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Selling a home with video

Videos are becoming popular in the marketing and sale of high-end homes

BY AIMEE FITZPATRICK MARTIN

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If the house on Jessup Lane in Westhampton Beach could talk, it might be heard uttering Norma Desmond's famous movie line, "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille."

Broker Loretta Besser recently worked with Hal Kench of HK Web Productions to create a customized three-minute video home tour that shows every room in the house and features narration with a classical music soundtrack.

Kench has uploaded the streaming video to YouTube .com and WellcomeMat.com and posted it to Besser's Web site, the Multiple Listing Service of Long Island, as well as Real tor.com, HREO.com, CraigsList .com and PropertiesoftheHamp tons.com, and his own site, HamptonHomeTours.com.

With more than 70 million videos seen on YouTube daily, Besser says she believes Web-based video tours are the wave of the future and a winning marketing strategy. "It makes a house come alive for prospective buyers," says Besser, who burned DVD copies of the Jessup Lane video and handed them out like candy at weekly open houses. "It eliminates wasted walk-throughs," she says, "and hopefully will shorten the time a house is on the market." The house was just rented for the summer, so she'll continue to distribute the DVDs after the property goes back on the market after Labor Day.

Besser, whose firm, Loretta Besser Real Estate, is based in Centereach, says she thinks her strategy will be helpful for weary house hunters who've traipsed through a dozen open houses to visually remember her listing on Jessup Lane.

"In today's market there's an abundance of inventory out there, and you have

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to do everything in your power to give a house the proper exposure - whether it's a \$300,000 house or a \$2-million estate," she says.

Targeting Net-savvy buyers

According to a survey last year conducted by the National Association of Realtors, a record 80 percent of home buyers are now using the Internet to search for a home. And 24 percent of those surveyed say they first learned about the home they eventually purchased through the Internet.

While real estate Web sites have been using digital photos and 360-degree panoramic tours to showcase listings for several years, Kench says this approach falls short of what a video tour with motion-picture quality can offer home buyers.

"My motto is, 'A picture is worth a thousand words,' but video tours sell homes. With a video tour you get a true picture of every square inch of the house and its flow."

Kench came up with the idea for his business while on a three-year deployment with the Army Reserves in upstate Fort Drum. Working midnight shifts alone in his patrol car, he says, he remembered his own house-hunting experience in 2003, when he and his wife bought their first house in Center Moriches.

"The online tours we saw were very cartoonish and had distorted images that the computer stitched together from photographs," he says of the spinning, fishbowl effect often experienced on 360-degree tours. "I knew there had to be a better way to show the entire house."

Once back home, Kench, a technology education teacher in the East Islip school district by day, began experimenting with his "basic camcorder, bare-bones PC and Windows Movie Maker software," using his own house as his guinea pig. He then invested \$9,000 in upgraded computer, software, camera and lighting equipment and began marketing his services. By January 2006 he had landed his first client, Fillmore Real Estate, an agency with 20 offices in Brooklyn and Staten Island.

Soon he was getting calls from agents like Patrick McLaughlin of Prudential Douglas Elliman's Sag Harbor office, who wanted to do videos for his multimillion-dollar listings in the Hamptons.

"I love that it's a streaming video, which is more fluid for people to see," says

McLaughlin. "I wouldn't give you two cents for those 360-tours that freeze on your computer. As an ex-television producer, I know how important good visuals are."

McLaughlin also gives high marks to Kench's wife, Rachel, a former journalist at an NBC-TV affiliate in Maine who writes the scripts (using the MLS broker sheets and any other information provided by an agent) and narrates them. (Besser prefers to do her own narration.)

More brokers use service

McLaughlin helped spread the word among his colleagues, and now Prudential is Kench's biggest customer. Working with six freelance videographers, Kench films home tours on Long Island and New York City - averaging 10 to 15 shoots a week - with the lion's share of his business based in the Hamptons.

He counts The Corcoran Group, RE/Max, Coldwell Banker, Hampton Estates Realty and Curto and Curto home builders among his clients. Most homes are listed for more than \$1 million.

Kench charges clients a very affordable \$150, which includes the video, professional narration and music, as well as postings to numerous Web sites, where it stays with no additional fees until the house is sold. For \$20 more, he will brand the video tour with an agent's name, photo, e-mail and phone number. DVD copies are available for another \$20. For most tours, Kench is able to post the video to the Web within 24 to 48 hours of videotaping a house.

Toni Curto, an owner with Southampton-based Curto and Curto, says she's "thrilled with the results" so far. A video was completed in mid-February, and she says she's gotten four calls from prospective buyers, which she considers a "tremendous response given the market and the fact that it was winter." She says she tried it as an experiment and definitely plans on using it again to showcase other homes they build.

Enzo Morabito, a broker who represents luxury properties on the North and South forks for Prudential Douglas Elliman, says, "The exposure you get online is phenomenal. Money spent on advertising in magazines and newspapers is important for branding yourself, but it doesn't generate the calls like a Web site. People want the sensory experience, so I've gone to video with that in mind."

A virtual walk-through

"I have clients who find their house on the Internet and then call me," adds Louise Pitlake from Prudential's Merrick office. "Up to that point we've never met. Basically they pick out their own homes."

Lynn November from Prudential's Westhampton Beach office is another advocate of video home tours. But when she wants to showcase a listing for an oceanfront home - and really show prospective buyers the pounding surf and sunny Hamptons sky - she spends her marketing dollars on Online WalkThru, a media production company with offices in Connecticut and upstate New York.

Eric Carlsen, who owns the 2-year-old company, specializes in creating high-definition "mini-documentaries" for the luxury real estate market (\$3 million and up) in the tristate area. Carl-sen and his crew will spend a half day lighting, staging and filming a home to give it a "refined, HGTV feel." The resulting two- to three-minute video includes an agent interview, professional voice-over and music. Clients also receive 10 DVDs, which can be customized with the broker's information, floor layouts, still photos and community attractions. The basic cost is \$1,500, which includes linking the video to Web sites.

Kent Rydberg, a former senior vice president at Corcoran's Westhampton Beach office, used Online WalkThru for several of his listings and plans to use it in his new role as manager of Prudential's Westhampton Beach and Quogue offices.

"The beauty of it in terms of value is that when you invest in a video, it's available to the entire world 24/7. There's no shelf life - until the home is sold," he explains, adding that he shows the DVD when making new listing presentations. "As an agent, it really helps separate you from the competition."

Early on, Kench learned his lesson not to put prices in the videos, because if a price is reduced, he has to make time-consuming edits. Instead, the price information is available through the agent or agency's Web site for that particular listing. Online WalkThru also does not put prices in videos.

Paul Brennan, Prudential's Hamptons regional manager based in the Bridgehampton office, says that by July the company will be offering its agents an in-house option for video home tours. Amanda Switzer, a producer, director and videographer who runs Into the Woods Productions in East Hampton, is working with the company to revamp its Web site and create streaming "village videos" so that potential buyers can learn more about a neighborhood or town. Agents can choose to work with Switzer to create video home tours for their listings and have them showcased under the village banners.

By next month Kench says he'll be offering video podcasts of the home tours, which can be downloaded to an iPod, cell phone or other portable device.

"Imagine how convenient it will be for an agent to have all their home tours right in their pocket," Kench says. "It's just another way to stay ahead of the curve in this competitive industry." On the cover

Lathe Poland and Eric Carlsen of Online Walkthru film a Coldwell Banker Prestigious Properties broker at a Southampton listing.

Keep in mind

Frank Cento, a producer, director and editor in Manhattan, suggests sellers think twice before trying to become their own Steven Spielberg.

"Creating a professional-looking video is more complicated than it appears," he says. "If the lighting isn't balanced, the color is out of whack and the sound is very low-tech, what kind of first impression is your video going to make on a potential buyer? Be your own worst critic when looking at your home movie and ask yourself, 'Would I buy this house?'"

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