

On Becoming an e-Agent—On Building a Website Part VIII

By Jo Becker, GRI, BA

A personal website for Realtors[®] is quickly becoming a staple business tool. If you don't have one yet, or have one you have been wanting to update, how do you go about it?

Most of the work is in the initial thought process: What is your available budget for the project? What do you want the site to do for you? Who do you want it to reach? What do you want it to look like? What do you want to say to those that visit your site?

Answering the first issue of budget will address several other concerns. If you want to get a site up quickly and without much effort, contacting a vendor that provides "cookie cutter" sites for the real estate industry is the most efficient way of going about it. I have heard good things about HomeSearch1 and ihouse2000, and many local agents have e-mail through Worldstar who I know also provides site development. These sites, without custom touches or many upgrades can run \$200-\$300.

If you can afford a larger budget you will get more bang for your buck. I recently spoke with RuckerWorks after seeing their ad in the PMAR newsletter. They offer a preformatted site that is custom designed. This amounts to a more personalized site without the full expense of building one from scratch. Their basic package costs about \$900.

When I had my site built a few years ago, I hired a designer and paid about \$3000 to get exactly what I wanted. While that's expensive, the cost of sites can go even higher depending on the type of coding used, the number of pages you have on your site, and other custom features.

So you can see there is a wide range of sites available from the ordinary to the fully customized, each with a corresponding price point. If you are considering launching a new site, you really ought to spend time looking at other agents' sites in your market and deciding for yourself what you want and what you can afford. Ask those in your office who they used and what they thought of the process. Notice the sites that you visit and that you like, ask who built those sites and how much it cost. Then interview two to three vendors to find the right fit for your needs.

Once the site is built, you will have other expenses. Most importantly, you will need to pay someone—either your ISP (internet service provider) or the folks who built your site, if they aren't the same people—to "host" your site. By hosting the site, they make it available online to anyone who wants to see it 24/7. Doing this requires specialized equipment and maintenance, and hence they charge a monthly fee for the service. I hear monthly charges ranging about \$40. If, in addition, if you want your site updated periodically, you will likely have to pay for that service as you have it done.

Now that you've decided how much site you can afford and have chosen a vendor who will build it for you, you need to give serious consideration to what you want the site to do for you. Do you expect it to bring you high-quality leads, do you want it to be a resource for existing clients, ... What do you want the site to look like? Do you have a "look" you have used with other marketing materials that you want to incorporate into your site for consistency or are you starting from scratch? What is your style? What kind of audience are you trying to reach and what's their style? Finally, what do you want to say to those who visit your site? Your site should do more than repeat what's published on your printed brochure. Make your words meaningful to those who visit and make it memorable. After all, you want them to come back again and again; you want to build a rapport with them that will cause them to contact you.

To get the most out of your site, at whatever price point, you will need to do some footwork—drafting verbiage for the site, picking graphics and incorporating a "look" into the site, deciding what features you want to offer on your site. Once it's all done, there are other things to consider: How will you promote your site? Understanding and getting the most out of search engine placement. How often should you update the site?

While these are all very important issues related to the success of your site it is best, perhaps, to take it one step at a time. I would argue that the most significant thing you can do for yourself is find a designer who

you are comfortable with and who can help you address these issues in a meaningful way without technical gibberish that only leaves you confused.

After being approached by fellow agents last year, I have begun offering technical and marketing assistance to interested agents. If you need help finding and working with a developer, give me a call. I have enough technical knowledge to interpret some of that confusing gibberish, as well as creative ideas for getting the most out of your site at whatever price point.

If all of this seems too overwhelming, ask for help, but keep trying! Before long you will get the hang of it. In the meantime, *hang it there!*



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