

Realtors increasingly look to the Web for an edge

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From e-mail to blogs, local real estate brokers are relying more heavily on Web-based marketing tools to give them an edge in the current soft market.

"E-mail marketing is a vital component of my marketing strategy. It is a cost-effective way of conducting business and extremely effective in communicating with prospects and existing customers," said Paul G. Wile of The Wile Real Estate Organization-RE/MAX Leading Edge in Winchester. "It has opened a door to thousands of consumers that are looking for superior real estate service."

According to a recent survey by Constant Contact, an e-mail software marketing vendor in Waltham, nearly 60 percent of respondents use Web sites and e-mail marketing to drive more buyers and sellers to their businesses. Among marketing methods, e-mail ranked highest in cost-effectiveness and speed of delivery.

"With the current uncertainty in the U.S. housing market, it's more important than ever for small real estate businesses and agents to find effective ways to build strong client relationships," said Eric Groves, senior vice president at Constant Contact.

Of course, e-mail marketing is only one method. Only 37 percent of the respondents in the Constant Contact survey said they sold or rented a property directly as a result of an e-mail marketing campaign, but other Web-based tools are lending a marketing hand.

For large companies such as Coldwell Banker, driving traffic to the corporate Web site is a key strategy. John Goode, senior vice president and manager of Coldwell Banker's South End office, said the Web gives potential buyers a 360-degree view of the available properties by serving up photos and video tours. Those home tours generate leads for the agents who then work to close the deals.

"So many agents think the end-all is to have a Web site, but a \$5,000 Web site alone is not the answer. You still have to advertise the Web site to generate leads," Goode said, noting that Coldwell Banker advertises on [Boston.com](#), [Realtor.com](#) and Google. "And you have to analyze where your traffic is coming from so you know where to focus your online advertising efforts."

Elad Bushari, a real estate agent in Boston who focuses on high-end clients, operates several Web sites, including [Bushari.com](#), [BostonianLofts.com](#), [BostonRealEstateMarketReports.com](#) and, his latest, [CambridgeLuxuryLiving.com](#). He got on the Web site bandwagon 2005 and reports 50 percent to 60 percent of his business comes through this e-channel.

"I've tripled my business every year since 2005," said Bushari, noting that he sees a collective 20,000 unique visitors to his sites each month. His strategy is centered on National Association of Realtor data that says more than 80 percent of homebuyers start their search online and 70 percent will contract with the first person who contacts them. Bushari sold more than \$12 million worth of real estate Jan. 1 through Nov. 1, 2007.

Bushari also uses a Weblog, or blog. Blogs are finding momentum among corporate real estate businesses and independent agents because they are search engine-friendly. A separate survey conducted by Global Research Center reveals that 68 percent of real estate agents are focusing on blogs as a marketing tool in 2007.

John Keith, principal of John A. Keith Real Estate in Boston, spends up to five hours a day reading materials and posting to his log at [BostonReb.com](#). With three years worth of blog posts containing industry buzz words, Keith also gets plenty of natural search traffic.

"Many of my clients are buyers who are relocating to Boston. If they do an Internet search for the words 'Boston

real estate' or 'Boston real estate blog' or similar words, then they find me," Keith said, noting that he allows visitors to search the listing service from his site.

With traditional print ads, he said, you don't know where the leads are coming from. Still, many Realtors depend on traditional advertising, according to a report prepared by consulting company Classified Intelligence LLC and real estate publishing company Realty Times.

According to the report, word of mouth and billboards were listed as the most effective sources of leads. The report suggests "agents and brokers don't see advertising in general as a very effective marketing tool."

But Keith isn't buying that philosophy, not with nearly 100 percent of his leads coming through his blog. "There's a real connection between having an Internet presence and finding clients and closing," he insisted. "I don't advertise anymore. The clients find me."