

Cover Story



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Fast Track to High Tech

In today's competitive world of real estate, it takes every available advantage to build sales volume and remain ahead of the pack. Being familiar with the latest technology and having it available to you can be the difference between success and failure. **By K.K. Snyder**

From hardware and software to blogging and Web sites, nearly every type of successful business relies heavily on technology. And while that PDA you buy today might be obsolete next year, agents who hesitate in joining the digital age may soon find themselves left in the dust.

Keller Williams agent Ivette Rodriguez Anderson says she "loves, loves, loves" technology and the various gadgets that allow her to perform better than ever. She's always amazed when talking to agents in the business 20 or 25 years who recall getting together with "the books" to go over listings before electronic listing capabilities simplified the process.

One of the reasons she joined Keller Williams was because the company keeps current with the latest technology and provides agents with the tools they need to succeed. Agents are allowed to customize their Web pages on the company's site rather than forcing them all into a cookie cutter template.

Having all the agency's listings on Realtor.com rather than just a select few is a big plus, she says, noting that the Web site allows for more detailed descriptions of properties, more photos, virtual tours and open house announcements.

The technology also allows Anderson to "follow her numbers" with regard to how many times a particular listing is viewed. "If you can measure it, you can manage it," she shares.

Anderson recognizes that most consumers are tech savvy, and agents have to stay one step ahead of them to provide the value they seek when buying or selling a home. Because of that, she carefully chooses pieces of technology that make her more efficient and more effective, like her BlackBerry.

"I didn't want to become a BlackBerry addict," she confesses. "But I don't know how I'd do without it now." The handheld device allows her to stay on top of her game, she says.

For example, if she's showing a client a house and they point to one for sale across the street and question why they weren't shown that property, Anderson can quickly look up the listing through the Internet via BlackBerry and share with the client that the house didn't have a basement or another must-have established by the client.

She's also hooked on Wi-Fi, giving her wireless access to the Internet and allowing her to work from almost anywhere and prepare and print documents on the spot.

"It keeps me more in the moment with immediate, up-to-date listings," says Anderson, who champions MLS and the "wonderful upgrades and enhancements" they keep adding to the service. One of her favorite features of MLS allows her to click on a price and go straight into a mortgage calculator tool that figures down payment, taxes and an estimated monthly payment.

"I still recommend clients talk to their mortgage professional, but this gives them a head start with their figures."

Anderson uses an e-fax service as well as Top Producer, a lead and contact management software, on her recently-purchased Lenovo 610 laptop. "I love [Top Producer] and

"We've picked up a lot of business where other agents had projects and lost out mostly because of a lack of communication. Communicating is so easy now with technology, so there's really no excuse."

MIKE VESOLE, CONSULTANT, @PROPERTIES

haven't even touched what it's capable of doing," she says of the many features the software offers.

"The great thing about all those things is that they don't tie me down to my home office or the Keller Williams office. My office is in my client's driveway or wherever they need me to be."

Mike Vesole, a consultant with @properties, also likes the convenience of working from anywhere and encourages his 25 agents in The Mike Vesole Group to do the same, an easy task as all of @properties' offices are wireless. Using BlackBerries and Microsoft Exchange keeps everyone up-to-date and on the same page with regard to contracts, appointments and other transactions.

Vesole is currently developing a Web site for his group and knows it can be a great lead generating tool as well as a showcase for available properties. He plans to integrate a number of features on the site, including blogging capabilities, neighborhood data and other information of value to clients.

"It's invaluable for our buyers and our sellers," says Vesole, who encourages his agents to attend programs on technology

offered by Chicago Association of Realtors (CAR) and other groups. One innovation he's seen taking off recently is the addition of a phone number on real estate signs that allows people to receive text messages with info about a particular property.

From the start Vesole was impressed with how tech savvy his company is, and credits that as a major reason for joining @properties.

"We're using technology differently," says Vesole, who has been in the industry for about five years. "We've picked up a lot of business where other agents had projects and lost out mostly because of a lack of communication. Communicating is so easy now with technology, so there's really no excuse."

Vesole and his group also utilize e-blasts to send announcements about every property to some 10,000 contacts, and Google Docs to maintain online spreadsheets, tracking properties, buyers, sellers and appointments. And a "real time" program allows clients to see up-to-date information on how many people have viewed their property online.

He acknowledges that technology can be a detriment to business at times. "Sometimes people need to just pick up the phone. Some people hide behind the technology and don't communicate effectively ... I imagine there are some things we're doing differently; we're ahead of the game."

Arthur van der Vant, president/CEO of Major Enterprises, credits his company's cutting-edge technology with growing his business to 500 agents in just five years.

"Major has committed to investing into the most current Internet technologies ever since we opened our doors in 1998," says van der Vant. "As the technology evolved, so did Major. About five years ago we decided to reengineer our company

by imagining what a real estate company of the future would look like and to create such a company today. Of course, one of the elements of that creation was the technology."

To design the technology he wanted for Major, van der Vant looked at the operation of a real estate brokerage as if it was a manufacturing system, studying the business processes of the brokerage company, such as seller or buyer representation, and broke them down further into workflows. Every workflow is organized to include tasks, triggers, reminders, etc., says van der Vant.

"Imagine an automobile assembly line. Some raw materials enter the line on one end, then along the line there are different robots working on different parts, and the end result is a completed car driving off the production line from the other end. That is how we organized our real estate brokerage and auction company."

In addition, Major measured the time each task in the flow takes, so they can measure staff's productivity and know how much every file costs the company to complete, efficiency being especially important in today's market. Agents benefit from

Cover Story

Top 100-Plus Free Web Sites for 2008

By Brad Andersohn

There are so many free tools and sites on the Web this year that can help Realtors, creating a list of just 100 was a difficult task. But I love a good challenge! Below are my top 100-plus picks for free Web sites for Realtors in 2008.

ANIMATED GIFS

GifAnimations.com

ANIMATED SIGNATURES

TextGifs.com

AUDIO EDITOR

Audacity.Sourceforge.net

BLOGGING SITES

Wordpress.com
Blogger.com
InmanNews.com
Trulia.com
Business Tools
Docs.google.com
OpenOffice.org

CALLS AND TEXT MESSAGES

Jaxtr.com
Skype.com
Chat Tools
Meebo.com
iChat.com

E-MAIL

Gmail - google.com
Yahoo - yahoo.com
Hotmail - msn.com

FLYER PROGRAMS

Postlets.com
vFlyer.com

craigslist.com

GRAPHIC TOOLS

ImageChef.com
Glittermaker.com
LogoMaker.com
CustomSignGenerator.com

INTERNET RADIO

BlogTalkRadio.com

MOBILE SITES AND MICRO BLOGGING

Utterz.com
Jott.com

MAPPING APPLICATIONS

Google Earth - earth.
download.googlepages.com
Google.com/GMM
BatchGeoCode.com
RandMcNally.com
HousingMaps.com

MP3 DOWNLOADS

MP3DownloadZone.com

PHOTOGRAPHY HOSTING AND EDITING

Flickr.com
PhotoBucket.com
Picasa.com
Slide.com
KodakGallery.com
Picnik.com

PHOTOS AND IMAGES

CopyrightFreePhotos.com
LogoDesignWeb.com/
StockPhotos
FreeFoto.com
public-domain-photos.com
publicdomainpictures.net
FreePhotos.se
PDPhoto.org
FreeGraphics.org
TheWebSqueeze.com

SOCIAL BOOKMARKING AND SHARING

Diigo.com
AddThis.com
ShareThis.com
StumbleUpon.com
Del.icio.us.com
Digg.com

SOCIAL NETWORKS

ActiveRain.com
Localism.com
LinkedIn.com
FaceBook.com
Twitter.com
Naymz.com
FriendFeed.com
Plaxo.com
chicagoreconnect.ning.com
realestatehappyhour.com

SOFTWARE

Tucows.com

TASK MANAGER

RememberTheMilk.com

TEXT MESSAGING

Txt2day.com

VIDEO HOSTING

Google Video
WellcomeMat.com
Viddler.com
YouTube.com
Vimeo.com
VEOH.com
Zipvo.com

VIDEO MESSAGING

Seismic.com
Eyejot.com

VOTING AND POLLING APP

PollDaddy.com

WEB SITE AND BLOG TRACKING

Clustermaps.com
sitemeter.com
Websitegrader.com
Hitstats.com
Google Analytics
Pr.Blogflux.com

WIDGETS

WidgetWorld.wordpress.com
WidgetBox.com

ZIP CODE INFO AND STATS

ZipCodeStats.com
acg.media.mit.edu/people/fry/zipdecode/

BONUS SITES AND MISCELLANEOUS

MyBlogLog.com - Track Visitors
PayPal.com - Online Account
AnnualCreditReport.com - 3 Free per year
WifiFREESpot.com - Free Wifi
Retaggr.com - Best Online Business Card
Feedburner.com - Media Distribution
FeedBlitz.com - Create Subscribers
BirthdayAlarm.com - track Bdays
Switchboard.com - Find Anyone
HitTail.com - Keyword and Tags



BRAD ANDERSON (ACTIVEBRAD) IS A COMMUNITY BUILDER AND EVANGELIST ON THE ACTIVERAIN PROFESSIONAL REAL ESTATE NETWORK. ACTIVERAIN SPANS THE ENTIRE COUNTRY AND CURRENTLY HAS OVER 110,000 MEMBERS. ANDERSON HAS OVER 22 YEARS OF EXPERIENCE AND RESOURCES IN THE

REAL ESTATE INDUSTRY, AND HAS BEEN WITH ACTIVERAIN CORP. FULL-TIME SINCE MARCH OF 2008. HE HAS BEEN A MEMBER OF THE NETWORK AND CONTRIBUTING TO THE COMMUNITY SINCE MARCH 2007. CONTACT HIM AT BRAD@ACTIVERAIN.COM.

Major's diligence in organizing and tracking all information. In addition to paper files on all transactions, they also have electronic files accessible at any time via Internet.

"Even though mobility is the most obvious benefit, imagine the convenience element and speed of doing business or liability reduction knowing that all documents have been checked by quality control," says van der Vant. "The automation is what I like the most. Because our processes include automatic notifications, it is very easy and effective to have all parties updated on what is happening with their transactions. Agents love our Syndicated Internet Marketing, which enables our listings to go to about 180 Web sites and the ability to generate e-mail campaigns. And we give them all Realtor.com showcase accounts for free."

Major's Web site is also crucial to their agents' success. "We have a very professional Web site (MajorOnline.com), which promotes our company and generates leads. All agents get their own fully customizable Web sites with IDX and lead generation tools as well," says van der Vant.

"They can have their own domains and change those

Web sites to match their needs. The corporate and all agent Web sites are search engine optimized to provide our agents maximum exposure. The Web site is only the tip of the iceberg; the value of our technology is hidden in the back office portion of our system."

The company also uses blogging, promoting two real estate social networks - ActiveRain, where, in addition to agents' individual blogs the company also has a blog (MajorOnline.info) and the Real Estate Happy Hour (RealEstateHappyHour.com), where agents network with other professionals and vendor/partners. Real Estate Happy Hour members include mortgage brokers, attorneys, home inspectors, architects, developers, investors and other professionals, says van der Vant.

Major hasn't remained stagnant with the high-tech systems that got the company off the ground. In fact, this year alone they invested approximately \$300,000 to provide agents with real estate auctions to boost the company's auction division.

"Auction sales are the way of the future. According to the National Association of Realtors, 30 percent of all residential sales in 2010 will be done through an auction."

Personally, van der Vant says he couldn't live without his notebook computer and the Internet. Major uses Voice Over IP, which places a Web-based console of the office phone on the computer.

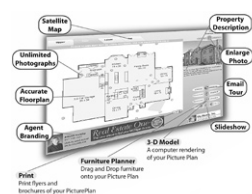
"I can call from it, receive calls, do conference calls, have access to call logs, transfer or receive eFaxes. As far as what I wish for, I wish that we had faster, larger broadband connections, so more data can be transmitted faster, but that is only a matter of time."

At the end of the day, can technology ever replace real estate agents? According to van der Vant, "not completely, but partially."

"I have no doubt that it will have an impact," van der Vant continues. "Many Realtors would like to believe that it will not, but all you have to do is look at other service-related industries, such as travel, to see how their business was redefined by the technology. The technology will bring a profound change to the real estate industry, but there will always be a place for highly-qualified and knowledgeable real estate agents and brokers."

TOOLS TO KNOW

Picture Plans from Vis-Home -
ChicagoPicturePlans.com



A Picture Plan photographer measures out a floor plan and takes an unlimited number of photographs of an agent's listing. Online buyers can then see an interactive

presentation of those photographs by clicking on the floor plan, and buyers can also fit their furniture with the drag-and-drop Furniture Planner and plan their lives in the neighborhood with a GoogleMaps-based Amenity Map. Picture Plans also offer an opportunities to attract leads through traditional sources, like Realtor.com or the MLS, and a Craigslist Eflyer Posting tool makes it easy to get additional attention from Internet buyers and converts that attention into leads. Buyers logged on to Picture Plans spend an average of two to three minutes interacting with a property. When they open the drag-and-drop Furniture Planner, that average increases to four to 10 minutes. Compare that to a 30-45 second average virtual tour visit.

Chicago Neighborhood Explorer from P3 New Media Group LLC -
seechicago.com

P3 New Media Group LLC is a Chicago-based online publisher of digital video content. The company is focused on delivering professional high definition (HD) streaming video content to local audiences in a state-of-the-art proprietary video player. Utilizing the latest streaming video technologies and "rich media" ad-serving technology, the P3 New Media Group's first offering - the Chicago Neighborhood Explorer - will serve the first-ever HD video library of Chicago's neighborhoods. Local Realtors, chambers of commerce, neighborhood associations, apartment rental sites and government offices can leverage the content to create a more enriching online experience for clients, tourists, home shoppers and local residents.

Million Dollar Homes from Comcast -
Thomas_flynn@cable.comcast.com



Comcast, the leading cable and high-speed internet technology provider in Chicago, is creating an exciting new program to appeal to high-income home

buyers and sellers. *Million Dollar Homes* will launch in November after the elections. *Million Dollar Homes* is a real estate program that will be promoted through cable networks like CNN, Fox News, HGTV, FOOD, A&E, ESPN and TLC. The program will showcase luxury properties and the agents that specialize in the high-end market. Segments of the show will be distributed through Video On Demand, Channel 102 the Searchlight network and Comcast.net channels.

YouMail - youmail.com



Increased competition in the market has required many Realtors to take on more clients than manageable, which means Realtors need improved customer service and efficiency tools to enhance productivity and juggle multiple clients without jeopardizing client service. YouMail is a free, customizable voicemail service that transforms how Realtors communicate with clients by giving them total control of their voicemail. YouMail allows them to personalize greetings for individual clients and choose how they receive voicemail - online, via phone, e-mail or SMS. In addition, Realtors can save important voicemails forever and effortlessly forward voicemails to assistants or colleagues, helping them stay ahead of the competition.

Postlets - postlets.com

Postlets provide an online marketing platform for syndicating listing information across the entire web. The free site allows Realtors to enter in data and photos, and then the information is distributed to real estate search sites like Trulia, Craigslist, Zillow and more. Included with each postlet is the HTML code to post the formatted ad on sites that accept and process HTML. Also available are widgets that can be used on blogs and your own Web site. Postlets Plus is offered to those who want to spend a little extra money for some added services such as a multi-page format, larger photos, a full-size embedded map and a virtual/video tour. The fee is \$5 to upgrade one listing to Plus status.

Virtual Assistance for Real Estate - va4re.com

Need some extra help around the office to get some of those pesky administrative tasks done? How about trying out a virtual assistant from VA4RE Administrative Services. Cheryl Allin, IVAA Certified Real Estate Support Specialist and her VA4RE Member professionals provide a variety of administrative support solutions. A virtual assistant provides basic office support from their home office, including all the services you would want from a secretary working in your office, plus more. They are also available around the clock for emergency office tasks and projects. Some of the services include Web design, e-mail templates, search engine optimization, flyers and postcards and a drip e-mail campaign. Sign up for a free consultation, and someone from the staff will contact you to discuss ways you can utilize a virtual assistant.

Jott - jott.com

Jott allows you to capture notes, set reminders and calendar appointments, interact with Web sites and services as well as stay in touch with friends and family. To use Jott you call 866.JOTT.123, speak your message and tell Jott where you'd like it to go. The company then turns your voice into a text and sends it to the proper destination. The Jott service includes the ability to post to Web services like Google Calendar and Twitter, listen to personalized RSS

feeds from your phone, set e-mail and text message reminders for yourself and send hands-free e-mails and text messages to your contacts.

Fingerprint Reader from Microsoft - microsoft.com



With so many tasks to be juggled, do you find it hard to remember a variety of different passwords and login information? The Fingerprint Reader from Microsoft allows you to log into your computer and your favorite Web sites just by using your fingerprint.

The Registration Wizard helps you register your fingerprints quickly and easily. Then, when you visit a site that requires a password, all you have to do is touch the product with a registered finger, enter your data, and click OK and you won't have to enter information for that site ever again. The Fingerprint Reader can also be used to switch between user accounts without closing programs and files.

Chargepod from Callpod - callpod.com



The Chargepod is a charging device that allows you to charge up to six different kinds of electronic equipment. You can charge multiple cell phones, PDAs,

headsets and many other mobile electronics at the same time with a single power cord. After you pick out the manufacturer-specific adapters for your devices, you'll be able to toss the dozens of power cords that are cluttering your office, home and car. The Chargepod uses voltage regulator technology and interchangeable power adapters to safely charge all of your mobile devices regardless of manufacturer or model. Purchase includes a base station for connecting devices, power cable, carrying pouch and user manual for \$39.95.

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