

Boost Your Efficiency, Profits

Tips on finding the right technology solutions to enhance your business

By Joe Panettieri

Many Certified Residential Specialists are drowning in a sea of technology options. With so many products on the market, it's easy to get overwhelmed with all the hype. It's important to understand what you need, focus in on only those products that offer the desired options, and use them to their maximum potential, according to **Rob Levy, CRS**, of Prudential Northwest Properties in Portland, Ore.

Getting the technology to work for you rather than the other way around doesn't have to be as intimidating as it seems. The best way to spot quality products and steer clear of the duds, Levy says, is to take a CRS technology class (such as CRS 206: *Technologies to Advance Your Business*), attend the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Conference or CRS's Sell-a-bration®.

"That's where all the big vendors are," he says. "You can take the time to walk the halls and evaluate each product with the thought of, 'How can I make this work for me?'"

At the conferences and trade shows, vendors and trainers field real estate-specific questions all day long. This is why Levy, who garnered 118 transactions generating \$30 million in gross annual sales last year, doesn't ask for advice from local retail stores, which are designed to sell products to mainstream consumers.

A prime example of being able to zero in on real estate-specific technology is with digital cameras. While retail stores and manufacturers focus on quality zoom lenses, REALTORS® can be better served by using wide-angle lenses that allow them to photograph entire rooms from a single position.



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Online Expertise

As he plans to build his business throughout 2005 and beyond, Levy is particularly interested in how to further attract and retain Internet-savvy buyers and sellers. "The average REALTOR® is now about two decades older than the average buyer," Levy says. "The average agent is a technophobe, and the average buyer is tech-savvy. Those disconnects are problems."

The key is to use the technology you have to its fullest potential, he says. Online marketing is a great example of how REALTORS® can do more with what they have. While there are a plethora of REALTORS® with their own Web sites, many lack "stickiness" — a term used to define Web sites that attract devoted visitors because of compelling content and services. Indeed,

many real estate sites contain antiquated listings, names of long-gone agents and outdated phone extensions.

Rather than struggling to constantly update a Web site's look, REALTORS® should use "stealth online marketing," Levy says. This involves promoting specific services online, such as using an e-mail newsletter to offer homeowners timely guidance and other information. This is known as stealth marketing because of the electronic newsletter's hidden goal of attracting readers' attention and then steering them to the REALTOR'S® Web site.

Using the stealth marketing approach for three years, Levy has been able to work with hundreds of potential buyers simultaneously. He believes stealth marketing directly benefited his annual sales by 20 to 40 percent. Although stealth

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marketing programs can take up to 16 weeks from when marketing is initiated to when a lead is ready to buy or sell, the effort is minimal since it is heavily automated. What’s more, the information gleaned can also be repurposed. Levy uses Real Pro Systems software to power his stealth site. The setup costs \$1,195 and hosting fees are \$99 per month or \$998 per year. In essence, one listing sold per year will pay for all of these online services.

Hardware Hit List

Of course, Levy relies on a collection of favorite high-tech tools. He uses an Acer Tablet PC (about \$999 to \$2,200, depend-

ing on configuration), which offers handwriting recognition for quick notes and also converts into a notebook computer. “That way I can type out my contracts and then flip the screen and have my clients sign it right there,” he says.

Levy also depends on a Canon S70 seven-megapixel digital camera (about \$380 to \$540, according to online electronics tracker www.cnet.com). It has a 28mm wide-angle lens vs. an average of 38mm found on most digital cameras.

For contact information and mobile directions, he depends on a Sony Clie personal digital assistant (PDA) and Garmin Quest global positioning system (GPS) for his vehicle, respectively. He

plans to switch from the Sony Clie to the Treo 650 smart phone (which retails for around \$450) within a few months. The fast-selling Treo is a combination cell phone and personal organizer with built-in wireless e-mail.

Microsoft Corp.’s Outlook 2003 and Exchange Server — the top e-mail platform in Fortune 500 companies, according to Gartner Inc., a Stamford, Conn.-based research firm — round out Levy’s software. He also depends on Top Producer 7i and 7i Remote (the latter is designed for mobile systems) to track his transactions. Pricing for the software packages varies widely depending on the number of users licensed.

Calling It Quits

Levy has also abandoned certain technologies that no longer provide tangible benefits. For instance, he stopped using an “egg” lens to create online virtual tours. “It was too cumbersome and complicated, and I stopped doing my CMAs [certified market analysis] from my computer. Some things are better with print.”

Looking ahead, Levy says he has no choice but to remain tech-savvy. “I live in the ‘silicon forest,’ where a huge percentage of our citizens have broadband, and most of my clients are tech-savvy. They expect me to do business that way, and are shocked at how behind the technology curve our industry is as a whole.”

One example of this: If you don’t have a personalized Web site you’re behind the times, and today’s buyers will know it, according to Levy. What’s more, your established clientele won’t be able to find out more about your listings, your background and the community you serve, and new customers will assume you don’t have the digital know-how required in today’s fast-moving world.

Without the proper technology in his tool belt, Levy doubts he would have emerged as Prudential’s top Portland-area REALTOR®. “I’ve been using the Internet since about 1994,” says Levy. “That gives me an 11-year head start on many of today’s agents.”

Memo to rival agents: Get wired and catch Levy if you can. ■

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