Developing Your Own

Web Site

The Neophyte's Perspective

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By David L. Liebman, SIOR

Like most of you, I believe in the power of the Internet when it comes to our work as real estate professionals. In the first quarter 2008 issue of *Professional Report*, I discussed some useful tools and Web sites that we, as real estate professionals, can take advantage of in our daily businesses. In this article, I'll look at using the Internet to create and maintain our own Web sites to market our professional services and capabilities. Because I am at the beginning of this process, I thought it would be helpful to share what I've learned, so that other beginners may avoid potential pitfalls and use best practices as they develop their site.

Basic Rule Guide

As stated in my previous article, our business is founded upon creating, building, and sustaining

personal relationships. That concept is equally applicable to the creation of a professional, useful Web site. You must effectively **brand yourself** through your Web site by promoting your knowledge and experience. In other words, you want to create the impression in the mind of the prospect that you are the best person to work with on a commercial real estate project. Caveat: If you decide that you'd rather create a brochure-style Web site (that is, a Web site that is dedicated to promoting specific developments, properties, or groups of properties), you should structure your Web site accordingly.

Assuming you are not creating a brochure-style Web site, be sure to provide information that is useful and informative to the reader/prospect. In a prior life as a practicing attorney, the best advice a

mentor gave me was, "Write for the reader." That axiom applies equally here. If, for example, you're a tenant rep broker, the content on your Web site must establish your expertise in one area or another and instill confidence in the reader that you are indeed a tenant rep expert. Whatever your skill sets may be, emphasize your knowledge and experience in those areas.

From a structural perspective, the best professional/promotional Web sites are easy to navigate. Users can easily locate information and the sites are simple to revisit. Let's face it, if you can get repeat readers and users of your Web site, you've accomplished a major objective in creating a Web site in the first place!

Consider also how you are going to generate traffic to your Web site. The most common method is to include your Web site address on your business cards, written promotional materials, direct mail (be they snail-mailers or broadcast e-mails), listing materials, press releases, and so on. I know of an SIOR who created a Web site that invites customers to a client-appreciation event. At the event, he posts a banner that has nothing on it other than his Web site's URL. The clients ask about it, he tells them what it is, and invariably, when the event is over, most of the clients go back to their offices or homes and check it out. Simply sheer genius!

Before creating your Web site, go online and check out other Web sites. Find one or more that you like. Write down all the aspects and features of the Web site you like, and then contact your Webmaster/designer directly. Using all the elements you found useful and appealing in the sites you visitied, your designer has a starting place to begin designing and customizing your site.

Finally, you must maintain your Web site, at least monthly, if not more frequently. My Web site has separate links to both my exclusive property listings and my firm's exclusive property listings. Since these listings change frequently, I ensure that those links are updated just as frequently. Other

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than constantly changing information, such as listings, a monthly maintenance timetable should suffice in most instances.

Specific Recommendations

I developed these recommendations as I went through the initial process of creating, building, and maintaining my own Web site. Admittedly, it's not an exhaustive list, but it's good for starters.

- **Domain name:** Make it simple and easy to remember, and reserve it early. I have found that www.godaddy.com is one of the most popular and reasonably priced resources for this purpose.

- **Layout of your Web page is critical:** Users must be able to navigate and locate needed information easily on the site.

- **The three-click rule:** Make sure that users of your Web site need no more than three mouse clicks to find what they're looking for. Studies have shown that if users need more than three clicks, they will leave your Web site and never return.

- **Make it interesting on a personal as well as a professional level.** While I'm sure there are those who may disagree with me, I look at my Web site as a tool for building a personal as well as a professional relationship, since one often leads to another. In my case, I play and officiate amateur and youth ice hockey. So I plan to have a link on my site called "David's Hockey World," which will include images of my personal hockey exploits, information on my team's standings and games, and a link to the official Web site of the Chicago Blackhawks, my favorite NHL team.

- **Use single screen shots, and avoid scrolling through long Web pages.** This adds to the ease of use and enhances the likelihood of repeat use of your Web site.

- **Satisfy readers that you're supporting their best interests.** This is the heart of building a bond

and rapport with your yet-unknown clients. If you're providing "free stuff," useful forms, or other information that they can use right away, you've achieved your goal in this important area.

- **Ask questions on your home-page about what prospective clients want or need.** In trying to make a connection with prospective clients, you must try to ferret out the reasons they navigated to your Web site in the first place. By doing so, you raise the probability that they will contact you directly for assistance.

- **Don't use clipart.** You should convey total professionalism through your Web site. To do this, make sure that any images or graphics used are of the highest quality. You can find image resources that are royalty-free as well. One such source is www.istockphoto.com, which bills itself as "the Internet's original member-generated image and design community." Another resource is www.brandsoftheworld.com, for access to copies of the world's most recognized logos and corporate brands.

- **Use metrics to assess your Web site's effectiveness.** Your Web designer should include in your hosting package the ability to track who clicks on your site, how many times, etc. In this way, you can determine if you're reaching your target audience and readjust your Web site as and if warranted.

Costs

I'm informed that a 10-page Web site (10 separate Web pages of content) produced by a professional Web designer typically should cost in the range of $400-$500/page. Since my Web site is being created through a business coach that I've worked with for several years, I'm getting more competitive pricing. In any event, my domain registration is $19.99 for 12 months and $29.99 for 24 months.

"Use a hosting package that includes the ability to track who clicks to your site and how many times."

Web site hosting is $29.95 per month. Maintenance fees are $55 per hour charged per incident with a half-hour minimum billing, and then billed in quarter-hour increments.

Most companies do not place their pricing online but here are some companies that do:

http://www.epaiges.com/ pricingGuide.htm

http://www.shibumy.com/ronjon web/web_services_ pricing.htm

http://www.337design.com/ pricing.php

The points and issues raised in this article are by no means exhaustive. My Web site should go live July 2008. It will be interesting to see if I've avoided the pitfalls that others have pointed out to me. But I am assured that the ultimate product will be far more useful and user-friendly than most.

If you have any favorite bits of advice in this area, please e-mail them to me (dliebman@colliers-bk.com), as I hope to publish a follow-up to this article in a future issue. In the meantime, good luck in building and maintaining your Web site.