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Sellers shoot for YouTube hits

Online videos could be another marketing tool for agents to lure home buyers into market

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Find your next home on YouTube.

That's the latest promise of the phenomenally popular Internet video site and its brethren, where, in addition to viewing such cultural treasures as wedding bloopers and clips from "The Simpsons," you can shop for real estate these days.

From slick, cinematic productions touting waterfront castles to underlit, homemade tours of modest condos, real-estate marketers are eyeing online video as the next way to capture that increasingly elusive creature, the home buyer.

"I was thinking about that somebody who's just scrolling through [video sites] late at night and types in the words 'real estate' and 'Chicago' and says, 'Let's see what pops up,'" said Dina Davis, a Coldwell Banker agent in Evanston who made a video of a Rogers Park townhouse listing and stuck it on YouTube.com.

After two months and a paltry 45 viewings, the townhouse is still available.

"I didn't think we'd get tons of business from it," Davis said. "It's another avenue, another option for marketing. I just hoped to pique someone's interest."

Still, the experience has whet her appetite and she's preparing another video tour of an Evanston condo.

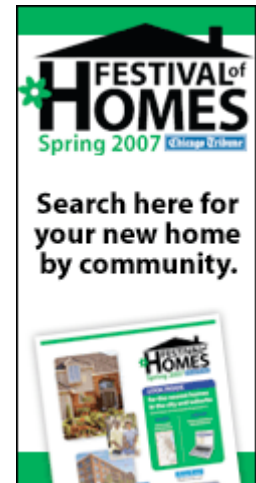
Once posted, it will find itself increasingly in crowded company: Analysts say the practice, though in its infancy, is beginning to boom and new sites are vying to become "the YouTube of real estate."

Just how many real estate videos are claiming a spot in cyberspace is hard to quantify because such general-interest video meccas as YouTube and Yahoo don't have a category for them. House-hunters must cull the videos from millions of other clips by typing in search terms.

That may be about to change.

"I think 2007 will be the year video breaks out," said Joel Burslem, marketing director for a Portland, Ore., brokerage and host of a popular industry blog, Future of Real Estate Marketing (www.futureofrealestatemarketing.com).

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Burslem cites the increasing accessibility of video technology just as the real estate boom was beginning to fade and the industry was scratching for ways to attract attention.

At the same time, the major search engines, including YouTube's parent, Google, are emerging as players in hosting real estate listings and property-mapping tools. Designating a category for real estate videos would be a natural complement, he said.

Burslem expects the video sites to create such "channels" dedicated to real estate content, perhaps even by specific brokerages through special marketing agreements.

"I don't think it will be too long before you can upload a video to your listing on Google Base and have it searchable on Google Real Estate," Burslem said. "I don't think that's out of the realm of possibility at all."

YouTube spokesman Aaron Ferstman said he couldn't comment on specific plans for either site, but he said online video exposure has an obvious appeal in real estate.

"When a [real estate agent] puts it on YouTube, it's being broadcast to the world," he said.

It's not, however, being broadcast in a consistent form.

For the most part, the videos aren't the familiar "virtual tours"--the 360-degree scans that have inhabited brokerage sites for a decade or so.

Many of the current videos are a few minutes of digital footage shot by a videographer--or a real estate agent or homeowner--strolling room to room.

At one end of that scale are videos on a par with Davis': a walk-through embellished with such subtitles as "Living Room" and the agent's contact information. In Davis' townhouse presentation, there's no narration, just dubbed-in background music from a jazz ensemble.

Davis' production costs are the camera and several hours of her time, she said.

Others pull out the stops. Professional videographer Malachi Leopold found himself being hoisted by a hydraulic lift last year to capture the second-story view that a buyer of an oceanfront lot in Massachusetts would get after building on it.

Later, Leopold, who heads the Left Brain/Right Brain production company in Chicago, also shot footage of the countryside and streets of a nearby town to provide local flavor, he said.

After the video went up on several Web sites, it was spotted by someone in California who bought the property, Leopold said.

Leopold put more than two full workdays into the project. He declined to specify his earnings, but speculated that real estate agents would expect to pay \$1,000 to \$3,500 for such efforts--perhaps \$5,000 or more, depending on the complexity, a factor that would limit polished videos to high-end properties.

Not all videos are live-action. Those of the 40 to 50 listings posted by the Real Living Helios brokerage in Chicago are essentially elaborate slide shows of still photography, stitched together with visual effects and voiceover narration.

Because they are video podcasts, consumers can subscribe to them and download them onto their computers, Web-enabled phones or iPods, according to brokerage principal Joe Magliochetti. He said his firm submits the videos to about 60 sites and podcast-specific directories and described production

costs as "nominal."

And they're getting results, he said. "We can attribute approximately 10 percent of our Web site traffic to the various podcasting directories," Magliochetti said. The firm's video vendor estimates that each Real Living Helios podcast episode averages 115 viewings a month.

"We believe these people are actively looking for more information about properties, which means they are more likely to be a ready buyer," he said.

One thing that's holding real estate video back, say those who aren't terribly impressed, is picture resolution, which is critical in marketing homes. Mega sites such as YouTube compress data to accommodate huge numbers of videos, so picture quality tends to be less than stellar.

"They're not `real estate great,'" said Christian Sterner, co-founder of WellcomeMat.com, dubbed "the YouTube of real estate" when it launched last year.

"We're going to be a venue of choice because we have nothing but [realty] video," Sterner said. In addition to offering higher resolution, WellcomeMat videos are embeddable on brokerages' home pages, so real estate companies can show off their videos without sending shoppers to other sites.

Its beta version hosts videos for free (though its search function is inactive temporarily while it's being revamped, Sterner said), but eventually will charge agents a monthly fee.

"In a time of market flattening and rising inventories [of homes for sale], people need to do whatever they can," said Sterner.

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