

Getting started with social networking

by Melynn Sight

By now, you've heard about REALTORS® using social networking to market their businesses. You might be curious, or maybe have even dabbled in it yourself and you're probably asking if its time for you to get started. In fact, you probably even know the answer to that question. It is time for you to get started in social networking for three key reasons:

1. Your competitors are doing it, so you need to remain competitive.
2. Social media are now longer new experimental tools. Almost everyone is using Facebook at least for personal networking. And the great news it, once you've learn them, these tools take little time and cost no money.
3. Your clients and potential clients expect it. They will look for you on Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, and if you aren't there, they may not consider doing business with you. They also want to know what kind of online presence you have as an agent and what social networking sites you will use to list their homes.

But don't panic. Here's a plan for getting started in social media that is specifically geared to REALTORS.®

Why social networking?

Social network can accomplish three very important goals for REALTORS.®

First, it can help you to create and build a network of clients and prospects. OKCMAR member Joe Ramsey has been on Facebook since January 2009. He reviews it daily for about an hour. "The greatest benefit is the networking with folks that I otherwise would know very little about." Ramsey has gotten five referrals so far this year from friends on Facebook.

Nobu Hata, E-Pro, a Minneapolis/St. Paul REALTOR® and speaker on the recent REFERRAL EXPO is a firm believer in social networking for building a network. He advises being open to the possibilities these tools offer. For example, Hata happened to read a comment one of his friends posted on another person's page about an upcoming move from Chicago to Green Bay. "I essentially asked my friend to connect me to this person who was moving, and he was thrilled that I could set him up with an agent to sell his home in Chicago and find him a new one in Green Bay," explained Hata. "I got paid on two deals and I never even met the guy."

Finally, social networking can help you market your business by sharing information and adding value. That's the name of the game in real estate today. Social networking helps you become a trusted resource that friends, clients and prospects turn to for knowledge or information. Offering free advice or valued information online often triggers people you have given free advice to turn to you for a sale. "The information is out there and anyone can find it, but if I'm the guy giving out the information or putting it out there on my website, Facebook, or LinkedIn page, those people are going to use me first. I've become a resource to those people," Hata says.

To Hata, an online presence is a vital part of any real estate business today. "The brick and mortar aspect of real estate will never change. We know that almost every home consumer, regardless of age, is starting to look online at the homes first," he says. "the real estate agent is almost a second thought. To get to the consumer first, the key is being online."



Nobu Hata's Facebook profile. Hata calls Facebook "a marketer's dream." "Facebook has become a verb. You have access to, and are invited into people's homes on a daily basis. And it's free," he says. See his page at www.facebook.com/tchomepreviews.

The four key social networking tools for REALTORS®

Facebook

Facebook has over 150 million users and crosses all age groups. It's the easiest to use for people with no technology background and more and more people are using it to keep in touch with family, old friends and to make new acquaintances.

REALTORS can use Facebook to create both personal and business profiles. Think of Facebook as an online way to share what you're doing in your personal and business life. If you aren't sure if Facebook is right for your business, search for your clients and see how many of them are on Facebook. If it's a majority, you need to be there, too.

First Steps

- **Create a personal Facebook profile.** To dip your toe into social networking, set up a profile of yourself and start to watch what happens. You can ask friends to join your network of friends and Facebook will find friends you already know. Watch what people are doing and saying until you feel comfortable, and then start to share information about yourself.
- **Create a business profile.** Once you are comfortable on Facebook, create a business page on your Facebook account. Your goal should be to become a trusted source of information, so add your listings, the listings of other agents of interest, market statistics, pertinent information about neighborhoods, etc. Set yourself up as an expert in your area.
- **Expand your network.** Reach out to everyone you know—friends, family, clients, prospects, open house attendees, school friends, business partners, colleagues, and ask them to reach out to everyone they know, and invite everyone to join your network.
- **Expand your network more.** Ask your sphere of influence to become "fans" of your business page. Ask your friends on Facebook for referrals to their friends. The average Facebook user has more than 100 contacts.
- **Make it a habit.** Once you've set up your business profile, have a goal of a daily or weekly update to keep information fresh and show people how much you have to contribute.

LinkedIn

LinkedIn is a professional networking site and is more business oriented than Facebook. The best feature of LinkedIn is that once you are connected with someone, you have access to all of their connections as well. You can introduce yourself to a new connection through someone you know. Connections are a huge part of how things get done presently in real estate. How you distinguish yourself is now about who you know. According to Hata, "it is human nature to find commonality among other people. Once you find something in common with a prospect, you capture them."

LinkedIn also gives your clients and colleagues the opportunity to discuss working with you in a testimonial format. The testimonials are important to legitimize you with prospective clients. These third-party endorsements are your past success stories and will bring future clients who want to do business with you. While Facebook is more social and playful, LinkedIn is about your reputation, resume and credibility.

First Steps

- **Create your LinkedIn profile.** LinkedIn profiles are more detailed and more business-focused than Facebook profiles. You'll probably want to study profiles first, then spend time offline figuring out what you want to say about yourself.
- **Add testimonials.** Ask your clients to post testimonials for you that you can post to your profile.
- **Work your network.** Seek introductions to your client's connections. If a prospect works for a particular company, search your past clients or friends for the same company and ask for an introduction.

Twitter

Twitter is an emerging, but hugely popular social networking platform. Twitter allows people to send short 140 character messages via the Internet or a mobile phone. As it began, people used Twitter to let friends know what they were doing right then. But Twitter is quickly evolving as business people find new ways to use it. For example, real estate agents can send a message like "new listing, just on the market." It reaches all of their prospects instantly.

First Steps

- **Sign up for Twitter.** Go to Twitter.com and join, choose a username and write a short description of yourself. Mention your real estate experience and you'll probably have people sign up to "follow you," meaning they want to hear your news and information.
- **Try it for two weeks.** It's hard to explain Twitter so you really need to try it to see how people are using it. Sign up to follow a few other real estate professionals to see what they are doing. You'll get ideas right away.

Blogs

Creating and maintaining a blog doesn't have to be an arduous task, and can help expand your overall Internet marketing presence. Blog about a real estate topic, or a particular neighborhood, or post facts from a real estate report reworded so that the public can

understand it. Write about anything of note to your geographical area that may affect real estate. With a click of a button, you can share your blog with your online community on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and on your website. Tumblr.com is a free online tool with a blogging platform that integrates these programs.

First Steps

- **Map out the goals of your blog.** With so many blogs out there today, it's important to think about the unique perspective you can offer on real estate in your market. Think about what differentiates you from other real estate professionals and establish yourself as an expert in that arena.
- **Set up the blog.** Setting up a blog is now easier than setting up a web page and there are various free and low-cost tools for getting started.
- **Offer value to your clientele.** Share news stories about the current economic market conditions, tips about getting a good deal or be the first source of vital information.
- **Add new information daily or weekly.** To keep people coming back to your blog, you need to offer new information.

Putting it all together

Once you've followed the steps to getting started with the key social marketing tools, you'll find your efforts start to pay off right away. Then your social marketing efforts will shift to maintaining your efforts. Once established, you should be able to spend an hour a day or less on social marketing. And you'll start to see how your social marketing tools fit together as an integrated package. But don't forget that real estate is still a face-to-face business. Social marketing will reinforce your brand and identity online, but you'll still be spending most of your time in the "real" world connecting with people like you always did.

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