes in that information should be updated online within 72 hours of the change. If the ability to make changes is controlled by a third party, it should be notified in writing of the change and requested to make needed alterations within 72 hours.

> All listings should include information on when the listing was last updated.

Tips for Writing Property Descriptions

Do:

✓   Write in the active voice.

✓   Write for people—not for the computer. In times past we were more concerned with word count and keywords. Today, let's focus on making your comments meaningful to potential buyers, what separates this home from others.

✓   Write your descriptions in a word processing program and use spell check.

Don't:

X   Use exclamation points.

X   Use all CAPS. (Doing so is the printed equivalent to SHOUTING.)

Photography and Video

A surprising number of homes are marketed on the Web without any photographs. However, real estate professionals need to recognize that the first time a house is shown is when the consumer sees the pictures on a website. With this in mind, taking good digital photos, creating slide shows, and even uploading video are no longer luxuries, but rather essential skills for real estate professionals.

Use photos and video to help capture buyers' attention and make them fall in love with the house and the surrounding community. Don't just post one photo of your listings. Be sure to include the maximum amount of photographs you can; home buyers want to see as many photos as possible. As a result, almost every website run by third parties (REALTOR.com® and most national franchises in addition to Zillow and Trulia) gives preferential placement in their search results to properties that have the most photos. In today's digital world, there is no cost to adding lots of pictures to your online listings, and tons of benefits. Here are a few ideas to increase the number of photos in even the smallest home:

1.   Take several exterior photos. Front, rear, and street photos seem almost a minimum today. Try going to the corner of the house and shooting a photo facing the far corner of the property line to show how the lot looks when you come around a corner of the house. Shoot one from the front and one from the rear perspective.

2.   Take a photo going into each room from the doorway. Then enter the room, turn around, and take a picture of the doorway from an interior corner so the buyer can see the room from both points of view.

3.   Take more than one photo of the kitchen and the baths. Feature different points of view and the different fixtures and appliances.

4.   Take more photos than you think you need, and don't be afraid to be picky. Choose the best ones to showcase the property. Remember the first time the property is shown is when the buyer sees it online.

We will discuss tools and techniques for creating and sharing high-quality photos and video in the Rich Media module of this course.

Listing Syndicators

Savvy home sellers are now looking to hire agents who can provide them maximum Web exposure. Listing syndication is a way to place your property listings on as many online portals as possible while only entering your data one time. Listing syndication enables a real estate professional to have wide Web exposure with minimal investment of time and money by auto-posting a listing to a large number of Web portals. When you need to make a price change or put a home under deposit, it is easy. Just visit the syndication site, make the change on the property, and the change will be sent out to all the sites where you have placed the property listing.

Before signing up for different listing syndication services, first find out if your company or MLS is syndicating listings for you. If they are, find out where your listings can be syndicated. Make sure you like what you see on each site.

If you need to syndicate your listings on your own, consider some of the sites mentioned. Make sure you stay on top of your listings, so you stay in compliance with advertising laws and code of ethics concerns.
Check your website analytics or with your company to see where consumers are finding your listings. It could be that sites like Craigslist.com or Facebook Marketplace are effective Hubs for your marketing.

☐ **ListHub**

ListHub (http://www.ListHub.com) is the broadest and most widely adopted network for listing distribution in real estate, with more than 25,000 brokerages, 350 MLSs and over 50 national publisher channels. It is a comprehensive listing syndication service that works directly in concert with MLSs, franchises, and brokerage firms. ListHub syndication is free for brokers and agents, and is the syndication platform that puts a true premium on data accuracy. ListHub pulls the broker listings directly from the brokerage MLS feed, so the listings that are syndicated are the most accurate and up-to-date online.

ListHub provides brokers and agents a single dashboard for listing syndication that displays all of the available Publisher Channels in the ListHub network. The dashboard allows brokers and agents to easily maximize their listing exposure for sellers, while giving brokers complete control of the data. Additionally, ListHub offers detailed reports, analytics, and marketing tools necessary for driving an effective online advertising program.

AGENT REPORT — 03/04/2011 — ListHub — *Your Listing Asset Management Company*

30-DAY REPORT FOR YOUR LISTINGS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

You currently have **27** listings and you are subscribed to **40** channels. **32** of your properties have been visited at least 1 time over the last 30 days.

Terms are defined on the last page of this report.

Top channels (by number of views)

	Views	% of Views
1. Publisher "A"	120	33.7%
2. Publisher "B"	84	30.3%
3. Publisher "C"	63	9.6%

Top location of your online consumers

	Views	% of Views
1. Tampa, FL	80	17.3%
2. Saint Petersburg, FL	26	5.6%
3. Clearwater, FL	15	3.2%

Listing Inventory

Number of Views - Last 12 Months

Inquiries generated over the last 12 months

INCLUDES TRAFFIC AND LEAD DATA FROM SITES LIKE...

REALTOR.com — Zillow.com — Aol Real Estate. — Homes.com — YAHOO! REAL ESTATE

...AND MANY MORE!

Top property categories

Description	Listing Count	Views	Click-Throughs (Visits)	Inquiries	Performance Rank
$100K - $200K - 3BR Residential - For Sale	5	543	8	0	1st
$100K - $200K - 2BR Residential - For Sale	0	0	0	1	2nd
$100K - $200K - 4BR Residential - For Sale	1	98	5	0	3rd

Page 1 of 5 — ©2011 Threewide Corporation

ListHub for Agents

ListHub offers upgraded accounts for agents that include detailed marketing reports and listing presentation materials. The benefits of the ListHub upgrade include:

Get an Edge in Listing Presentations: ListHub's online marketing reports and eMarketing flyers allow agents to show sellers *EXACTLY* where they market online, and the leads generated from each site.
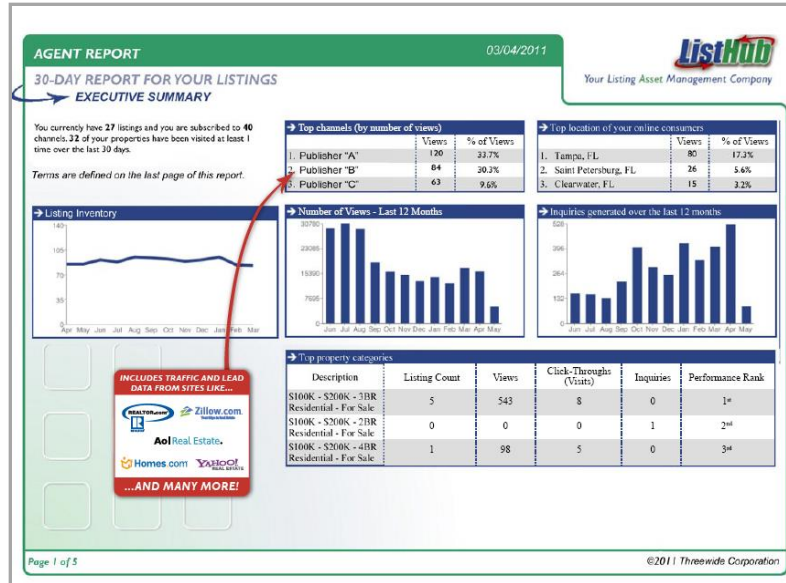
Stay in Touch With Your Sellers. The ListHub agent upgrade features automatic report delivery. This feature allows agents to send custom branded reports directly to their sellers every 15 days – automatically.
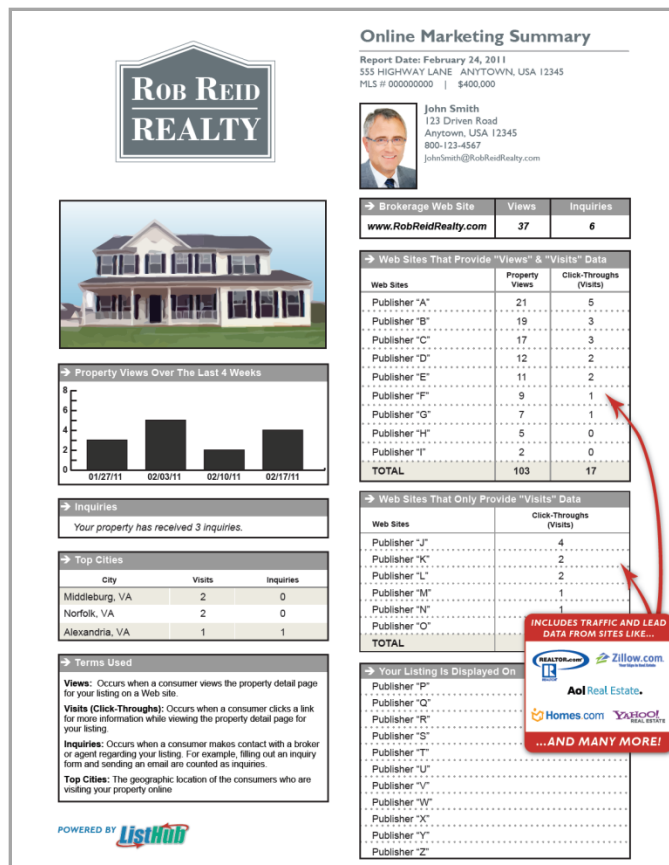
- **Save Money on Marketing**: The ListHub reports share valuable marketing intelligence, including a side-by-side channel comparison, that lets agents find out where buyers are coming from, so they can allocate their marketing dollars more effectively.
- **Easily Navigate Difficult Price Reduction Conversations**. ListHub reports are full of detailed online marketing metrics and data that arm agents with the information necessary to easily navigate difficult price reduction conversations and get the listing SOLD. The ListHub agent upgrade allows agents to get a reduction based on facts instead of a seller's emotions.

To learn more about the ListHub agent upgrade, please visit http://marketing.realtor.com/listhub.

☐ **Point2 Technologies**

Point2 Technologies (http://www.point2.com/products/point2agent) offers free listing syndication for members of the NAR through participating MLS associations. Free accounts include syndication to 36 listing portals and have analytics reports. Point2 Agent accounts start at $19.95/month and include syndication to premium sites such as Craigslist and the *New York Times,* along with a lead generation tool.

Single Property Websites

Single property websites are websites dedicated to one listing, usually on a custom domain with the property address. Most single property websites have a number of templates to choose from and a simple web-based interface for real estate professionals to upload property information and photographs. Fees are often based on a per-listing charge or a monthly fee for a set amount of listings. Most vendors also syndicate your listing to other online verticals as well. Single property websites are popular with sellers who like having their own custom website for the sale of the home. Single property websites are generally quick to deploy. The downside of a single property website is the diversion of potential Web traffic to a real estate professional's main website or Hub.

Vendors to Check Out

☐ **Agency Logic**

Agency Logic (www.agencylogic.com) is a robust single property website platform that provides listing syndication and social sharing features including the ability to add listings to Facebook fan pages. Upload up to 100 photographs along with video and podcasts with unlimited text descriptions. You can create flyers and a Craigslist posting from your site. Agency Logic has comprehensive statistics analytics to track visitors. Fees start at $50 per listing website and include the custom domain. Bundled packages are available.

☐ **RealBird**

The RealBird (www.realbird.com) Listing Publisher enables robust single property Websites. The site offers numerous options to customize the appearance, unlimited photos and descriptions, market reports from Altos Research, and easy integration with other third-party apps. RealBird syndicates to major real estate listing portals along with RealBird's own map-based listing and home valuation portal—SearchOnMaps.com.

☐ **VFlyer**

VFlyer (www.vflyer.com) combines listing syndication, Craigslist templates, and a single property website in one. The interface is very simple to use. You can create e-mail flyers and generate printable PDF versions of your flyers. VFlyer also offers embeddable widgets for your website or blog. An ad-supported free version is available. Paid subscriptions start at $12.95 a month up to $79.95/month.

☐ **AgentMarketing**

For a nominal fee, AgentMarketing (http://agentmarketing.com) creates an easy-to-use and easy-to-find single listing website.

Agent Websites

Many agents are creating their own single property listings on content management platforms like WordPress. The obvious benefit is that you own and control the traffic and your own content. The downside is the time investment to create and upload the new content. If you do create your own single property website, consider using a listing syndicator to extend the reach of your listing across the web.

National Listing Aggregators

National listing aggregators pull together listings from IDX (Internet Data Exchange) relationships with MLS providers across the U.S. and present them to consumers on one platform. As shown in Figure 2.9, these platforms provide expansive reach for your listings across the Internet.

Figure 2.9: Top 10 Real Estate Verticals, November 2015						
	Unique Visitors (000)	Avg Visits per Visitor	Avg Min. per Visit	Avg Views per Visit	Total Visits (000)	Total Min. (Millions)
ZILLOW.COM	52,568	18	4.0	4	244,447	1,332
REALTOR.COM	26,677	20	6	6	87,463	732
TRULIA.COM	23,674	13	4	5	63,557	379
HOMES.COM	8,885	9	3	5	14,968	51
REDFIN.COM	8,202	27	5	10	22,528	252
Yahoo Real Estate	5,052	10	2	2	29,735	59
COLDWELL BANKER	3,598	8	4	4	7,141	29
HOTPADS.COM	3,413	16	4	6	8,395	44
MOVOTO.COM	2,844	5	2	3	4,534	9
REMAX.COM	2,632	7	4	4	4,901	21

Source: Realtor.com Traffic, November 2015. Available at: http://www.realtor.org/reports/nar-website-traffic-statistics.

It's wise to check to make sure your listings are posted and accurate on the major listing aggregation sites. Many of these sites allow you to modify and expand on the data automatically fed into them. Make sure to take the time to add the maximum amount of photos and detail available

to you. Studies show the more photos and data provided, the more likely listings are to be viewed by potential customers.

> **REALTOR.com®**

REALTOR.com® (www.realtor.com) is the official site of the National Association of REALTORS® and is real estate's most accurate website. With Realtor.com, members can have a custom online profile, feature listings, connect with social media, have reviews and testimonials, and link to their business website. The advantages of Realtor.com are that it provides the most accurate property data and that it does not display FSBO listings.
Member listings are displayed free of charge, and brokers have choices for how their listings are displayed. Nearly all listings come from REALTOR® owned and operated MLSs. Due to this direct relationship with the data content providers, over 90 percent of listings are updated directly from the MLS every 15 minutes.

Only the listing agent and broker are promoted and branded on a listing, prominently displayed at the top of every listing right beneath the listing photos. Additionally, if the agent has claimed his or her Realtor.com profile, a Block-R is displayed on the listing along with a link to the REALTOR®'s profile, which increases the prominence of the listing agent and broker even on basic listings. Brokers also have the opportunity to add a back link on their listings to the same listing on their website.

One goal of Realtor.com is to direct consumers as quickly as possible to the right REALTOR®, whether through a listing search or by using "Find a REALTOR®." The site also includes content and messaging about the value of using a REALTOR®.

In addition to the paid marketing solutions, Realtor.com offers the following to members:

– Find a REALTOR profile

When members claim their profile: 1) on their listings, their name becomes a hyperlink to their Realtor.com profile and the Block-R is displayed next to their name, prominently identifying their REALTOR® status; 2) their listings might also be displayed on their profile. In addition, they can add a link to their website and social media, display showings, blog posts, check-ins, recommendations, and so on. Teams and offices also can have a profile page. These are provided at no cost.

– Mobile applications and Collaborative Search

The agent-branded Collaborative Search allows agents to invite clients to use the mobile app branded with the agent's information.

– The Find^{SM} Application

TheFind^{SM} Application is a professional data application exclusively for MLS members. TheFind^{SM} Application allows access to a national database with more than 100 million property records, all MLS data on Realtor.com, multiple automated valuation models (AVMs), school and neighborhood information and more.

– Realtor.com® International

Translated into 11 languages, the Realtor.com International site offers global and investment buyers the opportunity to view listings in their native language, switch currencies and measurements, and contact the listing agent/broker. All listings on Realtor.com are automatically presented on Realtor.com International.

– Open houses

Realtor.com can highlight open house dates and times from the MLS data. Open house information will appear on the free Basic Listing and automate the process for ShowcaseSM Listing Enhancement customers. Consumers can search for scheduled open houses and sort listings by open house date.

> **Zillow**

Many large real estate companies automatically feed their listings to Zillow (www.zillow.com). If your company does not, you may upload your own listings. Check to make sure your company doesn't before you upload your listings. Duplicate listings can be confusing to home buyers. Featured listings are $39.95 for 180 days.

> **Trulia**

Trulia (www.trulia.com) allows you to submit your listings with a photo and contact information for free if they are not already posted on the site. If they are posted on the site, you can "claim" your listing. Trulia provides weekly traffic reports that you can use to demonstrate your marketing efforts to your home sellers. Trulia has a blogging platform and has paid premium advertising available.

> **Craigslist**

Craigslist is a free classified platform available in many metropolitan areas. Real estate practitioners have found a free Craigslist account to be extremely effective for marketing listings online. You can write and edit your listing advertisement directly in the Craigslist interface or use some of the previously mentioned syndication tools to generate code to copy and paste into your Craigslist advertisement. You can't just post your listing and forget about it. Postings only last for seven days so you will need to go into your account to repost the ad at least once a week until the property is sold. In addition, the

ads are not sorted and the most recent ad shows first, so every ad placed in Craigslist after yours pushes yours further down the list.

E-MAIL MARKETING

E-mail marketing can be an efficient and effective way to communicate regularly with your customers and prospects as well as drive traffic to your Hub. Today's net-savvy consumer may enjoy receiving daily and weekly messages on real estate. If you provide them an easy way to subscribe, this list can be a valuable asset to you.

E-mail newsletters may ultimately replace their direct mail counterpart; they are more cost-effective and can be more target specific. Effective e-mail newsletters:

> Are timely, always providing something of value.

> Have three to four short articles with links to the "rest of the story."

For an example of an effective e-mail newsletter, see Figure 2.11.

Figure 2.11: E-mail Newsletter From the GoodLife Team
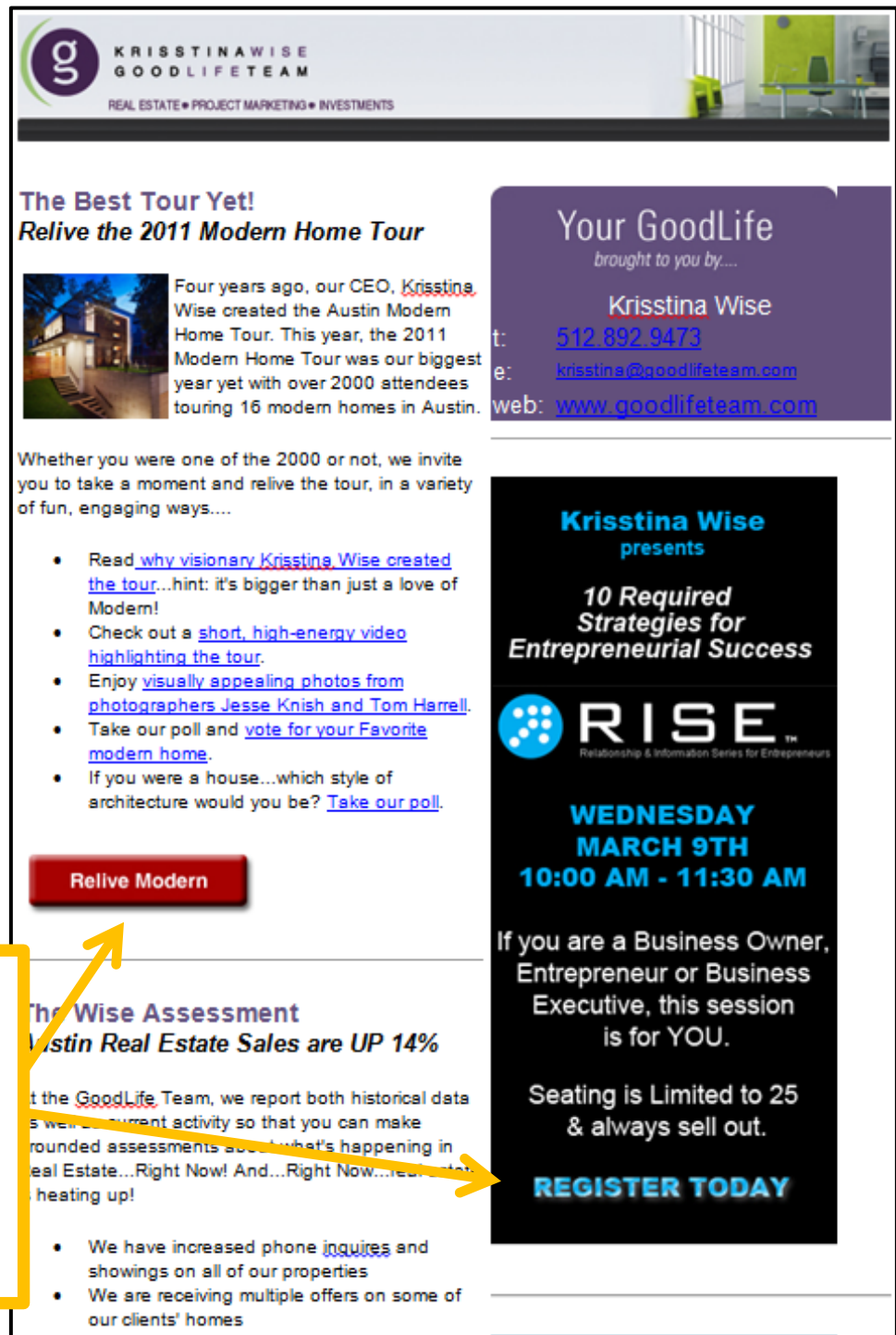
This e-newsletter from Krisstina Wise offers a rich assortment of content and calls to action. It also helps drive traffic to Krisstina's Hub—www.goodlifeteam.com.

Source: Reprinted with permission of Krisstina Wise, www.goodlifeteam.com.

If you write blog posts or articles on your website or blog, you can use the posts as articles in your newsletter. Write 25 to 50 words and then include the link back to your website. E-mail newsletters may also feature embedded photo tours and direct links to specific information. E-mail newsletters can be automated and scheduled to be date-specific or sent in conjunction with some other event, like an open house.

All your e-mail should be permission based. In building a relationship between you and prospects/past customers/your sphere of influence, the last thing you want is to flood them with unwanted e-mail. Be sure to include a link on your website where visitors can subscribe to your e-newsletter. If you have a Facebook business page, set up a tab for visitors to register for your e-mail newsletter as well.

Also, make certain you comply with the CAN-SPAM Act (which stands for "Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing") by including an opt-out mechanism, identify the newsletter as an ad, and include the physical address of your business.

CAN-SPAM establishes requirements for any e-mail that advertises or promotes a commercial product or service, including website content. E-mails must include:

> Accurate header

> Accurate subject lines

> Easy opt-out method

> Legitimate return e-mail address and valid physical postal address

CAN-SPAM Mobile Service Commercial Messages (MSCM) bans delivery of unwanted MSCM to wireless devices or domain names (includes cell phones, PDAs, smartphones). Check the FCC's list of wireless domain names at www.fcc.gov to ensure that commercial e-mails are not being sent to prohibited domains.

E-mail Marketing Programs

There are a variety of programs to help you create your e-mail newsletter. Some are turnkey, so you just pick the campaign, add your members, and the system does it for you.

Turnkey Programs

Turnkey e-mail marketing programs require minimal work by the real estate professional, but the content may be used by other agents. They may also lack local content and the real estate professional's "voice." If you use a turnkey e-mail program, be sure it allows you the opportunity to add some custom content to personalize the newsletter. Vendors include:

> SharperAgent (www.sharperagent.com)

> Top Producer (www.topproducer.com)

> Imprev (www.imprev.com)

Custom Programs

Custom e-mail programs require a greater time investment by the agent. Once you create your template, you may find them easier to use, especially if you are using regular content from your blog. A custom e-mail enables you to create targeted content to specifically meet the needs of your target consumer. Following are a few programs to check out:

> MailChimp (www.mailchimp.com)

> iContact (www.icontact.com)

> Constant Contact (https://search.constantcontact.com)

> What Counts (www.whatcounts.com)

> Vertical Response (www.verticalresponse.com)

> E-Campaign Pro (www.ecampaignpro.com)

Make sure your custom program allows you to:

☐ Manage subscriptions automatically.
☐ Offer an "Unsubscribe" feature.

☐   See who is reading your newsletter through data and analytics.

☐   Create a professional-looking product using the predesigned templates.

Ways to use the e-newsletter:

☐   Conduct weekly e-mail farming.

☐   Create a personal promotional e-mail brochure template.

☐   Create a property-specific e-mail marketing template.

☐   Extend content on your company website by creating a series of quick e-mail templates for replying to leads and prospects.

Tips and tricks for e-newsletters:

☐   E-mail the newsletter to yourself and keep it handy for fast reply to leads every day.

☐   Create a post-open-house e-mail template to quickly follow up with prospects after they visit your open house.

☐   Use to incubate leads over time.

3. e-Office

From financial programs to word processing to software that tracks contracts and the transaction, real estate professionals are responsible for managing multiple software programs. Because most real estate professionals spend a large percentage of their time outside the office and in the field, or working from home offices, it is important to be able to run your business no matter where you or your clients are.

In this module, we will examine products in the following categories:

> Customer relationship management (CRM)

> Transaction management

> Document management

> Communications

> Finance and accounting

> Photo sharing

> Bookmarking sites

Many of these products overlap. Don't reinvent…implement! Start by doing a little research and find out what tools are already available to you through your company, MLS, and association. Also see what your website company and virtual tour and e-mail client programs offer that can help you manage day-to-day tasks in your business.

CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

Sales professionals use CRM software programs to manage prospecting, marketing, listings and sales, and post-closing communications. Many CRM products allow professionals to compute "in the cloud" (see Figure 3.1 for a discussion of cloud computing) while at the same time integrate with other software programs to simplify running daily tasks.

Figure 3.1: Understanding Cloud Computing

The term "cloud computing" was introduced in 2007 and has since gained widespread use, proliferating in a wide variety of "cloud" products. But what does cloud computing mean exactly? Put simply, it's accessing data and programs online without needing to download software or have a specific operating system. Think of it: No longer do you need to have a specific program *on* a specific program. Just open a browser and you are there. Your information is stored "in the cloud" instead of residing on a single computer.

The rewards of cloud computing are considerable:

> Inexpensive or free software

> Constantly updated on all devices

> Greater efficiency

> Your "stuff" always with you

> Can be used cross platform

> Sending and tracking large files easily

> Manage documents and projects all in one place

Most cloud computing tools also have applications for the iPad and various smartphones. This means you can work from home, on the road, at a client's office, and even on your smartphone. You have access wherever you have Internet access. This makes cloud computing wonderful for collaboration. You now have an "e-Office": your office is essentially any place where you have an Internet connection and your laptop or smartphone.

Many CRM programs enable real estate professionals to carry out specific functions, including creating to-do lists, making calls, and sending e-mails and letters.

Features common to CRM programs include:

☐ A dashboard that allows you to manage contacts and incoming leads and that integrates with MLS data, which you can import when creating CMAs and compiling listings and sales information

☐ Marketing campaigns with built-in templates (letters, flyers, and e-mails) that can be personalized

☐ The ability to track listings and sales by checklists or action plans. When these activities are marked "done," a service report is populated. This report can be shared with the client or with an agent's team to make sure all tasks are being accomplished.

☐ Detailed data on all of your clients

☐ Date-stamped conversation logs

☐ Synchronization with smartphones and Microsoft Outlook

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Gary David Hall

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> Jamison, PA

I don't know which CRM product to pick. Which is best?

Choosing your CRM solution is arguably the most important software decision you will make. A CRM can help you grow and run your business. Take the time to find the right CRM solution; this will pay off tremendously in the long run. The more research you do, the more features will come to light.

Which one is the best CRM? That depends upon your aptitude for software in general, your current needs, and your future goals. When you are compiling your list of requirements for your CRM, think about them in the context of time-saving performance. That will help you keep your preferred features in perspective with your overall goal.

What kind of user will you be?

1. You have a relatively good understanding of how computers and software work. You pick up software relatively easily and enjoy playing with it. You have the imagination to be creative with it. You will enjoy investing the time into tailoring the program to be just the way you want it because it is flexible. For example:

Agent Y works with an iPad or laptop in the field. He uses the downtime during the day to get work done. He needs a product that he can access all day and send information to his team members and clients wherever they are. He will use a more robust Web-based software.

2. You use a computer because you have to. You would usually rather be doing something else. You want something that is already all laid out and is clear which information needs to go where. This makes it easier to learn and use. You should really have something that may not be quite as flexible, but is easier to learn. It is already tailored to the needs of the majority of residential resale agents.

> *Agent X works with her smartphone. She wants software that allows her to set appointments, add contacts, and send files while she is out in the field. She likes to do follow-up e-mails with clients and updates when she is back in the office from her laptop.*

If you do not yet have a CRM solution, hold off on buying a new computer or phone until you have decided upon one. Choose your CRM solution first and then get the hardware that it works with, not the other way around. Your desktops, laptops, tablets, and phones will come and go, but your CRM solution will hopefully be with you forever. For example, if you are considering buying a Mac computer, your choices of the better CRM solutions as well as many other software solutions are dramatically reduced. If you must have a Mac, plan on also installing PC Emulation software such as Parallels.

The single most inefficient aspect of most real estate CRMs is the inability to fully integrate e-mail into them. This necessitates using an e-mail client such as Outlook or Gmail for e-mail and the CRM for everything else. The end result is having to constantly switch back and forth between the two. A great deal of weight and consideration should be put into finding a CRM that enables both outgoing and incoming e-mails to be stored with the contact record in the CRM automatically. It should also be capable of using HTML in the e-mail as opposed to only plain text.

One of the most misunderstood issues with CRMs is that Web-based products "hold your data hostage." The perception is that a CRM application installed on your desktop means you will always have all of your data available. That is true as long as the CRM continues to be updated. If not, it's then just a matter of time until it will no longer work with your new computer, operating system, or phone. Top Producer 6i and Agent Office are good examples of popular products that have been

discontinued, thereby eventually rendering that data inaccessible. All CRMs allow you to export at least your basic contact information. Some allow for more, while others can literally export every single field. Some examples of other data are property information and history, e-mail, e-mail and letter templates, prospecting, transaction management plans, and calendar information. What is typically not taken into consideration though and is equally important is what the CRM you are moving to will allow you to import. Virtually none of the CRMs allows for much more than basic contact information. No matter what your existing CRM will export, since the new one cannot import it all you will lose data. The bottom line is that you want to invest enough time to do sufficient due diligence to make sure that you get the right one the first time thereby avoiding the loss of data during the process of moving.

Are you a real estate salesperson or are you also a part-time programmer? CRM solutions that are created specifically for use by real estate agents typically have most of what you need already set up. That said, they still take time to learn. If the CRM is not specifically for real estate, you will end up spending a great deal more time setting it up, and in many cases it will not be able do what you need as an agent.

If you are the type of agent who does not like sitting in front of the computer, choosing a generic solution is almost certainly a mistake. When someone is recommending a CRM solution to you, consider the source. If that person is an active real estate agent and is recommending the use of a generic solution, they are the kind of person who does enjoy sitting in front of the computer for hours on end. If they are not an active agent but have a background in real estate sales, they have a better understanding of your needs. If their background is in IT and does not include real estate, there is a tendency to recommend that with which they are familiar, which is usually generic solutions.

Top Producer

Top Producer (www.topproducer.com) offers a robust contact management system where the goal is to make sure no lead, client, or task falls through the cracks. Top Producer helps:

> Automate lead follow-up with hundreds of customizable e-mails, postcards, and letters

> Position the real estate professional as the market expert with cutting-edge reports and presentations

> Enable the real estate professional to provide exceptional client service with state-of-the-art listing and task management tools

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> Wonica REALTORS® & Appraisers
> Staten Island, NY

Why do you use Top Producer?

One of the main reasons why I use the program is the variety of ways it helps me to manage my time. With the volunteer work that I do, my time is of utter importance. This program allows me to set up when I need to call someone or perform certain functions or tasks I need to complete for a listing or closing. Top Producer allows me the freedom to set up when I need to touch base with people and then reminds me when it's time. It also allows me to track my listings & closings all in one place. Its mobility features also allow me to use Top Producer from my mobile phone with an iPhone app. I can also update my website (also from Top Producer) automatically when I add a new listing and monitor the traffic. It's a cost of my business that I don't know what I would do without it.

Wise Agent

Wise Agent (www.thewiseagent.com) provides a professional, private, and secure Web workplace for real estate professionals, with 24/7 access from anywhere in the world. Features of the service include transaction management, marketing tools, contact and time management tools,

unlimited document storage, lead tracking, free training, and technical support.

MyRealEstateTools

MyRealEstateTools (www.brokershelper.com) is an all-in-one, Web-based CRM allows users to manage contacts, marketing campaigns, transactions, finances, and even lock boxes. One subscription allows up to five team logins.

Realty Juggler

RealtyJuggler (http://realtyjuggler.com) is an online Web application that syncs with Microsoft Outlook, Google Gmail, and Google Calendar. It also syncs with any smartphone with Google or Microsoft Outlook sync capability. The program allows you to track prospects, clients, listings, showings, offers, open houses, promotions, and closings. In addition, it enables users to upload files, track documents, parties, contingencies and other transaction details.

Microsoft Outlook

Outlook is also viewed as a contact management program, but on its own does not have all the CRM features needed to run a real estate business. There are add-on products that install the features that Outlook needs to run as a CRM. These programs allow real estate professionals to use a product they are comfortable with and at the same time manage prospects, listings, and sales. Not necessary, but you may enjoy the familiarity of Outlook with some added real estate features. Some of these products include Salesforce (www.salesforce.com) and Sales Highrise (https://highrisehq.com).

For a quick-reference comparison chart of CRMs, see Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: CRM Comparison Chart

	Price	Track Leads?	Maintain Listing and Sales Info?	Create CMAs?	Prospecting Plans and Drip Campaigns?	Document Storage?	Transaction Management?	Sync with mobile phone/cell phone?	Sync with MS Outlook/ Google Gmail?	Stores e-mail (inbound/ outbound) with contact?	Connect with Facebook and Twitter?	Add-ons available?	Tech Support and Training
Top Producer	$39.95/mo to $249/mo for additional products	Y	Y	Y (extra $ for MLS interface)	Y	N	Y	Y (extra $ to sync with BlackBerry/ iPhone/Droid /HTC)	Y (extra $ for Outlook user interface but no sync)	Y (both)	Y (both)	Market Snapshot Market Builder Websites	Free support/free and fee options avail for training
Wise Agent	$24.95/mo	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	Y	Y (extra $ to sync with BlackBerry/ iPhone/Droid /HTC)	Y (extra $ for Outlook with Companion Link)	Y (outbound only)	N		Free support and training
MyRealEstateTools	$49.95/mo	Y	Y	N	Y	N	Y	Y (BlackBerry/ iPhone)	N	Y (outbound only)	N	Postcard campaigns	Free support and training
Realty Juggler	$99/yr	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (iPhone, Palm Pre/ Droid)	Y (both)	Y (outbound only)	N		
Outlook	$99/one time	N	N	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y (both)	Y (both)	N	ActiveAgent, Salesforce, Highrise	Free support 1st year

Social Media Add-Ons

Many of the CRM products discussed in this section have added a seamless connection to your Facebook and Twitter accounts, so you can instantly post and automatically follow the updates for all your contacts—all within their products. (See Figure 3.1.) In addition, developers have introduced social media add-ons for e-mail products like Gmail. Products like Rapportive (https://rapportive.com) can provide a bird's-eye view of your database contacts and allow you to monitor communications with them. Many of these add-ons also offer a social media dashboard so you can view all the data in one simple interface, which allows for a whole new layer of contact relationship.

TRANSACTION MANAGEMENT

When customers become clients, you can facilitate the transactions with electronic forms and transaction management systems. Today most of our transaction forms have been digitized. These forms can be filled out on a computer and then e-mailed directly to parties involved in the real estate transaction.

The real estate sales cycle becomes streamlined as files get delivered quickly and efficiently. No more running around at 11 p.m. getting signatures on contracts. If you use electronic signatures, your clients can sign the file digitally and then send you multiple files and folders with a mouse click—all the files being stored in one folder, on one Webpage, on the Web.

Whether you are on the buy or sell side, different levels of access to the transaction are provided to office staff, agents, brokers, consumers, and vendors. Using transaction management software:

> Files can be e-mailed, faxed, or scanned into the online document management system.

> Checklists can be created and tasks assigned to different parties.

> E-mails can be generated from within the system to remind parties of deadlines.

> Files can be accessed from anywhere.

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> Contracts, addendums, and commonly used forms can be left in folders for use in new transactions.

> Folders are created for each transaction.

Companies give access to the information in different ways. Consumer must set up their passwords in order to protect the integrity and security of the transaction. All visits by all parties to the transaction are tracked and logged.

Transaction management software is usually supplied by your company or MLS, so any of the following may be available to you:

> zipTMS™ : Note that zipTMS™ is benefit at no cost to all NAR members.

> PlanetRE (www.planetre.com)

> TransactionDesk (http://instanetsolutions.com/instanetsolutions/transactiondesk)

> TransactionPoint (www.transactionpoint.com)

> Settlement Room (http://emphasysre.com/transactions)

Many of these programs work with your existing electronic forms. They offer electronic signatures and store your transactions and all the paperwork digitally on a secure site. You are able to give limited access to the files and folders to the parties in the transaction that need the data. Simply e-mailing a form to an e-mail address will add the file to the online folder for your transactions. At the end of the transaction, these sites allow you to add all appropriate e-mails for the transaction simply by e-mailing them to the folders. For risk management purposes you are able to download a completely digitized version of the transaction folder and store in on your local drive.

Electronic Forms

Electronic forms software typically integrates with TMS programs and makes it convenient and efficient to fill out real estate forms from your state licensing authority, MLS, and REALTOR® board/association. Most electronic forms software programs include tools for editing common

contract clauses, checking spelling, sending forms as PDFs in e-mails, and more. Some software programs offer online document storage services as well.

The largest provider of electronic transaction forms to real estate professionals is zipForm®, which is the exclusive and official forms software for the NAR. To learn more about zipForm® products and REALTOR Benefits® exclusive offers, visit www.realtor.org/realtor_benefits/benefits_partners/zipform.

Electronic Signatures

With the adoption of the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act (UETA) in most jurisdictions as well as federal enactment of the Electronic Signatures in Global and National Commerce Act (ESIGN) in 2000, electronic or digital signatures are gaining widespread adoption among real estate professionals for facilitating transactions.

Electronic signatures have the same validity and legal status as signatures written with pen and ink. Electronic signatures are legally binding and can be used for a wide array of real estate agreements, forms, and addenda.

Some providers of electronic signature programs include:

☐ CoSign (www.arx.com)

☐ DocuSign (www.docusign.com)

☐ Adobe eSign Services (https://acrobat.adobe.com/us/en/documents/esignatures.html)

☐ RightSignature (https://rightsignature.com)

DocuSign is the official and exclusive e-signature provider to the National Association of REALTORS®. DocuSign enables users to:

> Manage agreements and forms electronically via the Internet, with no software to download or update.

> Collaborate on and track the status of all offers, counteroffers, and contract changes—receiving a certificate of completion for every electronically signed document.

> Set automated reminders for parties to sign required documents, freeing you to manage your business.

> Add "Stick-e®" tabs so that all parties know where their signatures are required.

> Control who signs a document and in what order they sign it, when needed.

> Add additional security and authentication features such as access codes and "out-of-wallet" ID check questions.

> Automate repetitive and common tasks using templates.

> Maintain client confidentiality while using electronic signatures for both sides of the transaction.

DocuSign offers REALTOR®-branded e-signatures (see Figure 3.3), dashboard, and e-mail communications. Note that clients/signers do not need a DocuSign account to sign electronically; only the sender needs to have an account.

Figure 3.3: REALTOR® Branded e-Signature from DocuSign

Source: Reprinted with permission of DocuSign.

This program provides a secure electronic signature platform by implementing audit trails, encrypted documents and communications, unique e-signatures, third-party authentication tools, and time stamping for every step in the process.

DocuSign is both computer and mobile friendly. Users (signers and senders) can e-sign documents with any of the following mobile devices:

> iPhone

> BlackBerry

> Windows Mobile

> Google Android

Benefits to using DocuSign are:

☐ Convenience. You can access DocuSign's e-signature services on to go—all that you need is Internet access. There is no software to download or install.

☐ Confidence. Your legal agreements and forms—many of which contain sensitive personal and financial information—are delivered and retained securely and professionally.

☐ Shortened time frame to the closing table. Users find that DocuSign reduced the time it takes to print, mail or fax, sign, and resend documents from a week or more to less than an hour.

☐ Cost savings. Gone are the days of faxing, mailing, and/or hand-delivering agreements and forms.

☐ Customer satisfaction. DocuSign helps real estate professionals better serve their clients.

Field Trip
Add Your Digital Signature

Creating and adding your e-signature to a legal document may seem daunting at first blush. However, DocuSign makes the process easy as 1, 2, 3!

Instructions

> Go to www.docusign.com/demo.

> Select "Real Estate Listing," customize the example you're your information, and then select "START SIGNING DEMO."

> Select "Continue" and review the document.

> Select "Start."

> Move your cursor to the "Sign" note.

> Choose a signature style and select "ADOPT AND SIGN."

> Select "FINISH."

DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

In real estate, document management has grown from cabinets filled with paper-laden files into easy-to-use systems to track and store electronic documents and/or images of paper documents.

Today, with the aid of a simple scanner, all the paperwork for a transaction can be reduced to digital files and organized for each transaction. A scanner is the easiest way to turn paper (receipts, paperwork, and communications) into organized files to find quickly, use, and share. Using software included with a scanner, it is easy to scan all-important paperwork into PDF files, which can be stored on your computer, on an external hard drive, or on a secure server on the Web.

You can manage, archive, and share them as PDF files. Scanned and electronic files can easily be viewed, accessed through keyword searches or as individual page thumbnails. By doing a simple search, you can quickly find all matching documents. It is then easy to mail, fax, and print the files from your computer.

Why We Use PDFs

When you save a document as a PDF, it can be read by almost anyone. Clients complain when they can't open the attachments sent by agents, and many of these attachments are critically important to real estate transactions.

Today, many of our forms have been digitized into PDFs that have editable fields. Once filled out, they can be printed and or e-mailed to appropriate parties. Once the offer is accepted the buyer can print it out, sign it, and fax it back. PDFs are also used to send information sheets, agreements, contracts, addendums, and flyers to buyers, sellers, and the other vendors involved in the transaction.

How to Create PDFs

If you already have a file in a digital format on your computer, like a Microsoft Word document, a spreadsheet, or a flyer, you can create a PDF by installing PDF creation software. Once downloaded to your computer, these programs install a printer driver. You can open any file and "print to pdf." You can purchase Adobe® Acrobat® (www.adobe.com/products/acrobat.html) for your business or use a free product like Pdf995 (www.pdf995.com), PrimoPDF (www.PrimoPDF.com), or CutePDF (http://cutepdf.com). Before downloading any product, double-check the system requirements to make sure your operating system is supported.

Electronic Fax Number

When you still need access to a fax machine, consider an electronic fax number. Products like eFax® (www.efax.com) offer a fax number that sends your faxes to your computer as an e-mail with an attached PDF instead of to a paper fax machine. The electronic fax process has many benefits:

> It's speedy.

> The document is only faxed once, to your computer, which will help preserve print clarity of the scanned document.

> It is more convenient for buyer-clients since they only have to search out a fax machine for the outbound fax.

Large File Transfer

Have you ever had trouble sending multiple files or a file that is so large in size that you cannot send it as an attachment through e-mail? Consider a product that allows you to send large files over the Web. Your client communication depends on immediate follow up on contracts and paperwork. Programs like Hightail (www.hightail.com) and Box (www.box.com) have features that will allow you to share files up to 2GB without using e-mail or sometimes difficult-to-use file transfer protocol (FTP) sites.

Using file transfer programs, large files are uploaded through a Web browser, from your computer, or from within an e-mail client like Microsoft Outlook. The file is stored on a personalized webpage. The recipient is sent a link to the webpage, from which he or she can download the file. The sender receives an e-mail confirmation when the recipient downloads the file.

File-Sharing Solutions

File-sharing solutions allow you to make mirror image copies of all of your documents as you change or create them. You can use these sites for document storage and give access to clients and colleagues as appropriate. The files can easily be viewed, accessed, and arranged online. Certain programs offer a free product to get you started. With file-sharing programs you can:

> Send and track large files easily.

> Manage documents all in one place.

> Manage projects around your content, assign tasks and track file versions.

Programs include:

- ☐ Box (www.box.com)
- ☐ Dropbox (www.dropbox.com)
- ☐ Sugarsync (www.sugarsync.com)
- ☐ Huddle (www.huddle.com)

If you have more than one computer registered, or are sharing files with someone else, you can sync your files online and across your computers automatically. These products work cross platform and have applications for smartphones and the iPad.

Box has a special arrangement with DocuSign, making it easy to put your contracts and files directly into its program. Box makes it easy to share folders and files and keep them password protected. Box allows you to create a folder on a website so people can access files directly.

Dropbox allows people with free accounts to collaborate on unique folders. If you are sharing files with someone else, Dropbox allows you to sync your files online and across your computers automatically. With Dropbox, you can:

- > Sync files of any size or type.

- > Sync Windows, Mac, and Linux computers.

- > Automatically sync when new files or changes are detected.

Users can view their files from a Web browser, and now there are free apps for your iPhone, iPad, or Android. When you install the Dropbox software to your computer a folder called Dropbox is installed in your Documents folder. This makes all your Dropbox files accessible offline. If you work on a file when offline, it automatically is synced when you connect to the Internet.

COMMUNICATIONS

Virtual Phone Systems

Keeping in touch with your clients is a full-time job. Many of us spend countless hours on the phone, or catching up with voice-mail messages left at different numbers. One solution can be to purchase a virtual phone system. This entails one phone number to which you forward all your phone numbers. Some systems have a virtual assistant answer the calls; others offer unlimited extensions so phone calls can be left for departments and employees. What separates a virtual phone system from one at the office is that all system features can be managed online or via your phone. No hardware is necessary.

One of the newest features is being able to have voice mails transcribed into text and then sent to your e-mail address. Voice mails can be read saving phone minutes and playback time.

Virtual phone system programs include:

> Grasshopper (http://grasshopper.com)

> Google Voice (https://www.google.com/voice)

> Onebox (www.onebox.com)

> RingCentral (www.ringcentral.com)

> PhoneTag (www.phonetag.com)

Video Conferencing

If we want to be successful with today's buyers, we need to remember what is, and always has been, at the heart of the sale: people will only buy something from someone they trust. If you can't meet them face-to-face, video conferencing a viable alternative to help instill and build on the trust you earn with your clients.

More and more real estate professionals are using Skype (www.skype.com) to communicate with clients across the country and across the world. Not only can you make phone calls from computer to

computer, you can open a live chat box and send links, files, and information. If you want, you can also "share your screen," which is useful when demonstrating a website to a consumer. If you have a webcam, you can also have a video call. Video calls, like Skype-to-Skype calls are free. All you need is a webcam and software; both parties must also have Skype accounts.

PRODUCTIVITY AND OFFICE MANAGEMENT

Business and office productivity has never been more important. Today there are various suites of products that integrate well together and can be used "in the cloud." There are three important areas where these programs prove invaluable. They are:

1. Productivity: including word processors, spreadsheets, calendar, notes and presentation software
2. Business applications: sales-cycle software with a CRM focus that also includes financial, HR reporting and financial software
3. Communication software: including e-mail, live chat, online meeting software, forums, wikis, and project sharing programs

Available Google Products

Because of the familiarity that most people have with Google, many find it simple to experiment with Google's large and well-developed suite of cloud computing tools. By creating a Google account at www.google.com you can easily try any of the following:

☐ **Gmail**

Gmail is Google's free e-mail platform. They provide an e-mail account with up to 25 GB of storage per custom e-mail address. The software includes a robust mail search tool and integrated chat. You can sync with many e-mail-enabled phones. Google also features a highly sophisticated spam filter.

☐ **Google Calendars**

Google Calendars allow you to coordinate meetings, showings, and company events with sharable calendars. You can also sync your Google Calendars with Outlook.

☐ **Google Docs**

Try Google Docs to collaborate on Word documents, PowerPoint presentations and Excel spreadsheets. When you set up a Google Docs account you have access to a dashboard that you can personalize with folders. You can create documents within the browser or upload your own files. Google docs accept: PDF, PPT, Word, Excel, and photos (jpg, gif, and png). You can give other people rights to edit or view, and you can share your documents with a link and not as an attachment.

Load documents that you need easy access to when you are on the road. If you load your PowerPoint presentations you now have an easy way to share information quickly with consumers. Do you have a WordPress blog? You can post your content directly from Google Docs.

☐ **Google Reader**

Google Reader constantly checks your favorite news sites and blogs for new content. Whether a site updates daily or monthly, you can be sure that you won't miss a thing: To simplify your online reading experience, Google Reader shows you all of your favorite sites in one convenient place. It's like a personalized inbox for the entire Web. You can access your Google Reader account from any computer with online access or any mobile phone browser.

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What Google Products Do You Find Most Useful?

☐ **Gmail**

I love Google's email platform and have my own domain e-mail address that gets processed through Google. People can e-mail me at my domain (Kim@KimWood.net), but I receive the e-mail and superior spam protection through Gmail. Changing from Outlook to Gmail was hard, but it's one of the best technology-focused decisions I've made! My favorite feature is their fast and accurate search. I can enter a street address in the search bar and results are sorted through my 18,000 e-mails in seconds. I receive all the e-mails that mentioned the street address in the subject or body of the message.

☐ **Google Calendars**

Google Calendars are my exclusive calendar. I have various calendars set up for different uses. Each calendar has its own color, so it is easy to keep track of the following:

> Personal commitments
> My child's activities
> Tech training
> Listing addresses

I have the calendars sync to my mobile phone so I always know where I need to be when—and what hat to wear.
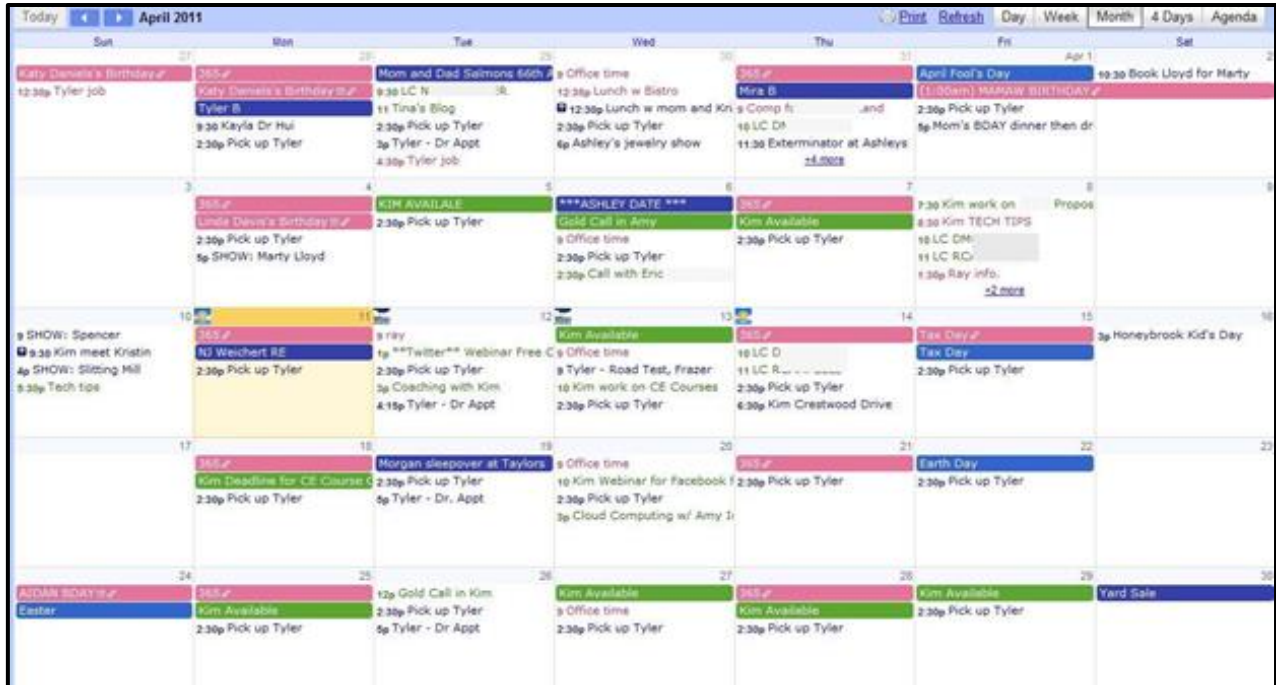
☐ **Google Maps**

I use Google Maps to pinpoint the location of my listings with community highlights of places on the map (libraries, hospitals, malls, restaurants, etc.) that shows the proximity to the listing. You can't print with Google's copyright, but you can link up to the map online! So I frequently post this on my blog website for details about the property.

For buyers, it's helpful to plug in various addresses of properties on a buyer tour to send with your buyer-client that includes other locations (shopping, libraries, parks, etc.).

For my community, I've created some area maps for places of interest. For example, I made one for Golf Courses in Chester County and used it on my blog website.

☐ **Google Docs**

For sellers and buyers I place documents pertinent to the transaction and contracts in a Google Document folder and share that with the seller and/or buyer (my client). It's helpful to have everything in one place and "in the cloud." A friend of mine, Kelly Koehler, also gave me a great tool: share a spreadsheet document with sellers where you can leave them

feedback received, marketing activity performed, and so on. They have one place to check for updates. For buyers, I create a spreadsheet where I list properties that buyers have visited with information like:

> Price
> Listing date
> 1st showing date
> 2nd showing date
> Feedback
> Sold date and price

This makes it a helpful place to refer back to if you've been looking for a while and want to see all the activity. I update the list after we return from showings and frequently go through to see if any properties have sold on the list.

☐ **Google Voice**

Google Voice is what my team uses to have one phone number that rings to all four of us. We like to answer the phone with a person instead of voice mail, and this helps get that done for us. I also have my cell phone forwarded to Google Voice so I can get a transcription of the voice mail that is left.

Additional Programs to Consider

☐ **OpenOffice.org**

OpenOffice.org (www.openoffice.org) is an open-source office software suite for word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, graphics, databases, and more. It is available in many languages and works on all common computers. It stores all your data in an international open standard format and can also read and write files from other common office software packages. It can be downloaded and used completely free of charge for any purpose.

☐ **Zoho**

Zoho (https://www.zoho.com) provides a wide, integrated portfolio of rich online applications for businesses. There are more than 20 programs. Zoho integrates with Google and Microsoft products. Zoho also offers built-in collaboration features. If you want to give access to partners or customers to your internal site, just invite them using their e-mail address.

Task Management

Sometimes a simple program to remember tasks, blog posting ideas, or great content to share with clients is all you need. There are easy-to-use task management products available.

☐ **Evernote**

With Evernote (www.evernote.com), you can type a text note, clip a webpage, or capture a photo, and they all end up in your Evernote account. If you need to capture anything to remind yourself of ideas to share, try this product. It is searchable by keyword, and you can organize your notes by categories. Evernote is a free product that integrates well with your phone, and syncs on the Web and with your computers. Evernote works by connecting all the computers

and phones you use daily, allowing you to capture something in one place and then access it from another.

☐ **Remember the Milk**

This free product (www.rememberthemilk.com) allows you to aggregate all your tasks and access them from everywhere. You can also share your tasks. It works with most smartphones and integrates with Google, Twitter, and your Web browser.

FINANCE AND ACCOUNTING

As independent contractors we need to find easy ways to do business planning based on real numbers. Keeping track of your finances, expenses, and receipts is important not only for when you need to file your taxes, but also to reflect the health of your business. Many of the finance software programs available today can monitor your current situation and offer powerful tools for aggregating data, analyzing it, identifying performance trends, and helping you plan for the future.

Consider using finance or accounting software to efficiently manage your own business. You can choose from a wide variety of finance programs. Some of them are really expensive, while others will cost you nothing.

Some of the programs available include computer-based and online versions. Many also offer applications for the iPhone and other smartphones.

☐ **Quicken**

Quicken (http://quicken.intuit.com) is a popular personal finance management tool developed by Intuit. It is easy to use, yet powerful. It allows you to track bank accounts, credit cards, stocks, income and expenses.

☐ **QuickBooks**

QuickBooks (http://quickbooks.intuit.com) organizes all your finances in one place. It is the big brother of Quicken. It does what Quicken does, but you can also create invoices and track sales. There are also many key financial reports that are available at a click of a button.

☐ **Mint**

If you want something very simple to use, consider Mint (www.mint.com). This is a free, easy online personal finance solution offered by Quicken.

☐ **Expensify**

Expensify (www.expensify.com) allows you to manage your spending, expenses, and receipts by either using the camera on your smartphone to take a picture of the receipt or through an easy-to-use Web-based program. You can create, approve, reimburse, and analyze expenses from your computer. It allows you to import expenses and receipts from all U.S. credit cards. It offers iPhone/iPad, BlackBerry, Palm, and Android mobile apps. Expensify also works with Quickbooks.

☐ **Shoeboxed.com**

Shoeboxed.com (www.shoeboxed.com) allows you to use an app on your smartphone to take pictures of your receipts and e-mail them to a report online. Shoeboxed also allows you to send in receipts and business cards using prepaid envelopes, e-mail, or your mobile phone, and Shoeboxed will scan, enter datat, and organize them for you.

☐ **HandyLogs Money**

HandyLogs Money (www.handylogs.com/home/prd.php?id=money) will keep track of receipts and expenses but also tracks time and mileage for tax purposes and reimbursement. This is an added benefit because tax law requires adequate records when deducting business use of your vehicle. HandyLogs offers complete reports of both business and personal use of your vehicle.

Choosing the tools that best fit your needs will result in a truly portable office experience, where you're limited only by your access to the Internet. Finding the best combination of tools is a question of style, preference, and budget—no matter your needs, a suitable e-office solution exists.

PHOTO SHARING

Photo sharing is the publishing or transfer of a user's digital photos online so they can be shared with others. This function is provided through websites where photos are uploaded and applications that help display and edit the images.

The first photo-sharing sites originated during the 1990s primarily to create a place to order online prints. Since then, other sites were created offering a centralized access point for a user's photos. Photo sharing sites provide various views of photos (thumbnails, slideshows), and the ability to add captions, tags, and comments. Many sites also offer photo management tools to help edit photos.

Products like Google's Picasa offer online storage and sharing, but also offer a desktop photo management application. Picasa finds all the images on your computer and organizes them for you. There are editing features as well as the ability to e-mail photos.

Flickr will store and allow you to share your photos online. You can upload groups of photographs and organize so friends, family, and others can find and share them. Flickr offers your friends and fans the ability to comment and tag your photos, and you can share your photos in various

ways: on the Flickr website, in RSS feeds, by e-mail, or by posting to outside blogs.

Note that Flickr is for personal use only. If you try to sell properties through your photostream, Flickr has the right to terminate your account.

BOOKMARKING SITES

What are social bookmarking sites? Using a website instead of the browser on your particular computer, you can set up a free account with one of the following sites and save your bookmarks into categories and tag them with keywords so you can find them later. You don't need to be on your own computer. You can open the software from any computer and find all your saved links.

Some users like to post their favorite sites, using tags (or keywords) to categorize and organize them, and then share them with even more users. You will need to create an account and sometimes download software for these programs to work.

☐ **Delicious**

Delicious (www.delicious.com) is a social bookmarking site that installs a browser button to make it easier to save your bookmarks. It allows you to save them on your computer as well. Once you create a series of tags or keywords that you use over and over, it is easy to go and search your keywords for articles when you are ready to research. Also enjoy the hotlist and the ability to explore tags that other people have used when they bookmark sites.

☐ **Digg**

Digg (http://digg.com) is social bookmarking and social networking where you can submit a Digg (site), and then anyone can comment on those same Diggs. In Digg's own words, they are there to provide a place where people can collectively determine the value of content. There are all types of media there from articles to videos and images. If something you "dig" becomes popular, Digg will promote it on the front page of the site.

☐ **Reddit**

Reddit (www.reddit.com) is a social bookmarking website that works similarly to Delicious: you register a username and password, and then start submitting and sharing your bookmarks. Reddit is similar to Delicious in that users are encouraged to vote on the links and stories that they feel are deserving of being in the top dog spot; it's kind of a popularity contest.

☐ **StumbleUpon**

StumbleUpon (www.stumbleupon.com) allows you to save, rate, and share great Websites. As you click on a site, StumbleUpon will send similar pages that match your personal preferences. These pages are recommended by other Web surfers with interests similar to you. If you use the rating system, StumbleUpon automatically shares your ratings with like-minded people.

4. Twitter and Foursquare

In this module:

> Twitter

> Location-based services

> Business applications of location-based services

TWITTER

At first glance or even after the first few uses, many people don't understand the value and use of Twitter for their real estate practice. Recall from Day 1 that Twitter is a platform for communication. You share status with the group of people who've chosen to follow you. At the same time, you're following (reading and listening to) the updates of the people you've chosen to follow. Discussion then takes place around those updates. Those discussions may occur in the public stream where anyone else can see them and participate, or privately via direct messages (DMs).

The open nature of the social network makes it very easy to communicate in real time with people in your backyard or around the globe. People use Twitter to update their whereabouts and activities, give opinions, and share pictures, articles, and links with their followers.

Remember that what often connects us to people are social objects—our shared interests and beliefs. If we talk about all business, all the time, we limit our ability to connect on a deeper, more personal level. Sometimes what seems to be a trivial personal comment or conversation on Twitter is the point.

Field Trip
Send a Tweet

If you haven't already sent a tweet (or two or three), NOW is the time.

Instructions

> Go to www.Twitter.com and sign in with your username/e-mail address and password

> Copy the following content:

   @billlublin @gingerw @amychorew @hallublin @epronar Working on my #epro certification

> Paste it in the "What's happening" field in the upper left corner of the screen and select "Tweet"
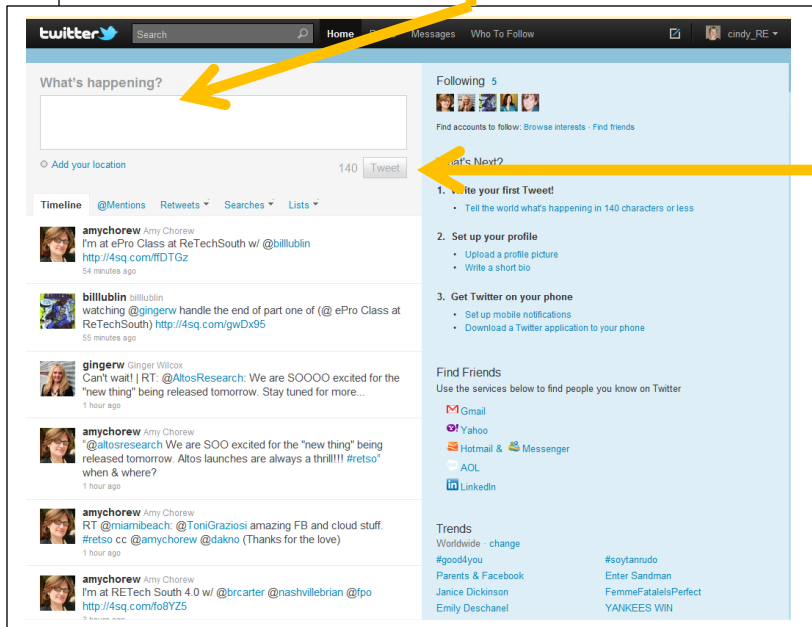
Begin to Comment and Create

As you begin to follow and engage people who interest you, you'll find that many of them will follow you back. This is the first step in establishing a connection. To make your connection a *relationship,* start commenting and creating (recall from Day 1: Listen, Comment, Create).

Do:

☐ Share your opinions on topics:

- Be genuine.
- Be interesting.
- Be entertaining/funny if you choose.

☐ Comment on others' tweets.

☐ Offer information that your followers value, such as links to reports or news articles.

☐ Ask for others' recommendations and input.

☐ If your friends and colleagues are on Twitter, engage in conversations with them. Conversations can be personal or work related.

☐ Respond when people mention you or send you a direct message (DM):

- If you don't check Twitter daily, set up notifications to send you an e-mail or text message when you are mentioned or are sent a DM.

☐ Keep it brief (you've got 140 characters or less to comment and create):

- See Figure 4.1 for a list of commonly used Twitter abbreviations.
- Use a URL shortener, which we'll discuss further in a few slides

Twitter is most effective if you use it as the conversation platform for which it is intended. If your tweets only talk **at** people and do not include conversation, you may want adjust how you are using it.

As a reminder, be sure your Twitter bio is complete with a link to your Hub—the place where you ultimately capture and convert and where you will need to put your company information to comply with licensing and ethical requirements.

Figure 4.1: Twitter Abbreviations	
AFAIK	as far as I know
b/c	because
BFN	bye for now
BTW	by the way
CC	carbon copy
DM	direct message
DYK	Did you know?
F2F	face-to-face
FF or #FF	follow Friday—listing people to follow
FTW	for the win—something being great/the best
FWIW	for what it's worth
GTG	got to go
HT	hat tip
IDK	I don't know
IMO/IMHO	in my (humble) opinion
LOL	laughing out loud
LMK	let me know
NSFW	not safe for work
OH	overheard
OMG	oh my god
Pls	please
ROFL	rolling on the floor laughing
TMI	too much information
TTYL	talk to you later
TY	thank you
YW	you're welcome

Shortening URLs

It is common for Twitter users to share specific websites or webpages in their tweets. However, URLs—especially the long ones—can use up most of the allotted 140 characters. For example, with tools on the Web, the following 94-character URL (a HouseLogic article on HVAC inspection):

http://www.houselogic.com/articles/how-inspect-your-hvac-system-and-blow-away-future-problems/

can be shortened to 20 characters:

http://bit.ly/ewDHoT

Available URL shorteners include:

- [ ] Bitly (https://bitly.com), which also allows users to analyze real-time statistics on the number of clicks to your shortened URL
- [ ] Budurl.com (http://budurl.com), which offers advanced data analysis
- [ ] Owl.ly (http://ow.ly/url/shorten-url), which is similar to Bit.ly
- [ ] Tinyurl (http://tinyurl.com/): where the shortened URLs never expire
- [ ] Google (http://goo.gl/), which offers analytics

Field Trip
Shorten a URL

Share a link to a *REALTOR® Magazine* blog post in your next e-newsletter or in a tweet. But first let's shrink that 119-character link!

Instructions

> Go to https://bitly.com

> Copy the following link:

> http://realtormag.realtor.org/home-and-design/feature/article/2013/12/think-color-in-2014

> Paste it in the open field and select "Shorten."
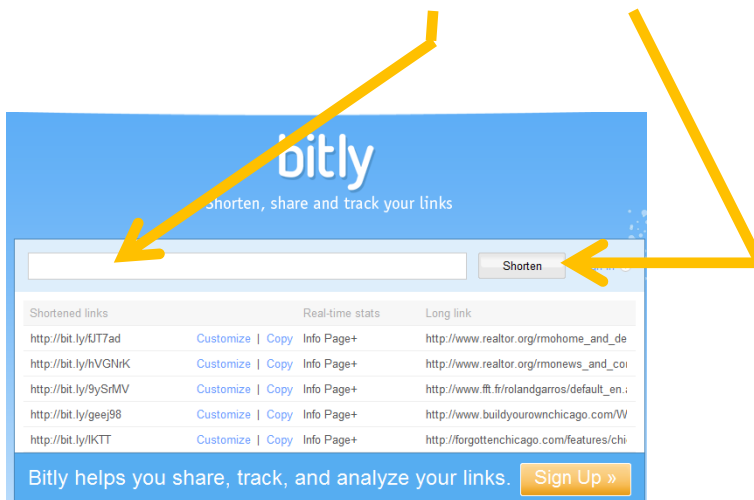
Don't (seriously, please don't):

X   Announce to the world that you are a real estate professional and looking for referrals.

X   Mention people you barely know in tweets to follow your links (doing so is considered spam).

X   Create an automated rule whereby a template direct message is sent to all new followers.

X   Constantly self-promote with no regard for the interests of others.

X   Promote listings, open houses, or price reductions.
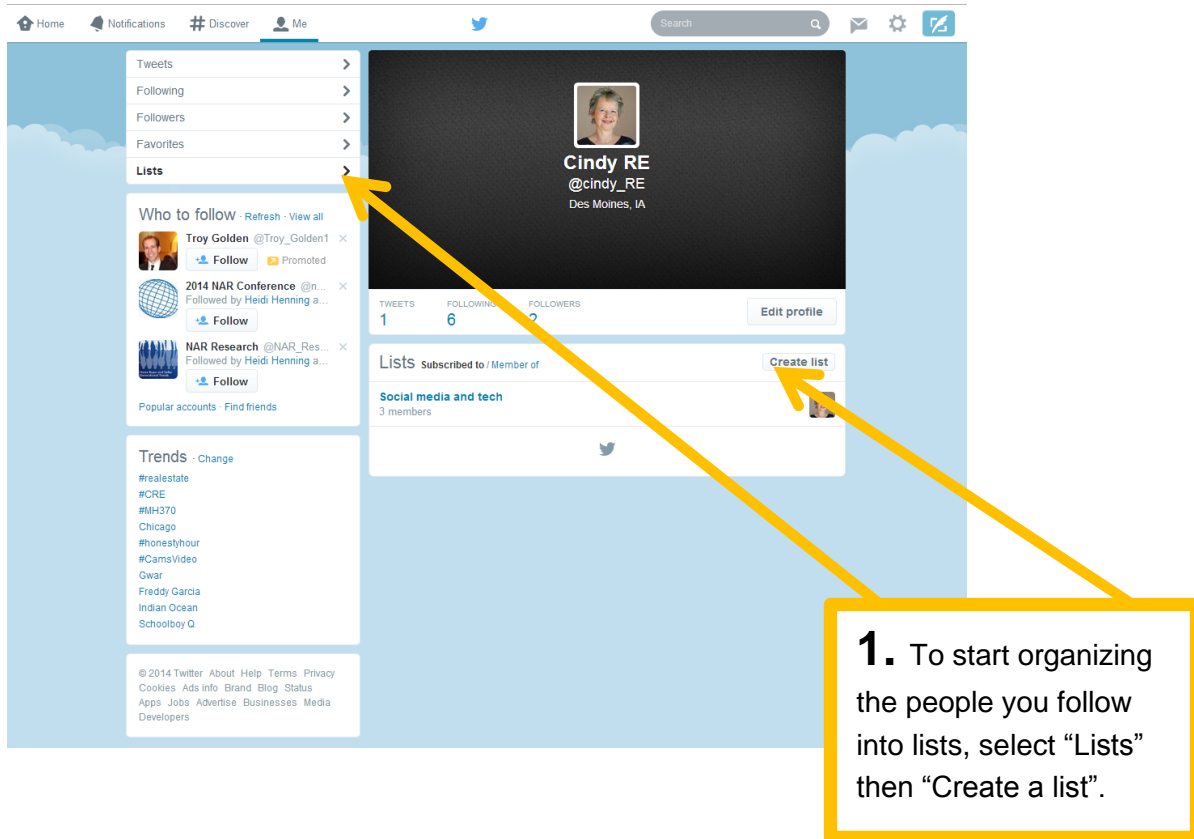
It is tempting for real estate professionals to use Twitter for the direct distribution of property information, but those types of tweets foster no engagement and will not achieve the click-throughs to properties that the sender would desire.

Occasionally a property that is unusual or unique (for example, a property with glass floors), architecturally interesting, owned by a public figure/celebrity, or a historic property might draw the attention of your Twitter community, but in those cases the interest is not drawn by the commercial purpose of the sender, but by the unique "entertainment" or curiosity value of the subject property. Where Twitter can be useful in a marketing sense is in its use as a place to engage in conversations, for example, to distribute information about your new blog posts, provide news, or curate material prepared by others.

Using Twitter Lists to Organize Followers

As you get more involved in following and connecting with people on Twitter, you are going to want to organize these people into groups so you can monitor what they are posting easily. Twitter calls these "lists" and you create them at Twitter (Figure 4.2).

Figure 4.2: Creating Lists at Twitter

1. To start organizing the people you follow into lists, select "Lists" then "Create a list".

2. Create a name for your list, add a description if you like, select whether or not you want others to see/follow your list, and then select "Save list."
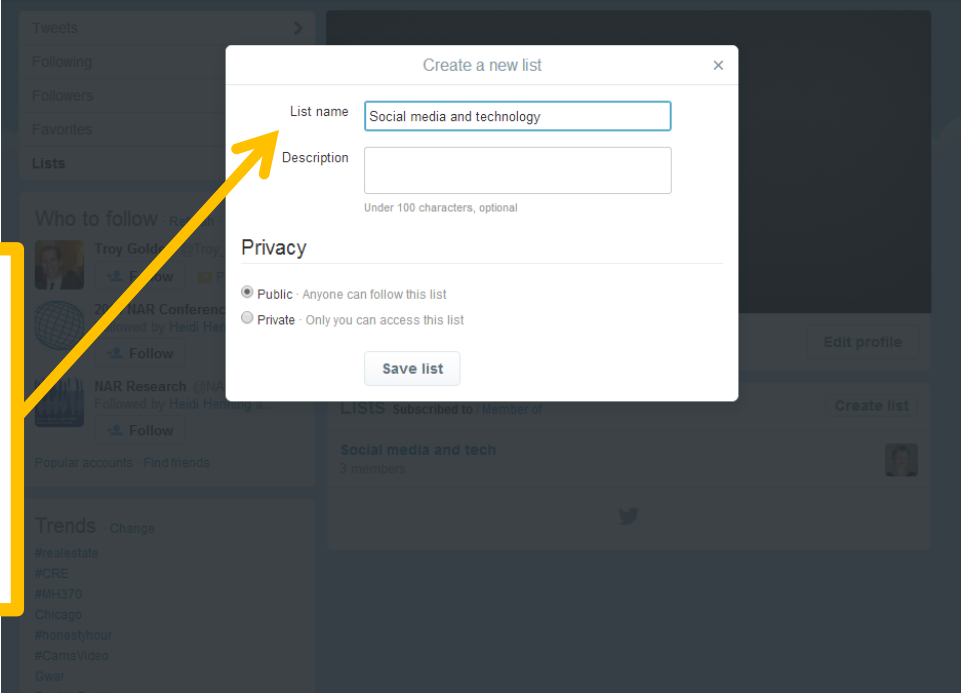
3. If you know the Twitter handles of people you want to add to this list, you can type their handle and select "Search".
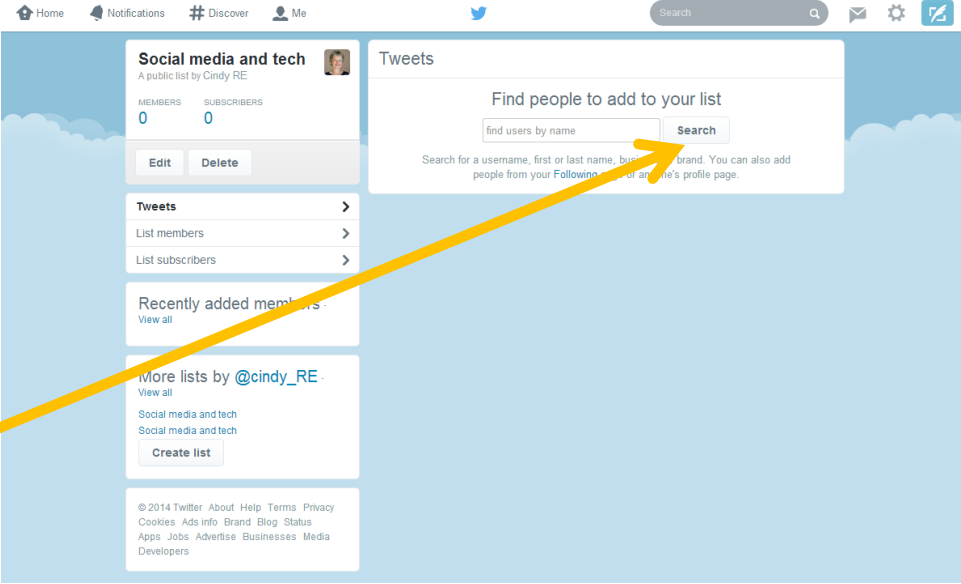
The next time you visit your home page at Twitter, select the "Lists" tab, choose the list you'd like to view, and right away, you'll see a feed of tweets from the users included in that list.

Using Twitter for Market Research

With Twitter, we have the ability to understand our customers' needs like never before. Twitter's open conversations make it an effective way to listen to potential consumers and find out what their concerns are, what they want, and what they don't like. Even if you decide never to post a tweet on Twitter, it can provide valuable information about your target consumers, absolutely free.

Twitter has an advanced search function (Figure 4.3) that can be used on the fly and allows users to search for key words in a specific language, from specific people, by location, and/or within a specific time frame.

Figure 4.3: Twitter Advanced Search

Source: http://search.twitter.com/advanced.
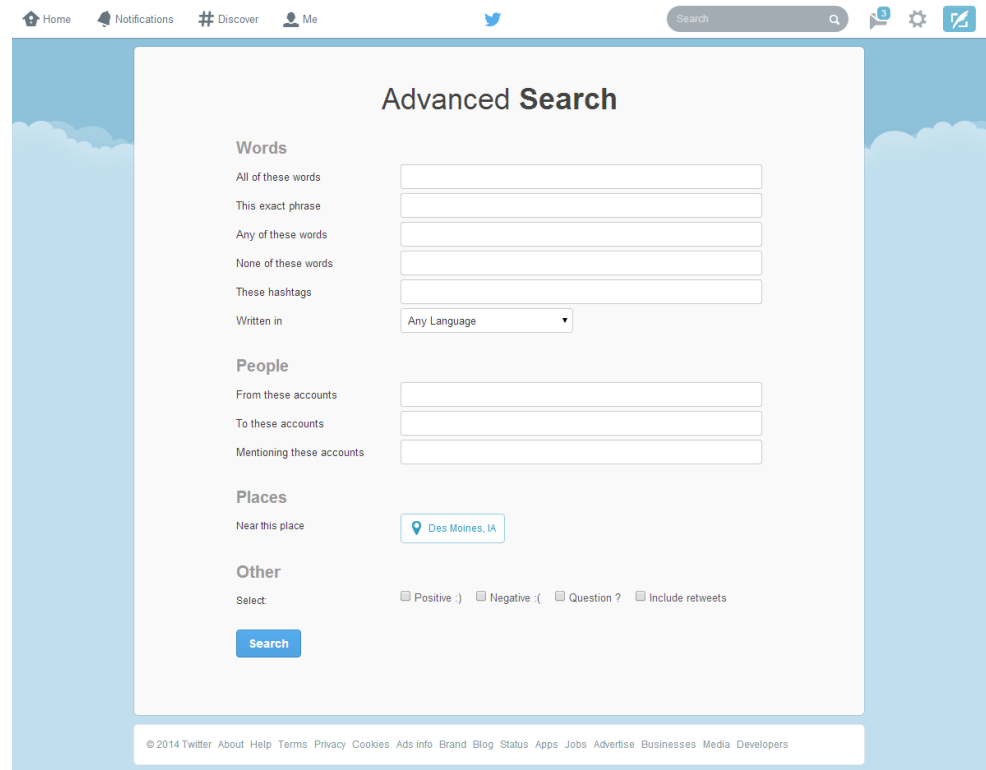
Desktop Applications for Twitter

There are many different applications that extend the functionality of Twitter and other social networks and that enables users to maximize the effectiveness of their Twitter experience. Most solutions feature all of Twitter's capabilities with added features such as:

> Commenting on retweets (RTs)

> Tracking link click-throughs

> Drag-and-drop picture uploading

> Managing multiple accounts

Popular desktop clients include HootSuite (http://hootsuite.com) and TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com).

HootSuite

HootSuite is a robust social media platform that offers the ability to add multiple platforms, which include Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Wordpress, Foursquare, and others. You can monitor and post to multiple social networks, and draft and schedule messages to send at a time your audience is most likely to be online. HootSuite allows you to have multiple contributors to your social profiles without sharing passwords. Create custom reports from over 30 individual report modules to share with clients and colleagues. Mobile versions are available.

TweetDeck

TweetDeck is touted as a real-time browser, connecting you with your contacts across Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Foursquare, Google Buzz, and more. TweetDeck uses Adobe® Air and allows some interactive features as a result. You can check in to Foursquare directly from the client, and also use LinkedIn for your professional contacts. You can also view YouTube videos within TweetDeck, and record and share video clips though TwitVid. A scheduling feature to check in or send a tweet in the future is also available.

Smartphone Applications for Twitter

The application you use to access Twitter depends in large part on the type of smartphone you have. Visit the app store for your phone and download a Twitter app to stay connected while you are mobile.

LOCATION-BASED SERVICES

Location-based services allow users to "check in" to businesses—for example, restaurants, theaters, stores—with their smartphones and then broadcast their locations to their friends, followers, and fans. Popular location-based services include:

> Foursquare

> Facebook Places

> Yelp

> Gowalla

Foursquare

Foursquare is a location-based application that allows users to check in at local venues (Figure 4.4), add their review and comments, and along the way earn points and badges. Foursquare is a social network and game combined together. Frequent visitors vie to become the "Mayor" of a venue. Many local businesses now have rewards for the mayor for their venue.

Figure 4.4: Using Foursquare to Check In
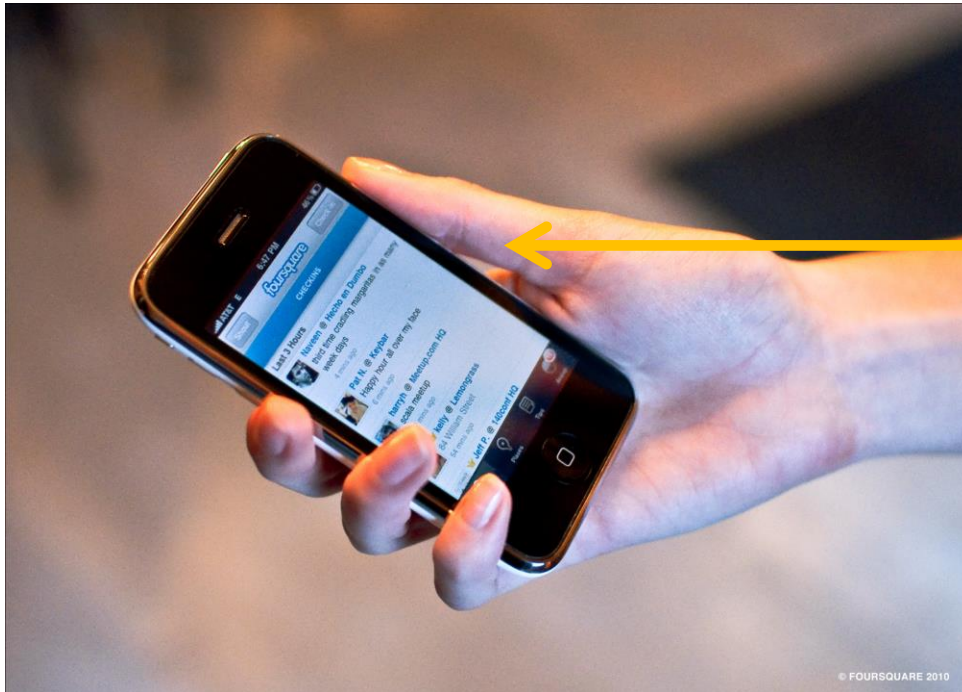
With a smartphone, users can "check in" to local venues.

Getting Started

Go to your smartphone App Store or App World. Download Foursquare and follow the prompts to set up your account.

When establishing your Foursquare membership, be sure to connect your Twitter and Facebook accounts if you have them. If you plan to check in frequently, we recommend that you turn off the auto-post to Twitter or Facebook feature in your Foursquare settings. You can selectively post to these networks when you actually check-in.

Checking In

With Foursquare, you can search for a place by name or select it from the list of nearby venues. You can check-in almost anywhere—restaurants,

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bars, museums, parks, your office, and more. If your venue is not listed, you will have the opportunity to create it.

Click the "Check-in" button and type in a message up to 140 characters in length. Decide if you want to send your message to your Facebook and Twitter followers as well as your Foursquare friends. That's it! You have officially checked in.

With Foursquare you can keep track of your friends. Simply click on the "Friends" tab on the button right-hand corner of your screen to show who has checked in recently (Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5: Tracking Your Friends' Check-Ins at Foursquare
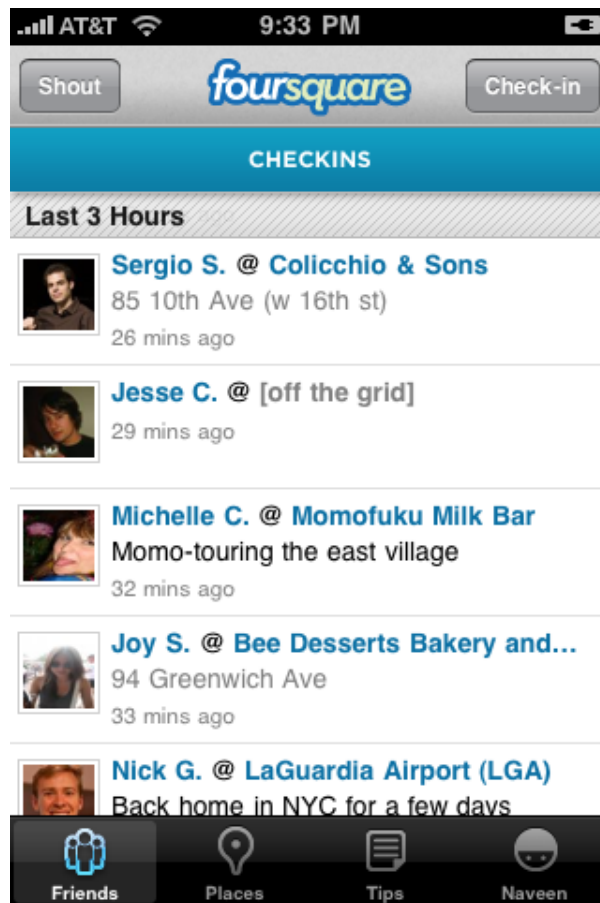
In addition, you can leave suggestions for your friends or other people who visit the venue. Keep in mind that these tips are available to anyone checking in to that location.

Facebook Places

Similar to Foursquare, Facebook Places enables users to share their location by checking in. You can also see if any of your friends happen to be at the same venue, nearby, or if they have been there before. Users can control if their check-in is shared or not and can "tag" their friends at the location.

Getting Started

If you are not already using a mobile application for Facebook, go to the App Store for your smartphone, download Facebook, and follow prompts to set up your account. When your account is established:

> On the main screen, there is a small pin to the right of the status update bar. Click the pin.

> Facebook will ask you to allow it to use your current location. This is required if you choose to use Facebook Places. Click OK if you wish to proceed.

> Facebook will recommend a list of nearby venues or you can search for a place by name. If your venue is not listed, you can "Add a Place."

> Click the "Check-in" button and type in a message. You can "Tag Friends With You" at this point.

> Click the "Check-in" bar. That's it! You have checked in.

Tagging Friends

Facebook allows users to "tag" their friends, provided their friends' privacy settings allow it. Users can remove a "Places" tag at any time, just like you can untag yourself from a photo. In the master privacy controls, you can choose who can see where you visit or when you are tagged. Only your friends can see your check-ins, unless you set your controls to allow everyone to see them.

The first time a friend tags you on Facebook Places, you will receive a notification on Facebook and on your smartphone giving you the choice to allow your friends to check you in. If a friend checks you in, you will appear at the venue just as if you did the check-in yourself. If you do not

permit check-ins by friends, you will not appear to be checked in at that venue.

Modifying Your Privacy Settings

Choosing to allow others to check you in on Facebook is a personal choice. Be aware of your privacy settings. To modify your Facebook Places privacy settings:

1.   Click on the "Account" tab in the upper right corner.
2.   Click "Privacy Settings."
3.   Click the "Custom" tab on the lower left side of your page.
4.   Select who you want to share check-in information with on "Places you check in to."

Yelp

Yelp's motto is "Real People, Real Reviews." If you are looking for a restaurant, store, a type of business, even a real estate practitioner, you can find them on Yelp by location and by customer reviews.

Yelp users have written more than 12 million reviews since it started in 2004. In 2010, Yelp added the ability for users to check in at local businesses on the Yelp mobile application. Yelp is both a research tool and a social network. Reviewers meet and follow people who frequent the same local businesses. Reviewers can also rate other reviewers.

Using Yelp for Market Research

Yelp can be an excellent way to find out what people are saying about both you and your fellow real estate professionals.

>   Go to www.Yelp.com.

>   Enter the term "real estate agents" in the "Search For" field.

>   Enter your city and state in the "Near" field.

>   Find out which agents in your area are being reviewed. Is the commentary good? Are people reviewing you?

Set Up a Business Page

If you don't already have a free Yelp business owner account, you may want to set one up. Your business account allows you to communicate publicly and privately with users who write reviews, track how many people view your business page, add photos and a detailed business description, and announce upcoming events.

To get started, go to https://biz.Yelp.com/signup. If you choose to set up a business page, fill out your profile completely.

Soliciting customer reviews is discouraged at Yelp. In order to maintain the integrity of the customer review process, Yelp has automated filters in place to remove solicited or fake reviews. The system suppresses reviews from less established users. Unfortunately, this means real reviews do get caught in their filters. Yelp will not and cannot restore reviews rejected by the automatic filter.

Responding to Reviewers

If someone reviews you, it's important to respond to him or her! This is a good way to generate goodwill with your clients and customers.

What if you get a bad review?

> If there is an opportunity to resolve the client complaints, pick up the telephone and resolve it.

> When responding to negative reviews, be cautious about your tone. The Internet can be unforgiving and intentions can be mistaken.

> If you are responding in the public forum, be careful not to disclose any details of your transaction that would violate your client confidentiality.

> Do not get defensive or make personal attacks.

Yelp will not take sides on the validity of reviews and will rarely remove a review. You can bring a review to Yelp's attention if it violates the review guidelines, which prohibit reviews with racial slurs or reviews based on second-hand experience. If you receive a poor review from someone who was not a client, you should contact Yelp to request that it be removed.

The best way to prevent a bad review is to provide great customer service! Note that you can be reviewed even if you don't have a business page set up. You should still monitor your presence on the network.

It's Your Turn to Review

With all social networks, the more you participate, the more you get from the network, and Yelp is no exception. Consider writing interesting reviews for businesses you frequent. When you do so, other reviewers with similar interests will pay attention. If they find your reviews interesting, they might compliment you, follow you, add you as a friend, or check out your profile.

Remember Listen, Comment, Create from Day 1 of this program? Yelp is a great forum for listening as it is a very local social network. Over time you are likely to see the same reviewers who frequent similar restaurants. If users write interesting reviews for businesses you frequent, compliment them, follow them, or check out their profile. Do they have sites you can engage with them on?

Checking In

Using the location of your mobile phone, Yelp can identify nearby businesses. Users can check in and post short status updates on the system through their mobile phones, letting their Yelp, Facebook, and Twitter friends know where they are and what their thoughts are. These status updates are listed as quick tips on Yelp and published in review highlights on the business owner's page.

BUSINESS APPLICATIONS OF LOCATION-BASED SERVICES

Location-based services enable you to:

> Meet local people.

> Learn more about the preferences and habits of people you already know.

> Share relevant information about your preferences and habits to others.

> Leave little "Google calling cards," which place your name all over the Internet.

> Exhibit your knowledge and involvement in your local community.

> Encourage you to get away from the computer and out where you can meet people face-to-face.

Businesses and careers are built on relationships. No computer can replace the feeling of giving someone a hug or sitting down and having an honest, in person, face to face conversation. Location based services enable us to get face to face where we can deepen existing relationships. There is tremendous power in it when used properly.

Social Media Marketing Institute Simple Dos and Don'ts for Location-Based Services

☐ DO be careful who you friend on the network.
☐ DON'T accept every friend request.
☐ DO see who else has checked in to the venue you are at. It's a great way to meet local people.
☐ DON'T auto-feed every check-in to Twitter if you are a power user; you will alienate your network.
☐ DO add context! Include a message, especially if your posts feed to Twitter or Facebook. Share something interesting about the venue

    or add another message so your followers know why this is important!

☐   DON'T violate your customers'/clients' privacy by checking in when you shouldn't.

☐   DO be cautious of your personal safety.

☐   DON'T check in at the same time and place every day if you are concerned about personal safety. Be aware that frequent check-ins can indicate a pattern of your physical whereabouts.

☐   DO add tips for other users in your network.

☐   DON'T check in if you are supposed to be somewhere else (like at work!).

☐   And most importantly…DO use common sense.

Privacy and Safety

Location-based services do come with privacy challenges. It is important to know and adjust the privacy settings on any application you may use on your mobile phone. Even Twitter, while not designed necessarily for check-ins, has a "Tweet with Your Location Feature" that is opt-in. Users who don't realize it could inadvertently release their exact geographical coordinates, sending out their physical location and a map with their physical location pinpointed at the bottom of the tweet. Know where your check-ins are being broadcast and consider the consequences that information may bear on your own privacy, personal safety, and client relationships.

5. Rich Media

In this module:

> Photography

> Video

Today's technologies have made us all budding photographers, videographers, citizen journalists, and recording artists. Think of it—many consumers today have digital cameras, cameras on their smartphones, webcams on their laptops or desktop computers, and perhaps small personal video recorders. All of these things lead to the creation of a huge amount of new media. While the output of these simple digital cameras and recording devices is not the same quality as when using professional equipment, it is acceptable quality for many real estate professionals and the tools can be easily implemented in our day-to-day business. In this module, we'll concentrate on the devices and technologies we use to generate and post photos and videos.

PHOTOGRAPHY

Knowing that the vast majority of consumers start their home searches online and that real estate listings with photos sell faster, taking good digital photos, creating slide shows, and uploading video are no longer "nice to have" or "I'll get to it when I get to it," but rather essential skill sets for real estate professionals. So let's start by discussing the tools you need.

Smartphone Camera

While smartphone-generated photos are not sufficient quality for most marketing purposes, there are practical business reasons why it makes sense to take photos with your smartphone:

> Your seller or the title company needs a final meter reading. Use your smartphone to snap a photo of the meter and e-mail the photo to the individual who needs the reading.

> You need to report damage to a property to the seller, buyer, or authorities. Using your smartphone camera allows you to take the photo(s) in a time-stamped and time-sensitive manner.

> You need the listing agent to clarify an issue or area of concern for your buyer-client. With your smartphone camera, you can take a picture of the issue/area of concern and get in touch quickly with the listing agent.

> You are previewing properties for your buyer-clients. Sending photos from your smartphone to your buyer-clients may help them quickly evaluate if they should schedule a time to visit the property.

> You are valuing a vacant or distressed property and need to document the features (and issues) so that you remember them when you later prepare your report.

With the above in mind, look for the following features when buying your smartphone:

☐   3MP sensor or better
☐   Digital zoom
☐   Flash

Digital Still Cameras

Although we will differentiate between still and video cameras for the purpose of this discussion, multifunctional cameras tend to blur the lines. As a guiding principle, all but the most expensive cameras will do one thing really well and another thing in a fair manner. (For example, a single frame of a video camera can be used as a still photo but is generally of lower quality than a photo taken by a dedicated still camera. Conversely, still cameras with video capabilities usually have limited quality or can only take videos of limited duration.)

The Pocket Camera/DSLR Divide

Retailing on average for $300, a digital pocket or compact camera offers a number of features and is sufficient for taking still photos for use in marketing. True camera aficionados may want to purchase larger DSLR (digital single lens reflex) cameras, which are, on average $400 more expensive than pocket cameras, and are so feature laden that they

compete with cameras used by professional photographers and have been labeled Prosumer (professional/consumer). The use of the DSLR is complicated enough to warrant a course of its own, so let's concentrate on the features commonly found on both:

☐ **Viewfinder**

With today's digital cameras, the viewfinder gives users the ability to see the photo on an LCD screen mounted at the rear of the camera. This enables you to preview each photo as you take it, sparing you the agony of arriving home only to find out you missed a shot. Make sure that the LCD display is easy for you to see.

☐ **Focal Length**

The focal length of a camera lens determines the angle of view for the camera. The focal length is measured in millimeters (mm) and is generally compared to the focal length of a lens on a 35 mm camera. The lower the number, the wider the angle. The higher the number, the closer the image appears. Generally any lens with a focal length of 35 mm to 70 mm is considered average.

Since digital cameras with a zoom feature provide a range for the focal length, the greater the range, the greater the versatility of the camera. For example, whereas a digital camera with a focal length equivalent of 27–108 mm would allow you to take wide-angle shots and zoom to medium telephoto shots, a camera with a focal length of 28–196 mm would retain the ability to take wider shots while providing you with a stronger telephoto ability.

☐ **Zoom Lens**

The zoom lens is what enables the camera to vary its focal length. There are two types of zoom: optical and digital.

– **Optical zoom** uses the movement of a physical lens to bring images closer and is generally sharper.
– **Digital zoom** uses the electronics of the camera to achieve the telephoto effect.

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Most cameras have a combination of the two, with less expensive cameras relying more heavily on digital zoom, which is less desirable because it can negatively affect the quality of your picture. Get as much zoom as possible without adding an extra lens, so you can handle larger rooms or take shots from a distance.

☐ **Accessories**

Camera case. It's tempting to throw a pocket camera in your purse or jam it in your pocket, but the glass on an LCD display has been known to crack and keys (house keys and car keys) have scratched many displays. Using a camera case will protect the life of your camera. Additionally, the case is a good place to store the most important accessory of all—the extra batteries.

Extra batteries. There is nothing worse than being at a property and finding that the batteries in your camera are dead. If your camera takes a special battery (as many do), it's wise to have an extra battery in your camera case at all times!

Memory/storage. Having an extra memory card is always a good idea since technical difficulties can occur, and even the largest capacity cards get filled. The amount of photos a memory card will hold varies, depending on the quality setting at which you shoot the photos. The higher the quality, the smaller the number of pictures, and the more difficult they are to display on the Web.

Be sure that your computer can read the memory card used by your camera. If it does not have a slot to accept memory cards, you can purchase an inexpensive card reader that plugs into the USB port of your computer.

If you work with wireless networks and computers in different locations, you might consider buying an "eye-fi" memory card, which will upload your photos to your computer wirelessly.

If your phone uses an easily accessible memory card, consider getting a camera that utilizes the same type of card.

Put simply, if you need to buy a digital camera, for the greatest utility you should consider a pocket-size digital camera with flash capability and an optical or combination zoom lens (with the greatest difference between the lowest and highest numbers on the lens you can afford) to give you the greatest flexibility.

Taking Good Digital Photos

Five steps to taking better pictures of your listings:

1. **Prepare the property.**

   When our picture is taken, we all want to look good and we think nothing of taking a few minutes to brush our hair or straighten our clothes. Houses deserve the same degree of attention and care. Take the time to be sure that rooms are neat, counters are cleared, toys are put away, and the house is groomed to look its best before you take photos.

   Ask the homeowner what made living there special. Their stories will help you take pictures of areas of the home you may not have noticed or thought of before.

2. **Take plenty of pictures, but only use the good ones!**

   In the digital age, we don't have to worry about the cost of film or developing. Use that to your advantage.

   When you're just starting out, take a lot of pictures from different parts of the house. On the exterior, take pictures from both ends of the yard and show the house from a distance and closer up.

   Remember, be critical. Choose the best photos to be published online. Remember that nowadays the very first showing of the seller's house takes place online, not when the buyer arrives at the front door.

3. **Shoot your photos from the doorway.**

When you take a picture inside the room, you make the room smaller by the amount of room behind you. If you take your shot from the doorway, you get the largest amount of area possible. Use that to show a truer picture of the room size.

Stop the security camera mentality. Most people hold the camera up high. Try holding the camera in a lower position; it will make the rooms bigger. Think about sitting down for maximum effect! The point of view of most viewers is an average height of five feet.

A wide-angle lens will allow you to see more of the room, making it appear larger to the viewer.

4.   **Use natural light whenever possible, but don't shoot into the sun.**

Natural light will make pictures most flattering, but be careful not to shoot directly into a window where the sun is setting or rising; bright light confuses the camera's built-in light meter, causing the foreground of the picture to become underexposed. Stand to the side of the window or at another angle that allows you to avoid that problem.

Be cognizant of the presence of ambient light so you know how to use your camera appropriately.

The exterior of the home should be shot during daylight. Interior shots should use flash to fill in areas of dark. Don't shoot directly in windows that are brighter than the room.

5.   **Use your camera's review feature.**

On most digital cameras you can review a picture right after you take it. Check to see that the lighting is even and that you didn't move the camera, which will spoil the focus. It's much easier to retake a photo while you're at the property than it is to make a second appointment to retake a photo.

Tips from a Professional Photographer

Expert Jay Groccia of OnSite Studios™ in Boylston, MA shares these recommendations.

Shooting from a low angle expands the room and allows you to highlight features like skylights. It is also important to set the camera's exposure to the OUTSIDE and then use flash to illuminate the room. Do not use the camera's built-in flash as it will cause unnatural hot spots and hard shadows—use off-camera flash and soften the light with a light modifier like an umbrella, softbox, or a large, white panel. Using this method makes the room look natural and lifelike.

Source: Photo reprinted with permission of Jay Groccia, OnSite Studios™. Copyright Jay Groccia.

Making use of a slave flash will illuminate an adjacent room visible through a doorway passageway. In this example a slave flash was placed in the shower to light it up.

Source: Photo reprinted with permission of Jay Groccia, OnSite Studios™. Copyright Jay Groccia.

Don't lose sight of the fact that listing photos are less about "documenting" the house and more about creating an emotional connection with the buyer. You're not an insurance adjuster or real estate appraiser—you're in the business of selling a house—make it look like someone's dream home, because it IS someone's dream home. Your job is to help them find it. If the house looks amazing in the early morning, late afternoon, or dusk, then don't shoot it at noon. Compare the boring day shot with the dramatic night shot.

Source: Photos reprinted with permission of Jay Groccia, OnSite Studios™. Copyright Jay Groccia.

If you're using words like bright, airy, and sun-splashed, then you better SHOW it.

Source: Photo reprinted with permission of Jay Groccia, OnSite Studios™. Copyright Jay Groccia.

Photo Editing

Even with the tips we gave you previously, some of your photos may need a little help, and the second best thing about digital photography (after the savings on film and developing) is the ease with which to manipulate digital photographs.

Basic photo editing software is often supplied by the camera manufacturer, included in the purchase of your computer, or as part of a suite of office software (such as Microsoft Office Picture Manager or iPhoto on the Mac). Software allows for the management, organization and editing of the digital images uploaded to your computer.

Following are common editing issues and processes you might use:

1. Correcting brightness and contrast—for example, if the picture is too dim or too bright
2. Correcting color by adjusting hue (what we think of as color), saturation (the amount of the color from its brightest appearance to the grayscale), and amount (how light or dark the color appears)
3. Cropping (trimming) photos—for example, getting rid of the items on the edges of the photo that might distract to bring greater attention to the picture that is left
4. Rotating or flipping photos. If your camera was turned on its side, you can rotate the picture 90 degrees at a time, clockwise, or counterclockwise. This is useful for making sure that all of the photos in a series are facing the same way.
5. Removing "red eye" from people in your photos
6. Resizing photos. The higher the pixel count of a photo, the larger size the file will be. Often we need to resize the photo to fit it on a page for printing or upload it to websites. This function allows you to resize the photo to a number of different "standard" sizes:

Where Picture Will Be Used	Small	Large
Document	800x600	1024x768
Web	448x336	640x800
E-mail	160x160	314x235

7. Compressing photos so that they load faster on the Web

File Formats

One of the other benefits of using photo editing software is saving your photos in an appropriate file format. Photos saved as .gif, .jpg, and .png files can be viewed simply using a Web browser because they are standard file formats for the Web. The most commonly used file format for photos is .jpg. If you need to create a high-resolution photo for print, consider the .tif format.

Photo Manipulation

While photo editing is an acceptable and established practice, photo manipulation also has become quite common. The widespread use of Adobe® Photoshop—the most popular software programs for editing and manipulating photos—led to the term "photoshopped," indicating when a photo has been retouched or manipulated to enhance the photo or aspects of it.

It is inappropriate for REALTORS® to manipulate the physical aspects of properties in photos. REALTORS® have a specific obligation to the public regarding such activity. Article 12 of NAR's Code of Ethics, often called the "true picture" article, states:

> REALTORS® shall be honest and truthful in their real estate communications and shall present a true picture in their advertising, marketing, and other representations. REALTORS® shall ensure that their status as real estate professionals is readily apparent in their advertising, marketing, and other representations, and that the recipients of all real estate communications are, or have been, notified that those communications are from a real estate professional. (Amended 1/08)

For example, it may be okay to crop a photo so you can't see a bike left on the sidewalk, but it is not okay to remove the high-tension power lines behind the house or remove a tree that might be blocking the view of a corner of the home.

If you follow our recommendations, you will have good photos of your listings, and you can edit these photos, correct them for color and light, and size them in the most common file format. These photos can be used in a variety of marketing vehicles. They can be submitted to your MLS, published on your company and personal websites, and used in print and electronic flyers. They also can be used to create slide show virtual tours.

Slide Shows

Slide shows are the sequential display of your digital photos and may consist of a simple procession of photos to a more complicated shuffling of photos from different angles and accompanied by special effects. You can generate slide shows using desktop software, like Microsoft's free PhotoStory 3 (available to owners of computers operating genuine Windows software) or use a dedicated Web-based application service provider. In either case, slide shows are a really inexpensive way to animate your existing photos and attract the attention of consumers surfing the Web looking for properties.

Some examples of online slide shows are:

1. Real Estate Shows (www.realestateshows.com) is an inexpensive service that allows you to upload your own photos to create videos of your listings or local communities.
2. Flickr Slideshow (www.flickrslideshow.com) allows you to create a slide show using your account with Flickr, an online photo-sharing service. Using Flickr Slideshow, you can create a slide show from your Flickr photostream pages, sets, tag pages, group pools, and search results. Just look for the slide show icon. Easily embed the slide show into your website or blog by clicking the share link and copying and pasting the embed code.
3. Animoto (http://animoto.com) essentially creates a music video with your own photos. This service, which offers free as well as fee-based plans, allows subscribers to upload their photos, arrange them, add music, transitions and/or text, and create videos.

Flickr

The free service offered by Flickr gives members 100 MB per month of photo uploads, 2 video uploads a month (90 seconds max), and 200 recent photos. These limits are very low if you think about the number of

photos you might take of a seven-room house. If you took two good photos of each room, two photos of the front, two of the rear, and perhaps four of special features in the house (22 images in all), you would only be able to see the last nine houses you photographed. The upgrade to Flickr Pro is well worth the $24.95 a year fee. As a Pro member, you get unlimited photo and video uploads, unlimited storage, ad-free browsing, and unlimited storage and bandwidth. And you get the word "pro" next to your profile name—always a good thing.

Why use Flickr? It's a great place to store your photos; it's a wonderful place to meet other people in communities you can connect to in a positive and meaningful manner that will help you to be perceived as a valued member of the community.

Here's a few ways to maximize the social impact of your Flickr experience:

1. Invite existing friends, family, and contacts to join Flickr. Remember how important it is to connect your offline and online communities.
2. Visit your contact list's photostreams often. Be social, be genuine, and show your interest; they may reciprocate and your relationship will strengthen.
3. When you post photos that include friends/family/individuals from your online community, tag them when appropriate. (Don't post unflattering pictures of someone else!)
4. Connect with people in your online community by commenting on their photographs.
5. Finding common interests is a good way to increase your sphere of influence. With thousands of special interest groups on Flickr, finding people with a common interest becomes simple. For example, a search for the word "neon" produced 4,800+ groups of people who are interested in sharing photos. The word "pottery" provided 1,200+ groups (the largest of which had over 8,600 members), and a search using the word "dancing" provided more than 14,000 groups (the largest of which had more than 47,000 members). You can connect based on what you take pictures of, or even what you take pictures with. The Flickr community can be a great resource for learning how to get the most out of your camera. Obviously this is an environment rich in the opportunity to connect with people of similar interests in a meaningful manner.

Real estate professionals should NOT promote listings on Flickr as though this was an advertising site; it isn't. Flickr is very serious about enforcing their community guidelines, which state:

> *Don't use Flickr for commercial purposes. Flickr is for personal use only. If we find you selling products, services, or yourself through your photostream, we will terminate your account. Any other commercial use of Flickr, Flickr technologies (including APIs, FlickrMail, etc.), or Flickr accounts must be approved by Flickr.*

VIDEO

Video has become an important communication channel and can be a powerful tool for a real estate agent's business. Video provides a richer, more complete experience for consumers seeking out information about homes, communities, and the home buying and selling process. In addition to being an effective tool to market homes for sale, video also enables real estate professionals to demonstrate their expertise while also letting their true personality shine through.

There are two basic types of video cameras: handheld and computer mounted.

Handheld Video Cameras

1. **Smartphones.** Smartphones with video capability ensure you always have the ability to record videos on the go. Smartphones enable instant uploading and live broadcasting.

2. **Point-and-shoot video cameras.** Point-and-shoot video cameras make it easy to shoot and share videos. Recording a video is often as simple as pushing a red button. They record to internal storage (though some have extra memory cards). With point-and-shoot video cameras, there are no settings to adjust, so they are easy to carry in a pocket or small purse, and you can connect them directly to your computer through a USB port. Brands include but are not limited to Kodak and Sony.

3. **Digital tape and professional video cameras.** These larger, more complicated cameras should be considered only when you have committed to a substantial video campaign. You should choose a camera with high-definition (HD) video support—but realize your videos will play in standard definition. Widescreen videos uploaded to YouTube are automatically letterboxed so that 16:9 screen ratios end up 4:3. Midrange priced brands include Sanyo, Vado HD, and Samsung. Higher priced brands include Canon and Panasonic.

Computer Webcams

These webcams are great for client communication, casual video conversation, responding to a blog comment via video, or recording a quick hello message. Many computers have built-in webcams, enabling you to quickly record and share videos online. After-market webcams are also available and can be mounted on a monitor or laptop.

Best Practices

Lighting and sound are crucial to good video. Here are guidelines to create the best quality your video camera will deliver:

> Record a test video to review the quality of lighting and sound recorded by your camera.

> In an interview, test the placement of your interview subject.

> Make sure the background sound is not distracting.

> Be sure that your subject is not standing in front of a light or bright window.

> Turn on all of the lights at the location.

> Consider purchasing an inexpensive lighting kit, which can make a significant difference in your picture quality by reducing shadows and dark corners.

> If you plan to edit your video, use an external microphone. The Kodak Zi8 is one of the few handheld video cameras that includes a jack for an external microphone. Ted Mackel, an agent and REALTOR® in Simi Valley California, regularly uses video in his real estate practice. He says an external microphone "really gets rid of that echo chamber effect and polishes off your video production. I

have an expensive wireless microphone that was $175. An inexpensive $25 microphone on a 30-foot cord works just as well."

> Hold your camera steady. Keep your elbows against your body as you shoot. For additional stability, buy a tripod to lock the camera down for solid shots.

– Tripods can be either fixed or flexible. Fixed tripods need a level surface to be used, but flexible mini-tripods are designed to not only stand on level surfaces but can also be easily attached to convenient vertical surfaces.
– Min-tripods work well with handheld cameras (both still and video).

> Avoid excessive panning and zooming. It's a quick way to show off your amateur status.

> If you plan to edit the video, shoot far more than you need. You can delete the extra footage later, but you can't add more without reshooting.

PRACTITIONER SPOTLIGHT
Ian Watt

> Ian Watt
> Ian Watt Corp.
> Vancouver, BC

Why did you decide to use video as your primary blogging technique?

Back in 2007, I was running my business like many other agents, spending $5,000/month on traditional self-promotion techniques. But I hit a rough patch, financially, and was forced to find new ways to promote myself.

I dropped all my print ads and decided to concentrate solely on online marketing. Coincidentally, my website provider sent me a Web camera as a "best client" gift. I decided to give it a try and made and posted my first real estate videos. When I saw that Google was indexing my video, I started getting more diligent about it.

I like video because it doesn't lie and it helps consumers decide immediately if they want to work with me. Imagine a dating site where everyone posts a video instead of a static profile. Within five seconds people would know if they want to date (or work with) another person.

How successful has it been?

Google Analytics tells me that video has doubled the amount of time people spend on my site, as well as increasing repeat visitors. I do realize that only a small percentage of consumers are interested in watching video clips online, but I think it's a growing segment.

More importantly, I've cut my $60,000/year marketing budget to less than $5,000/year, while dramatically increasing my production. In 2008, I jumped to the top 10 percent of all real estate agents in

the greater Vancouver area (roughly 10,000), and by 2009 I was ranked #83.

Whether you create videos on your own or hire someone, here are some quick tips:

☐ Make your videos short and sweet.

– The ideal length is between 60 seconds and three minutes. If you go over three minutes, you will lose the prospect.

☐ Use your voice.

– Videos with just pictures and music can't sell. Your voice can help point out the features that make a house a home while creating a connection with the viewer.

☐ If you end up starring in your video, remember to represent your brand.

– Look professional.
– Wear solid colors, which work best.
– Avoid white around your face.
– Plan your setting.
– Pay attention to lighting, sound, focus, and framing of your subject.

Editing Software

Some cameras come with their own editing software. When you plug the camera in, the software launches. This type of software is convenient but often has functionality limitations. If you are a PC user, Windows Movie Maker is free and simple to use to edit video. iMovie is free for Mac users and comes standard with any Apple computer. QuickTime Pro works on both MAC and PC and provides a stripped-down approach for basic editing. Other brands to consider are Vegas Movie Studio, Adobe Premiere Elements, and Final Cut Studio.

Editing Basics

Video editing is the process of deciding what elements to keep, remove, or combine from the "raw" footage taken by the videographer. The

process also includes importing the video from your camera and exporting for playback by others. Suggestions are:

☐ Try to shoot lots of raw footage so you have more choices to work with as you edit.

☐ Before you start editing, back up your original video.

☐ Choose a basic introduction or titling format and stick with it to create personal branding. Some formats might include:

  – A stock video clip to start or finish
  – A catch phrase to start or finish
  – Displaying your logo

☐ Be sure to include licensing and contact information in your video clip.

☐ Keep your editing effects simple. Fancy editing can distract from your story.

☐ Most every editing program has a storyboard and timeline view. You can alternate between the two.

  – Storyboard views show each clip of video and enable you to combine more than one.
  – Timeline views are for use with a single video clip and allow you to trim the clip length and add titles.
  – Once edited, you'll create a new file that you can post to various sites.

☐ If you add music, make sure it is royalty free. Sites such as Vimeo allow only non-commercial videos. If they deem that any of your videos are commercial, they will delete your account.

Video File Formats

YouTube accepts a wide variety of video formats including MPEG, MPEG-4, AVI, MOV, WMV, and others.

> MPEG-4 is YouTube's preferred upload format because it provides a good compromise between picture quality and file size.

> AVI is the output used by many popular photo editing programs. It produces good picture quality but files sizes may be large.

> MOV, WMV, and others are generally acceptable as well.

Platforms for Sharing

Once you have created video, you will want to share it with the world.

☐ Using your webcam you can record and post from your computer. Sometimes you may want to capture a conversation, and interview right on your computer. Here is a list of free and paid programs to help you do that. You will need a webcam attached to your computer to do this.

    – Skype, the software application that allows users to make voice and video calls over the Internet, also allows users to record video conference calls using "Call Recorder." You can capture video conversations and share them later.

    – iToxBox is a Web application that allows users to make multi-party video chat calls over the Internet without a download.

    – Facebook has a native video recorder within the program, so you can send video messages to your friends.

    – Eyejot is one of the first browser-based video mail platforms that allows you to record and e-mail a video message.

    – Wetoku allows you to record a split-screen video interview.

☐ You can also use your cell phone to record and post using these platforms:

    – Qik–Allows you to record and show videos from your mobile phone.

    – U-stream–Online video streaming service

    – Pegshot–Location-based system that allows you to post video and stills, sharing them with your social graph

Most camera-shot video ends up on a video-sharing site. There are a number of platforms to share video on. Some sites are free and others charge a fee. If you have to choose one place to share video, YouTube is it. Many video editing programs enable you to upload directly to YouTube.

Other video sharing sites include Viddler (www.viddler.com) and Blip TV (www.blip.tv). Real estate–specific video-sharing sites include WellcomeMat (www.wellcomemat.com).

To upload your videos to all of these sites in one step, use a video syndicator like TubeMogul (www.tubemogul.com) or TrafficGeyser (www.TrafficGeyser.com).

Marketing with Videos

One of the benefits of uploading your videos to a video-sharing site is the ability to market your videos either with the unique video hyperlink or Web address or embed code. Each uploaded video has its own unique Web address or hyperlink. Sites like YouTube have "share" buttons that allow you to post your videos directly to Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks.

Here are other uses for those hyperlinks:

> Put links in your e-mail signature for buyer and seller-clients.

> Share on social networks.

> Include a page or links in your blog or website for video.

Once your video is uploaded on the video-sharing site like YouTube, html code or embed code is created so you can easily embed a video on your blog or website.

Types of Videos

Video is an all-purpose medium and can be tapped for a variety of end uses:

> **Testimonials.** Record video testimonials from your past clients. Let them tell your story!

> **Education.** Answer commonly asked questions, like what to expect during the home buying process. Give it to all new buyer clients. Or address what's happening in the market. Market stats can be boring when written. Make it interesting by providing your commentary.

> **Buyer tours.** Send video e-mails of homes you have previewed for your buyers. (Get the listing agent's permission first!)

> **24/7 tours of homes.** Pictures can show the feel of a home, while video can tell the actual story. Discuss the features of each room in

the home. Capture testimonials from the sellers regarding their favorite features of the home and neighborhood.

> **Virtual community tours.** Showcase your community to prospective buyers. People don't just buy homes, they buy communities.

> **Interviews with local business owners.** Ask them what makes their business unique. Make sure you get their name and contact information to follow up with them. Let them know you will contact them after the video is posted. Also specify where you post the video (preferably your Hub—your own site).

> **Interviews with school principals and/or local event organizers.**

> **Just moved announcement.** Help your happy home buyers show off their new home! Create a video of their home and neighborhood for new home buyers to send to their friends!

6. Technology Toolbelt

In this module:

> Computers

> The skinny on smartphones

> Technology: Overload or tie it all together?

> Create your SMART plan

COMPUTERS

No matter how long it's been since you purchased your last computer, the choices can seem overwhelming. It also can be intimidating to try to make sense of the acronyms, names, and numbers used to describe features and functionality in today's computer systems. Let's start with the fundamentals so that you're better armed for your next purchase.

☐ **Operating System (OS)**

The operating system, or OS, is the software that powers your computer system's back-end operation. The two biggest competitors are Apple and Microsoft; and there are ardent supporters of both among real estate professionals.

The Mac (Apple) OS is touted as fast, graphically superior, more virus resistant, and user friendly. The Microsoft (Windows) OS has been the most universally adopted in the business arena, and though the OS has been widely criticized in some of its versions, its broad adoption means there are fewer compatibility issues. By almost all accounts, Windows 7 runs much better on old or low-cost machines than Vista did.

☐ **Processor**

Another key feature to look at is the computer processing unit, or CPU, which is the mind of the machine where all data are processed and calculations are made. Processors are continually

evolving, and you'll hear terms like dual core, quad core, and hyper-threading used to describe different CPUs. The safe way to judge these is to look at the leading-edge technology found in powerful high-end, high-priced systems. Even though these systems deliver more power than most real estate practitioners currently need for everyday computing, you can use them as a benchmark to measure the other CPU speeds—trying to get as close as possible to their operating speeds while conserving your budget.

☐ **Memory**

The memory capacity of a computer, expressed as RAM, determines how much memory space is available to the CPU for temporary storage of data during processing. Today, 3 GB should be the minimum amount of RAM installed on any new computer system.

☐ **Hard Disk**

The size of the computer's hard drive, now measured in gigabytes (GB), tells you how much information it can hold. The speed of the drive, expressed as a number like 5,400 rpm, indicates how quickly the drive spins and therefore how quickly data are written or available to the CPU. Look for at least a 320 GB hard drive if you work with a lot of digital photo images and other multimedia virtual tours.

☐ **Screen**

All screen sizes are measured diagonally, in inches. New widescreen monitors have a specific ratio of screen height to width that corresponds to the format of movies, DVDs, and high-definition television. Screen resolution, expressed as pixels in a number such as 1,024×768, indicates the quality of the image seen on-screen. The higher these numbers, the sharper the image.

☐ **Wireless Air Cards**

Staying connected wherever you go is important. A half-hour between appointments can be more useful if you can get online and send and answer e-mails. Here are some ways to stay connected on the road.

A wireless card works on the high speed cell phone networks. Visit your cell phone store for the various models and price plans. Today they plug into the USB port on any laptop.

An even better alternative to the single appliance USB air card is the MiFi card. The MiFi is a tiny portable device that can convert incoming 3G cell phone signals to a small Wi-Fi network, which can then be accessed by your laptop, notebook or tablet via a USB connection. MiFis are basically mobile hotspots that you own and control, and keep you online almost anywhere your network has connectivity. Take it out of your laptop and you can use the MiFi as a mobile hotspot and up to 5 people can get online.

Netbooks

For those of you who don't really need much more than word processing, Internet access, and e-mail access, you might consider a netbook. Netbooks also are typically less than $500, so if you're on a budget, this is the way to go. This ultra-portable computer is exactly what the name implies—a smaller breed of computers built for mobility, usually weighing three pounds or less. A sharp division exists in this class: At the high end are lightweight laptops, fully powered, fully portable PCs that are less than an inch thick, with full-sized screens and keyboards; the other class is the less expensive, even more compact netbook and mini-notebooks. Netbooks and minis have smaller screens—usually less than 10 inches— with cramped keyboards but were developed as mobile, fully wireless Web portals and best serve those looking for something a little bigger than a smartphone but smaller and even more mobile than a laptop.

Tablet PCs

A tablet PC is another option consumers have to fill their mobile computing needs. The defining feature of the tablet PC is its interface. The tablet PC uses a touch screen controlled with a stylus. Notebooks are identified by the attached keyboard that folds under the screen. Apple's iPad is its version of the tablet computer. It can be a great tool for mapping properties, accessing your MLS or other databases to find homes, show properties in slide shows or in photos, deliver listing presentations, and more. It is probably not going to be your only computing device, but is great as an additional marketing tool. The

development of tools like DocuSign for the iPad extends its use for real estate practitioners.

THE SKINNY ON SMARTPHONES

The smartphone has become the most useful tool on today's real estate professional's toolbelt. Smartphones are phones that allow you to access the Internet and e-mail and offer photo-taking and video-recording capabilities as well.

Today's consumer wants answers fast. Having your e-mail delivered to your smartphone enables you to answer those critical e-mails while you are on the road. A majority of consumers work with the first agent who responds to them, so being the first to answer in many cases is more valuable than being the best real estate professional to answer.

Smartphones are ever changing. Each provider has different models. It really doesn't matter which model you buy, but there are key features that you should consider. They include:

> Cellular voice calling

– Do you have good reception? Can people hear and understand you?

> E-mail functions

– Does your e-mail client work efficiently on the phone? Not all smartphones work well with e-mail clients like Microsoft Outlook.

> Real-time calendar, contacts, and task lists

– Can your calendar and to-do list from your computer sync with the smartphone?

> Web browsing

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> – Do you like the browser and the size of the screen to surf the Web?

> Keyboard

> – Is the keyboard comfortable for your fingers?

> Digital camera

> – Some smartphones have high-resolution cameras; some have cameras on both sides of the phone for video conferencing.

> Video camera

> – Do you need to take video clips? This feature may be important.

> GPS

> – Is there a GPS feature that helps you find addresses? Some include turn-by-turn instructions.

> Sync

> – Do you need to wirelessly sync with your computer? Make sure all the programs you use sync easily with the phone.

> Battery

> – How long does the battery last? Is it enough to make it through your workday?

> Screen

> – Are the resolution and size easy on your eyes?

> Wireless sync

–   To make sure they have the same information on their smartphone as their computer, many use a traditional sync. This is accomplished through a cord from your smartphone to your computer. This means your data are only as up-to-date as the last time you synchronized. It is important to have the same data on your computer as your smartphone automatically. This is called real-time data.

–   By using a hosted exchange provider you can add files from your smartphone. They are wirelessly sent to a server on the Internet and brought down to your computer when you turn it on.

–   This also means instant team collaboration because you can share common files. If calendars are shared you can put appointments on each other calendars, answer e-mails and remind each other of tasks to be done.

There are amazing apps out there that can make your workload easier and save you money and also be fun to use. When choosing apps, most marketplaces allow you to search for the top paid or free apps. One way to start that is budget efficient is to search the top free apps—see which interest you for business applications and start experimenting. Beware of your phone's memory limits, however, and be quick to remove apps that you just don't use.

Categories of smartphone apps include:

>   Social networking—Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, Foursquare

>   Multimedia—Skype Qik (www.skype.com/en/qik) and U-stream (www.ustream.tv)

>   Real estate search (Realtor.com, Zillow, and Trulia)—many real estate practitioners are using real estate search applications to enable them to easily access property information on the go when their MLS access is limited. At the very minimum, you should see what your property listings look like on these applications to see what consumers are looking at. They are also great for looking up information on properties while showing homes or holding open houses.

> Mortgage calculators

> Road warrior tools:

  – Mobile Receipts (www.miteksystems.com) enables you to use the camera on your phone. These programs take pictures of your receipts and save them in a spreadsheet on the Web.
  – Virtual phone systems provide for one phone number that follows you, so you don't have to check numerous voice-mail accounts.
  – Voice mail to text services convert your voice mails to text and deliver via e-mail or SMS messages. These transcribed voice mails are sent to your e-mail account and your smartphone, saving you time and money. Most also attach an audio file.

> Cloud computing tools (discussed in Module 3):

  – Box.net
  – Google Docs
  – Dropbox

> Location-based services (discussed in Module 4):

  – Foursquare
  – Facebook
  – Yelp

TECHNOLOGY: OVERLOAD OR TIE IT ALL TOGETHER?

By now you might be feeling overwhelmed with all of the tools and new technology we've covered in Days 1 and 2. Before you've figured out one application, it might be time to move on to the next. Technology is changing at warp speed and we can't slow it down.

The following is adapted from the Social Media Marketing Institute's own blog:

Change is inevitable and you should embrace it so you are not overwhelmed by it. After all business is always changing. Consumer communication is always changing. Adaptation to the changing world is crucial to long-term business success, but that doesn't mean that Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the like represent the adaptation that

you need. Adjustments need to be made based on your target market and how your consumer base is changing. They are the indicators of the changes you need to make.

It's impossible to adopt every new piece of technology that comes out. We can't afford it financially or with our time—we are real estate professionals, not technology gurus. It's important to be strategic about what tools and applications you choose to modify your business to make sure they provide a real benefit to your life and your bottom line. Keep what is working, change what is not.

If you are looking at your long-term success (or even your success in the short term), here are some questions to help you determine how you need to adapt for the future:

1. *What do your consumers need? You can find the answer to the question by simply listening to them, because they're out there talking about those needs.*
2. *How can you satisfy their needs? A good product and quality customer service are crucial. A customer's bad experience can now be shared quickly across the Web. Making customers happy and retaining them is far more important than ever before. How can you address their needs efficiently? Keep in mind that the best marketing you'll ever have is a job done excellently.*
3. *What marketing tools are working in your business right now? We aren't talking about the ones you like, or are used to, but the tools that provide a measurable return.*
4. *What marketing tools are not effective for you? Which tools are you using out of habit?*
5. *Where are your clients spending their time? How can you reach them? What will you say when you do?*
6. *How can new technology tools enable you to reach more potential customers?*
7. *How can you use those tools to connect with them in a way that is important to them?*
8. *How can they improve the satisfaction of your existing customers thereby improving their connection with you?*

These are important questions to answer. They should be used to aid in crafting a business plan. Technology and social media tools are

important, but they are not effective unless they are part of a solid business strategy that addresses:

> What your consumers want and need

> How you can help them efficiently and effectively

> How that helps you reach your overall business goals

Finding the Time and Budget

Many agents use time and money as excuses to stay behind technologically. Unfortunately, we can't buy time, and even if we could, we probably can't afford to. We all have things we are doing in our businesses that don't work—activities that take our time and expenditures that waste our money. Have you done print advertising without a return? Marketing on a listing that yields no buyers? What about time? Are there activities that you do that don't generate new prospects, aren't mandatory to closing your transaction, and don't expand your knowledge and make you a better agent? One agent who mentioned time as factor in her slow adoption of new tools eventually figured out she spent more than an hour a day playing solitaire. Another agent sat at open houses twice a week for months on end with very few visitors and no buyers converting into sales. She didn't stop sitting the open houses, but going mobile enabled her to write blog posts completely uninterrupted each and every weekend.

It is important to find something you are doing now that doesn't enhance your business and get rid of it. That doesn't mean you have to get rid of your solitaire game if that is what you want to do in your personal time, but it's important to analyze both our financial expenditures and our time spent at work to identify inefficiencies.

Keep track of how you spend your time for one week:

1. How much time are you actually working?
2. What activities are you doing that are profitable for your business?
3. What activities are time wasters?
4. Are there some activities that can be outsourced inexpensively?
5. What activities could be automated or made more efficient through technology?

If you aren't using a task management system, you're missing an essential tool for a productive agent to track accomplishments.

Tracking your financial expenditures may take longer than a week if you aren't the best record keeper.

1. Collect your total business expenses from last year.
2. Separate your expenses into mandatory expenses and discretionary business expenses. Mandatory expenses include licensing fees, MLS dues, association fees, office fees, errors and omissions insurance, vehicle costs, insurance, dry cleaning, and so on.
3. Review your discretionary costs. This includes all of your marketing expenses. Where did you spend money? What return did you see on that investment? Are there expenses that were unnecessary or ineffective? Do you have funds that could be allocated toward new tools to make you productive and extend your reach?

It is possible you may not find extra discretionary income after your analysis. In recent years, many agents in the U.S. have been operating under very lean budgets in light of the economic challenges the real estate market has faced. In many cases the lack of budget significantly reduced or even entirely eliminated ongoing marketing campaigns to real estate professionals' customers and prospects, harming their sales pipeline for the future. Fortunately, there are many technology tools agents can now take advantage of to connect regularly with their databases and reach new and potential customers at minimal cost and even some free tools!

Identifying the Tools

It is important for real estate professionals to find technology tools that are efficient as well as enjoyable to them. Although our profession is work, we don't do things that we don't like doing for any extended period of time. If we did, everyone would be a FSBO and expired-listing award winner.

There are more technology tools available to you than you could ever possibly use. If you are trying to use them all, you will not be efficient. With so many choices available, you should be able to find technology tools that will be enjoyable to you as well as more productive and

efficient. This process may take trial and error. It's hard to enjoy something you don't know how to use!

Throughout NAR's e-PRO® certification program, we have given you lots of new tools to enhance your productivity and your marketing and sales.

> What tools are mandatory for you to have an efficient and profitable business? A smartphone? A laptop?

> What tools do you believe will be enjoyable and beneficial to you in creating a sustainable, efficient business?

> Did specific tools strike your interest?

> How could they enhance your business and save you time overall?

> What do the tools cost? Are they within your budget?

> Do they require training to use? What is the cost?

Determining Your Market

In Day 1, we talked about identifying your target market. This is the hardest step for a real estate professional to identify. Agents always want to skip this step! If you don't know whom you intend to reach, it's really hard to find them. You also want to make sure that your market doesn't include everyone. Just because you identify a niche doesn't mean you can't and won't work outside of it.

Remember the long tail? Amazon receives 98% of its revenue from sales of books nobody else sells. These books may be insignificant on their own, but combined together, the cumulative effect may be greater than the market share of the popular niche.

If you choose to blog about niche or non-real estate–related topics, you may find that the long-term cumulative effect of a small niche may provide greater results. If 100 agents in your office are focusing on reaching a community of 50,000 people, and you are the only agent focusing on a niche of 1,000, you have a far greater opportunity to be successful.

Determining the Objectives of Your Engagement

By now you have identified your market. You know where they participate online and offline and you understand what their issues and concerns are. When you engage with these particular individuals and groups, what do you hope to achieve? What is your objective?

As human beings as well as real estate professionals with families, homes, cars, and other bills, our ultimate goal is most likely a paycheck. Each individual we meet with and connect with is a possibility of a future paycheck. That paycheck is our ultimate goal, but it is not our objective for each engagement.

We know from our experiences that developing longstanding relationships with clients is a complex process both online and offline. If we reflect back to the modern consumer, our objective of engagement is not to make a sale, because the modern consumer does not want to be sold.

Many people try to measure success in this new world of technology based on impressions (how many times a piece of content is seen), readers, friends, followers, likes, and retweets. Understanding reach with statistical analysis of a campaign is extremely important but it is not our objective for engagement. True success (aka generating results that lead to a paycheck) relates to people's actions, not the number of impressions, fans, friends and followers, or readers.

What action did they take? Did they feel more informed or a sense of relief because you helped them solve a problem? Did they comment, call you, or e-mail you? Did they tell their friends? Did they buy something? How did the engagement make them feel?

Understand your objective as you engage with the modern consumer. Use each connection point to develop "a relationship built over time where you establish trust and demonstrate expertise which can eventually yield influence."

CREATING YOUR SMART PLAN

In both Day 1 and Day 2 of this program, we have talked about developing relationships, engaging in conversations, and earning trust.

These concepts are the foundation of engagement with the modern consumer, but they require a SMART plan to make them happen. That plan must be:

☐   **S**pecific. A plan without specific action steps is not a plan. What do you need to do to reach your goals? What tech tools are you going to implement? How are you going to pay for them? Once you purchase them, how do you plan to use them?

☐   **M**easurable. It is difficult to achieve something you can't measure. If you can't measure it, your goal is not specific enough.

☐   **A**ttainable. The goals you set need to be attainable or you will be discouraged. Your plan needs to push you to reach your goals while still being possible. It can be aggressive without being unreasonable.

☐   **R**elevant. How do your action steps relate to your overall goals, not just in business but also as a human being? How will they help your productivity? How will they help you stay in touch with your clients or close more sales? If your goal is to purchase a smartphone, do you have a plan of what you are going to do with it that helps you be more productive?

☐   **T**ime-bound. Place deadlines on your action steps. When are you going to start it? When are you going to complete it? If you don't have deadlines attached it is hard to focus on completing the action steps. Set reasonable time limits.

Your strategy can and will change over time. It is important to evaluate where you are in your plan on a regular basis, especially if your goals change or you find that your action steps are not helping you achieve those goals.