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Lights, camera, action!

Making Movies: From Camera to Screen

Video home tours can set you apart from the competition. Here's what you should consider before rolling the tape.

BY MIKE ANTONIAK



the house.

But amateur filmmakers quickly discover that video tours are more work than just point-and-shoot.

Offering you insider tips on making movies: Christian Sterner, co-founder of [WellcomeMat](#), a provider of video hosting and a distribution solution for real estate, and Bart Wilson, chief marketing officer for Voyager International, and supplier of the [RealTour Production Suite](#). Sterner and Wilson have been offering video tour solutions for more than a year and have worked with several real estate



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professionals in developing video tours.

Before You Begin: Questions to Ask

Before you even start filming, consider this:

- **What will the finished product look like?** You should have a solid understanding of what a video tour is so you know what the finished product should include. A video tour typically includes motion footage of the property, broker, or sales associate and is shot with a camcorder or in the video mode of a digital still camera. It's not a series of stills, played in sequence, with a soundtrack (although they will be hosted and distributed on the same sites). "If you promote it as a video, and people only see a slideshow they will be disappointed," Wilson says.
- **Which listings warrant video?** Because of the time and potential expense involved, typically higher-priced homes and properties will make strong candidates for a video. That's not to suggest it can't be used effectively to convey the unique appeal of any listing. "With a video tour, people get the most realistic view of a property without visiting it to decide if they are really interested," Sterner says.
- **Is this a do-it-yourself project?** If so, you'll need: a digital camera or camcorder; a computer; basic video editing software, such as [MovieMaker](#) for the PC or [iMovie](#) for the Mac; audio files for a soundtrack; and a video hosting/distribution solution. On top of that, there's the know-how to put it all together into an effective presentation for distribution online or on disc. Consider whether you will be better serviced mastering the tools and skills, or hiring a professional videographer, which leaves you more time to focus on selling the property.

Video tour services average anywhere between \$100 and \$400 per tour, depending on your market area, but can climb into the thousands for an ambitious production.

Those who opt for turnkey services can pick up the phone. Companies like WellcomeMat and [Voyager 360](#) can provide referrals, and many virtual tour providers are now expanding into video services as well.

Video Step-by-Step Guide

If you're a do-it yourselfer, here's what you'll need to do:

1. Plan ahead. Creating a virtual tour from photos can be as simple as snapping pictures as you step through the house. Creating a video requires much more forethought. Consider what are the best and most visually appealing features, what to include, and what to leave out. Think about how to highlight selling points in a movie: lighting, perspective, and where you should set the camcorder and tripod to pan the scene.

2. Remember less is more. Both Sterner and Wilson say video tours should run no more than three minutes; two minutes is more ideal. "Three minutes is longer than most people are willing to sit there and watch a video on their computer," Wilson says. You can produce a longer version for distribution on DVD or CD-ROM, but keep it brief for the Web.

3. Use storyboards. Given those constraints, Wilson recommends using story boards to plan out each segment of the video, and what you'll say, before you start shooting. Prioritize which features you want to include, the amount of time to devote to each, and when you will be on camera. Also factor in time for transitions from scene to scene. Plan for the beginning and ending sequences or overlays with graphics that detail the property address, price, and your contact information.

4. Shoot now, cut later. When onsite, shoot each scene at least twice to make sure you have usable clips. When on or off camera, talk about what you're showing and why it's important. You can always replace it with a narration track later. If you plan to use what you record "live" get an external microphone. A tripod is a must. Set it on a dolly or cart when moving through the house. Pan and zoom slowly to convey motion. Anticipate potential lighting problems and if necessary bring external lights.

The goal is to do all you can to avoid making a return visit for additional filming.

5. Edit. If you planned well, the actual editing process shouldn't be that difficult — that is, once you've explored and mastered the features of the editing software. That will take time, at least on your first few tours, but a lot of editing software is user-friendly and easy to get a hang of the basics after a bit of practice. To give your video a more professional feel, add background music during the editing process. But...

6. Don't use copyrighted material. One common mistake: using a favorite song as a soundtrack. If you don't own it, don't use it. Music publishers can be aggressive about defending copyright and royalty fees, which can be surprisingly expensive, and they've been known to file a lawsuit to make their point. A lawsuit would be more cost than you'd ever gain from the video. Therefore, buy royalty free music you can use again and again without worry.

7. Show time. Hosting and distribution can be some of the biggest challenges in the process. You'll have to consider where to host the video and what file format to present the file so it's universally available online. Sterner suggests letting the video host be your guide. "Every host site has specific requirements about what it wants in file format, so read and follow them exactly," Sterner says. Wilson recommends using the flash format, which can easily steam to anyone with a flash player installed.

Before deciding to host videos with your Internet service provider, "ask them if they have a controlled delivery network (CDN)," Sterner says. If not, look elsewhere. "If your ISP is not multi-cast enabled, they won't be able to support the kind of traffic you hope to generate for the video," Wilson adds.

You also want to find out if you're allowed to upload branded tours to your MLS. You may need to produce one version for your use, and a generic video for distribution through the MLS.

You'll want your video available with listing information

on your MLS and [Realtor.com](#), but beyond that Sterner and Wilson's recommendations diverge. Sterner recommends videos are distributed to popular video portals like [YouTube](#), [Yahoo! Video](#), and [iTunes](#). Any good host will take care of distribution, he says.

On the other hand, Wilson says to be careful posting video to free sites like YouTube because you have no control over the comments that might show up with your tour. "There are online forums for people to post comments about videos," he says. "If some kids post something negative about your tour, that can become a real problem for you and your seller." He suggests converting video to flash with tools available through [On2.com](#) and then hosting them on [VitalStream](#).

8. Use it as a promotional tool. Include "video tour" with the listing information uploaded to the Web. Explain what the videos are, and point people toward sample tours, on your Web site. You want to promote the fact that you are using video tours because you'll be differentiating yourself in the eyes of buyers and sellers from everyone else in your market.

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