

Are personal websites the latest “magic pill”?

by Sandy Geroux

The sales field is a difficult one. And the field of real estate sales is no different. Real estate agents are being wooed by the siren song of the “magic pill” - an easy method of getting prospects to line up and bang down the agent’s door in an effort to do business with them, thus avoiding the dreaded activity: PROSPECTING!

First, there were the flashy direct mail pieces that would “guarantee” real estate agents of getting *tons* of buyers and sellers to call them. Direct mail is one of the most difficult forms of marketing, especially when there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other agents in your immediate area competing for the same pool of prospects. Nonetheless, agents are constantly tempted by the hope of making lots of money with no effort, believing the claims that these types of products virtually guarantee that the “old way” of doing business (prospecting) is dead, and this “new way” will bring agents the success they crave - without the bothersome lead generation and follow-up activities normally associated with sales success!

Hogwash! These marketing ploys prey upon our natural aversion to rejection and our lack of dedication to a difficult goal, when even minor, reasonable and expected “hardships” arise. Agents chase the carrot of the 6-figure income, believing they can achieve it without any effort or rejection at all, simply by using direct mail or a similar campaign. Not many salespeople can resist this temptation, even though the cost of these methods usually outweighs or offsets its benefits. In fact, there exist so many of these temptations and diversions from actual WORK that it is difficult for any agent to block them out and focus on activities that will really bring in business; in other words, prospecting.

The latest in the selection of magic pills is related to technology and the Internet - most notably, the personal agent website. The Internet has caused such a tremendous stir in all industries, that it is being touted as *the place to be* if you want any success at all. In fact, many technology vendors have gone so far as to tell agents that if they don’t get a complete personal website, they will be out of business very soon!

Double hogwash!! While it is true that real estate agents absolutely must have e-mail capabilities, and they also must have *some presence* on the Internet, there are many avenues available with which to get on the Internet without going to the full extent of a personal agent website.

Relatively inexpensive alternatives include online MLS’s (most MLS systems are now on the Internet; and if they aren’t yet, they will be in the near future), individual agent pages on their company and/or franchise website, agent pages on other large real estate-related websites, such as Realtor.com and Homeseekers.com, and other widely available Internet avenues.

Personal agent websites require a tremendous commitment of time and money, not only in the concept and design of the site, obtaining domain names, researching web hosting services, interviewing website developers, obtaining photos, writing copy, obtaining appropriate links and

permission to use them and registering them with search engines, but also in maintaining the site on an ongoing basis. Real estate companies are able to justify this expense and effort, to gain exposure for the company and its agents. They have the resources to provide this service for their agents, thus providing agents with more exposure on the Internet than the average individual agent, which helps both agent and company gain more business. However, rarely can an individual agent justify the expense of both time and money that accompanies the decision to have their own full-blown personal website.

One cause of the hype surrounding personal websites is that many of the headlines are very deceiving, claiming everything from the fact that “buyers are finding agents through their personal websites and buying houses, without even seeing the house or meeting the agent”, to claims of “60%-80% of an agent’s business actually coming from their personal website”! When asked to analyze those results, most agents I spoke with told me that upon analysis they realized that, although a small percentage of their business came from this source, most of their business wasn’t due to the existence of a personal website at all. The business was actually coming from the fact that their listings were advertised on other Internet websites via their online MLS, exposing their listings to a much larger audience than ever before possible. Savvy agents who have many listings to advertise in this fashion are picking up more buyers and sellers because prospects contact them with regard to their *listings*, not because they have a personal website.

Thus, while there are exceptions to every rule, and a few agents are actually getting a good amount of business from personal websites, the vast majority of agents will not experience this kind of return on their investment. Buyers and sellers are not, as a general rule, just finding an agent’s website on the Internet and doing business with him/her because of that!

We are reminded of the dilemma of the chicken and the egg. Are agents getting more business because they have an Internet presence, or are they getting more Internet exposure/presence (and subsequently more business) because they already have business in the form of their listings?

Don’t get me wrong. I encourage the use of *appropriate* technology. Technology plays an important part in automating repetitive tasks, organizing an agent’s business, helping an agent plan and monitor income and expenses, creating exposure for an agent’s listings and personal/company promotion activities, enabling free and quick communication via e-mail, and a multitude of other vital tasks, both on and off the Internet, for saving time and money.

However, if you want some good advice, here it is: build your business properly, using proven sales and business-building techniques and activities, as well as proper business planning and budgeting. Use technology as a tool to support your business, save time and money, and provide superior service, marketing and communication vehicles to your clients and customers.

And leave the “magic pills” to those who continue to believe that a rabbit will actually come out of that hat . . . THIS TIME!