

# Your Web Site

## YOUR MOST POWERFUL PROSPECTING TOOL

A Web site is fast becoming the most powerful prospecting tool for agents and brokers. It works 24-7 and is accessible today to more than 37 million people. By 2002, that number will double. Are you ready?

In the 1920s, Henry Ford envisioned a car parked in front of every home in America. In the 50s, major television executives saw a TV in every living room. Today, technology leaders say the vision is "Internet everywhere." Are you ready?

"There is no phenomenon--ever--that has grown like the World Wide Web," says Reg Gupton, CRS, GRI, Reg Gupton Growth Seminars, Boulder, CO. "Nothing has ever affected human thinking and behavior so deeply and so fast. Gupton, a speaker at the most recent NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS®'s convention, creates and manages Web sites for REALTORS® (see <http://www.agentfinder.com>).

In just a few months, having a Web site has grown from something REALTORS® regarded just as a sophisticated frill to become the core of their marketing programs.

Why do you need a Web site? The answer is simple: for prospecting and, increasingly, for listing. Today, most Web sites generate relocation business for sales associates and brokerages, but soon local clients will be relying on your Web site, rather than calling or walking into the office.

Gupton says his clients are sold on the value of Web sites. "My Web site (<http://www.lacrosserealty.com>) is essential," says Fran Knofke, CRS, LaCrosse Wisconsin Real Estate, Onalaska, WI. "It gives me the opportunity to introduce myself to prospects and allows them to know more about who they will contact if they choose to call or e-mail me."

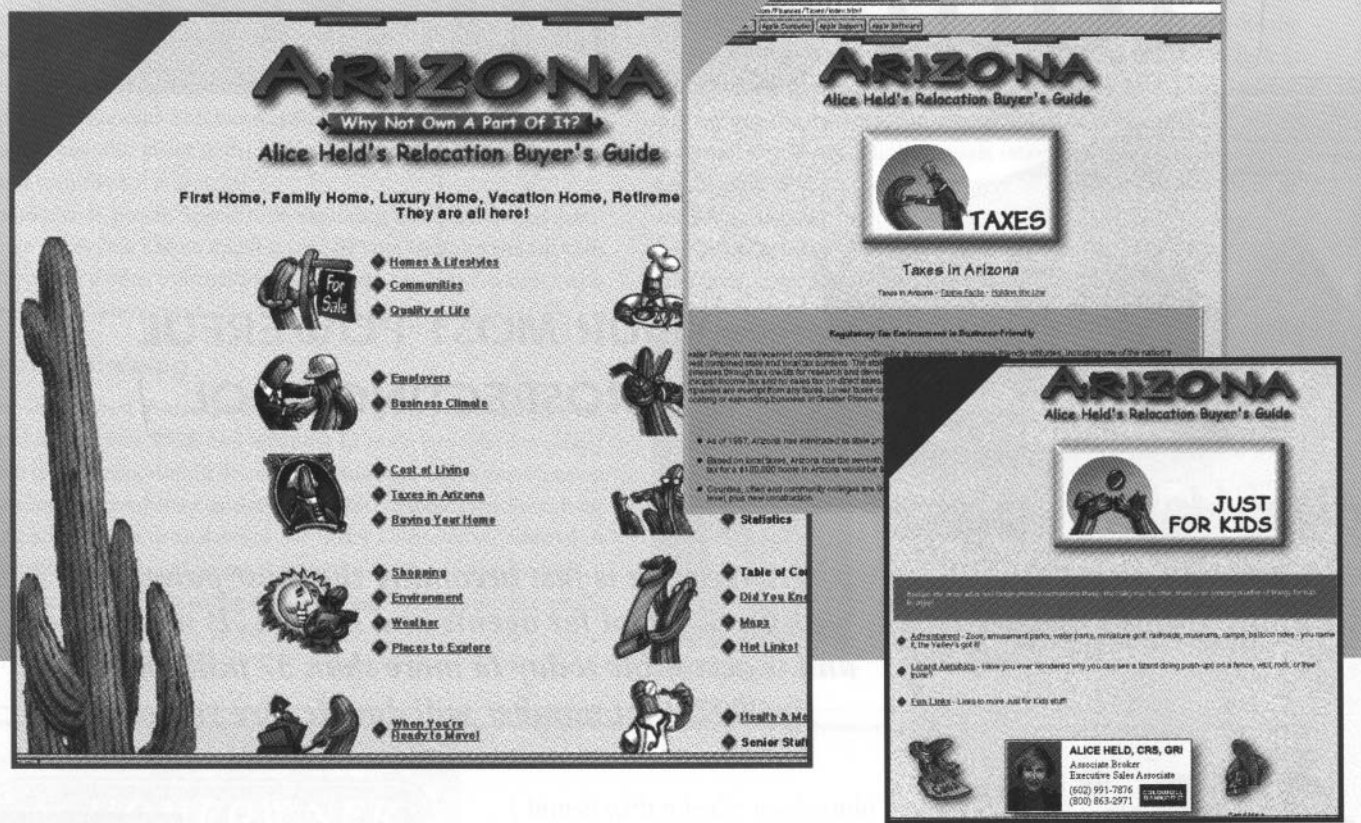
Gary Lukens, ABR, CRS, GRI, ERA, Kraus Real Estate & Building, Inc., Sun Prairie, WI, finds that his Web site (<http://www.luken4ahome.com>) is most useful as a listing tool: "It knocks most sellers' socks off when I put their listing on it. It provides a real point of differentiation for me in my market place."

### Web Site Fundamentals

Most experts agree that certain elements form the essential core of a Web site. They are:

- Start with a Web address that sells. Experts are evenly divided between those who believe that you should name your Web site after yourself, such as <http://www.carriehealy.com>, and those who favor a name that may be more likely to pop up in a search, such as <http://www.dallashomes.com>.

Alice Held reels in relocating clients with gorgeous graphics that download quickly and Web pages that answer the questions clients ask, such as “what are the taxes?” and “what is there for kids?”



- Focus on consumer-oriented information--an introduction to the community with photos, a summary of the local housing market, and links to sites that will interest new residents, such as schools, arts, entertainment, sports, recreation, parks, and city, county, and state government services.
- Provide helpful information on home buying and selling, such as what steps are involved or a guide to settlement costs.
- Include your photo, your professional credentials, and a description of your services. Feature your CRS and CRB Designations and explain the benefits of using an experienced professional.
- Organize the site logically. Many Web visitors are out-of-towners, so try to anticipate their needs. Also, don't make visitors hunt for your contact information--include it on each page of the site.
- Make sure graphics download quickly.
- Include a mechanism to capture visitor names, such as a guestbook or a sign-up offer to send your e-mail newsletter.
- Hire a professional firm to design your site, preferably one with real estate experience.
- Maintain and update the site. It's especially important to keep pace with technology enhancements

for Web sites and to continually update your search engine registrations.

- Put your Web address on every printed piece you produce, including newspaper ads, brochures, business cards, postcards, home signs, etc.

Web sites are a new marketing tool. So even the experts are still learning how to use them effectively. In addition, new Web site tools are being invented daily.

### **Out with the Old**

It may be hard to think of your Web site as old if you only created it a few months ago, but a lot has changed in the past year. "Sites that focus on the agent are out," says Allen F. Hainge, CRS, GRI, Allen F. Hainge Seminars, Springfield, VA. "What's new? Area and property slide shows, updatable voice messages, multiple Web sites, and sites with depth. Cheap sites with little content are out." Hainge is an instructor for RS 206--Using Today's Technology to Capture Your Market, an RS Course designed to train and update members on technology.

REALTORS<sup>®</sup> are using new technology, such as autoresponders, virtual tours, and audio messages, to strengthen the appeal of their sites and provide higher levels of customer service. Gupton is a big fan of autoresponders. "The number one complaint I hear about REALTORS<sup>®</sup> is that they don't respond quickly enough to e-mail," he says. "Autoresponders are powerful ways to enhance customer service."

An autoresponder--set up and managed by your e-mail software, Web site manager, or Internet provider--automatically returns an e-mail within a few minutes. The autoresponder can be designed to provide any type of information. Gupton recommends that REALTORS<sup>®</sup> start by setting up an autoresponder that provides a brief introduction and professional credentials.

Virtual home tours also are increasing in popularity. Talk about "wow!" factor. Consumers can now visit a Web site and see a 360-degree view of every room in a home. New versions of these software programs make it easier than ever to load pictures onto the site.

Although it's possible to design your own Web site, resist the temptation and hire a professional. A well-designed Web site requires a firm or professional who can:

- Help you determine and research content,
- Program the site for speed and ease of navigation,
- Design a "look and feel" for your site,
- Keep the site registered with search engines and build identifiers (called metatags) into the site so search engines will find your site, and
- Keep the site updated.

Some Web design and marketing firms specialize in the real estate industry. Preferred Pages (<http://www.preferredpages.com>) is a Web marketing system designed specifically for REALTORS<sup>®</sup>, with content provided by and listings published on <http://www.homes.com>. Preferred Pages offers a package that includes a unique agent home page, a follow-the-customer screen layout that keeps an agent's contact information and photo on the screen even when the user links to another site, tracking reports that monitor where the consumer goes on the site, desktop tools that turn property listing into attractive fliers, online placement of property listings, and much more.

### **CRS Sites Worth Seeing**

Alice Held's Web site is so gorgeous that even if you have never thought about moving to Arizona, you will be packing your bags after you visit her site. It's aptly named <http://www.come2AZ.com>.

"My Web site has added another dimension to my business—and to me," says Held, CRS, GRI, Coldwell Banker Success Realty, Scottsdale, AZ. "Since 1995, when—at my brother's urging—I put up a Web site with a few listings on it, I've gone from techno-phobic to techno-savvy. It's total, total fun."

"Every day is such excitement," Held continues. "I open my e-mail in the morning just thinking, 'What will there be today?' This morning, it was an e-mail from Germany, yesterday from Bangladesh. I start out many relationships by e-mail now and, by the time they get here, we are good friends."

Held has designed her Web site as a relocation buyer's guide. "I've built the Web site based on what consumers want," she explains. "When one client asks a question and I know the answer will interest other clients, I put the answer on the Web site." The Just for Kids section of her Web site, for example, appeared because clients frequently asked her what activities in the area would interest kids.

Held also strives to keep her site lighthearted. "A move to a new location is always stressful," she notes. "I want to provide some relief to that, keep the site friendly, make the experience an adventure." A seasonal page is one way she accomplishes that. Her February Valentine's Day page provided links to two dozen other sites for friends, lovers, and kids.

The site also is rich in local news. She provides separate pages containing news about events in Scottsdale Valley. Real estate news is provided by Inman News Services, plus Held adds her own newsletter.

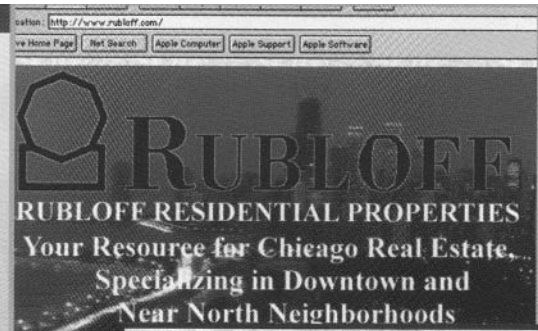
How much time does it take to keep the site fresh? "Not as much as you think," Held claims. "I am an avid reader, and I read with my antennae up. I am always looking for information that will be interesting to consumers." Held is responsible for the content of the site, a local artist developed the graphics, and her brother does the programming.

Noticeably absent from her site are houses. "I'm working on that," she says. "When I first had the site, I posted my listings and other available homes. But we have such a robust market here that homes often are sold before they go online. Even when clients come to me with list of MLS numbers, the homes they have jotted down are sold. It's frustrating to clients." Held is considering a different approach: "Perhaps it would be better just to provide pictures of typical communities and home styles on the site. That's the direction I'm leaning."

There's no question that Held thinks her Web site has paid off: "I spend about \$3,000 to \$5,000 on my site each year, not counting my time. I earn \$30,000 to \$50,000 in commissions a year from it." Wynne E. Achatz, CRS, GRI, LTG, Real Estate One/Westrick Associates, Inc., Marine City, MI, won the Residential Sales Council's Web site award in 1998 for <http://www.wynnea.com>. But in the last year, she's added a dozen new features to the site. In fact, she plans on adding something new every month. "Updating your site frequently helps keep you at the top of the search engines," she says. "Besides, there's so much new technology available."

An audio message, provided by Neon Cactus, is one new addition.

Rubloff's site showcases Chicago. Many visitors learned about the site from splashy transit ads. Each sales associate has a page, which prominently features the CRS Designation. More than 20 Rubloff agents hold the CRS Designation.



Position: Broker  
Working in Real Estate since: 1978  
Certifications: CRS, GRI

Background: Roseanne joined Rubloff in 1985. Throughout her career, she has worked with developers and banks, including 3930 N. Pine Grove, 2650 N. La

Visitors to the site can play a message--everything from real estate news to a thought for the day--that Achatz changes daily. To update the message, Achatz calls a toll-free number, follows the prompts, and records a new message. It's then posted to her Web site within a few minutes, all for an annual cost of under \$100.

Achatz also recognizes the importance of being generous with clients about listing information. She invites visitors to search for their dream home on <http://www.HomeSeekers.com>. She uses an autoresponder to first thank them for visiting her site and then provide the entry code they need to search <http://www.HomeSeekers.com>.

Here's more. Achatz now is using TRF System's Photoshare to present slide shows on featured properties. Need Achatz right away? You can page her from her Web site, just by clicking on "Use Wynne's Pager."

"In addition to the new technology features," Achatz says, "I've also added more content. There's a new page devoted to a description of my services. The gardening page is new, and so are the drive-distance calculator and calendar generator. School information is coming soon."

Achatz's Web site prominently features the CRS Designation. The blue-and-gold CRS emblem is at the top of the first page. (To get an electronic version of the CRS emblem, go to <http://www.rscouncil.com>, click "What's New," then "Online Tools," then "Clip Art.") Her name is listed on every page and is always followed by her designations. She also spells out the CRS designation in the automatic signature that goes on every e-mail. Achatz also features a Web page entitled "Why a CRS?" which notes: It is Wynne's mission to offer a rewarding and satisfying experience to everyone who buys or sells a home. She does this with special care because of her background as a Certified Residential Specialist. The Certified Residential Specialist (CRS) focuses on listing and selling houses and is the highest professional designation awarded to REALTORS® in the residential sales field. Fewer than 3% of all agents in the entire nation have this designation.

"People from all walks of life are using the Internet now," Achatz says. "They preview an area--and agents--by going to Web sites." Achatz loves this trend: "I sold \$6 million last year. About 25% of that came from Internet leads, but perhaps more importantly, I was able to do all of my business better because of the Internet, e-mail, and my Web site. Plus, I had time for other things. I took care of my family, went to 13 real estate conventions last year, taught two continuing education classes, and served on an NAR committee. This technology enabled me to do all of that."

### **Outstanding Brokerage Site**

Rubloff was the very first Chicago-area real estate firm to offer clients and potential customers worldwide exposure on the Internet," says James M. Kinney, CRS, CRB, GRI, president of Rubloff Residential Properties, Chicago. "Although other local real estate companies have come online since our debut nearly four years ago, we strive to offer a unique service: in-depth information on both Chicago real estate and life in the wonderful city of Chicago."

A visitor to <http://www.rubloff.com> gets just that. The site's home page is packed with information for house-hunting consumers, plus it's organized so visitors can go where their interests lead. On the home page, visitors may choose one of several categories of real estate: properties currently on the market with Rubloff (including a virtual tour); currently available and recently sold properties; and detailed information on Chicago condos and co-ops. They also can learn more about Rubloff, sales agents, the brokerage services, and Chicago in general.

One spectacular area of the Rubloff Web site is the virtual tour, powered by Interactive Picture's IPIX Technology (<http://www.ipix.com>). After taking a few minutes to download the IPIX viewer, visitors can take a 360-degree tour of every room in a listed property. Even home hunters on a budget can peek at a \$2.5 million condo.

Kinney wants to make sure the site works as well for the brokerage as it does for consumers. In the last four years, Kinney has put the Web site address on all of the company's printed materials, in advertising, and around Chicago buses. "Many Web sites are geared toward the out-of-towner," Kinney says, "but we wanted to make sure Chicagoans know who we are and where we are on the Internet. We want Rubloff to be synonymous with Chicago." The strategy has paid off. Kinney estimates that 80% of his Web customers are Chicagoans. "Our market here is so hot homes are selling overnight," Kinney says. "Our customers---particularly the younger ones--are turning to our Web listings because they know the property will be gone by the time it hits the Sunday paper."

Driving visitors to the site is only part of the job, Kinney says. "Our Web service reports the number of hits we get on the site and the most popular pages, but that only tells part of the story. We want to capture those names," he explains. That's accomplished by inviting visitors to sign up for the Home Club. When they sign up, visitors can specify the type of home they desire and the Chicago neighborhood that interests them. Home Club members receive an e-mail of available homes that meet their specific criteria. The site goes to great lengths to ensure registrants that their privacy is respected and that a sales associate will follow up only if the visitor requests it.

Kinney says the site gets about 10,000 viewers per week and the Home Club regularly carries 2,000 to 3,000 members: "The Home Club drives visitors back to the listings pages. We find that's what people want to see--the listings."

The Rubloff site has been designed and managed completely inhouse. The original site cost about \$10,000 to develop and \$750 per month to maintain. It's been redesigned three times in four years and is ready to be updated again, A new technology that Kinney is looking at is live contact. Visitors

will click an icon and automatically dial up a customer service representative to make an appointment. Kinney estimates he now spends about \$90,000 annually on developing and maintaining the site.

Kinney says the brokerage Web site has provided real value to agents, as well as clients. The brokerage provides a free Web page to agents who provide a picture and paragraph about themselves. Most agents are featured on the site and all of them have been quite happy with the company-sponsored page. None has developed a personal Web page. "The biggest inhibitor to the adoption of technology has been the strength of the market," Kinney says. "Agents are doing well." But that's also because Kinney positioned the brokerage strategically: "The Web site accounts for 30% of our sales volume now," Kinney says, "and continues to climb. Imagine the business we would have lost without it."

By Nancy Petersen, REAL ESTATE BUSINESS staff

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