

HOME

TECHNOLOGY

SELLING GOES HI-TECH FOR THE IPHONE GENERATION

Apps, Facebook and Twitter are among revolutionary ways people are speeding up and simplifying home buying

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This year, a businessman in Beijing used a brand new, custom-designed app on his iPad to take a virtual tour of a luxury flat in Miami to check out the views and get a sense of the neighbourhood. He bought without getting on a plane.

In June, at a cocktail party in the restaurant of the Summer Village at the Pond holiday homes in Westford, Massachusetts, prospective buyers picked up framed photos of the model cottages, scanned an embedded code into their smartphones, and toured the homes and amenities without putting down their drinks.

And a young couple out scouting open houses in a San Francisco suburb used a smartphone to view images of the home interiors before deciding whether or not to park their car for a proper look.

The marketing and selling of property have been revolutionised by technology, allowing buyers in one part of the world to acquire property in another without having to do any physical legwork. Elsewhere, people are using their Androids and iPhones not just to view property, but also to list their property and market it using social media.

"The question to ask is: what's the advantage of this technology and how can we use it?" says Tina Marie Bacci, principal at Real Estate Sales Integration Solutions, a residential real estate marketing company based in Boston, in the United States. Another question: "How do you sell property on Facebook?"

These are the more pressing considerations in international property circles today as people consider how to use apps, Facebook, Twitter, QR (Quick Response) codes and mobile tagging to speed up and simplify real-estate deals. Some of the technology is in its infancy, but given the rise in demand for it – and the easily transferable global applications – fewer people will eventually be buying homes the old-fashioned way: having a broker tell them about it and seeing mostly unsuitable homes back-to-back while carting around brochures and blueprints.

Two years ago, Doug Perlson founded RealDirect, a website that helps people buy and sell homes in Manhattan and Brooklyn without a traditional broker. Clients create an online listing and the system helps schedule showings, and surveys viewers afterwards. The listing goes up on search engines, local newspapers and through Facebook Marketplace. Tweets go out and listings are also posted on Foursquare, the popular interactive social site.

The RealDirect model – which Perlson describes as a "hybrid", given that brokers are available to help guide clients through the process –



has been so successful that he is planning to expand it internationally.

RealDirect charges sellers a fee of US\$395 a month (for lower-priced residences or ones that might be on the market longer, they can choose a flat one per cent commission), but many find they save several thousand US dollars down the road.

"We're empowering people who are inclined to do it themselves," he says. "The idea of using your social network to help you sell is no different today than it was 20 years ago when you would tell the people in your circle that you are selling your home. Now, the only difference is we have these online social networks, which makes the process much more efficient."

To market 175 Kent, a new 112-unit apartment building in New York's trendy Williamsburg waterfront area, a web-based video game was created: help a motorcyclist dodge obstacles on the streets and win an invitation to a preview party for the building. Some 200 people registered the week the game went live in March, a month before marketing began. David Maundrell, president of aptsandlofts.com, a Brooklyn-based property brokerage, which has the 175 Kent listing, says the key is to make information accessible be-

yond a conventional website: his agents also lead virtual tours via Skype.

"Without having a mobile website we would be at a major disadvantage," he says. "Everyone uses smartphones and iPads these days and is looking for information on the go." Much of the technology has yet to catch on outside the US – including in Hong Kong. A quick look through the websites of some of the high-end property firms in town yielded no enhanced graphics or facilitated ways of viewing homes; there are standard 2D images, boxes of information, phone numbers to book appointments to see listings. Since the market is still flourishing here, perhaps people who market properties don't have to try very hard.

But consider the possibilities: Realtor.com, which has three million for-sale listings across the US, last year launched an application that allows smartphone or iPad users to check out homes while they are driving around a neighbourhood, using the app's GPS technology to zero in on an open house in real time. The app has been downloaded almost six million times.

"You can find a property and go and look at it right away," says Candice Cerro, spokeswoman for Realtor.com. The system can be accessed anywhere in the world, allowing buyers outside the US a quick sense of what is available and where.

According to Cerro, 13 properties are viewed every second.

According to Bacci, of Real Estate Sales Integration Solutions, a smartphone can provide 360-degree 3D visuals of what under-construction

developments will look like based on a scan of a QR code, replacing traditional billboards and brochures. "It's cool," she says. "If you do something fun, people will follow it. The first step is piquing their interest."

Bacci also uses "hypertargeted" Facebook adverts to get the word out about properties under construction, information about which shows up, say, only on the pages of the 35-year-old-and-up demographic living within a 30-kilometre radius of the place. As they "Like" the visuals, their Facebook friends check them out. Bacci says this "soft-selling" has yielded enough interest in the past few months to make her company focus more on social media than conventional websites or print adverts.

"You can build a corporate ethos for the project on Facebook, where you get credibility," she says.

"You post high-quality things constantly, people are watching from the sidelines, watching the video tours as you post them. By the time they come in for their first visit, they are more comfortable with the project because they've been following it, and they've been hearing what goes on in the neighbourhood. It makes everything less of a battle."

Marquis Residences, a high-end building in Manhattan, developed a custom iPad app that has helped significantly in generating international sales. The Residential Sage app provides an interactive, 3D-generated view around the building and ameni-

ties, giving them different views at different times of the day.

"It really does bring the domain to you," says Wendy Marks Pine, sales director of the building. "No matter where in the world you are, you feel you're in the actual residence, as if you're walking through the building. You can zoom in and spin the views around. It's resulted in numerous sales, but also has tremendous follow-up capabilities, allowing family members into the decision-making process because not everyone can be present at a viewing."

Still, because the technology is so new and shiny, other property insiders are urging caution.

"Sight unseen" are still two of the scariest words in real estate," says Patrick Hohman, the author of *Condos, Townhomes and Home Owner Associations – How to Make Your Investment Safer*. His advice: before buying, despite the razzle-dazzle of the apps, ask for a reserve study from the building, which lists the building's financial plan.

"Don't be seduced by the granite countertops and the views," he says. "I've seen virtual tours where they say: 'This is just like being there.' I compare it to being on a date where there is initial chemistry but you don't know anything about their past. You have to look beyond those superficial, seductive things. It will save a lot of headaches later on."

STYLE
DAVID RODEN



What: Air-M table lamp
Why: This twisted polywood lamp, by Irish designer Ray Power, won a Red Dot design award in 2010. Its lightness and interesting curves make it a centrepiece.
How much: Large, HK\$3,999; small, HK\$2,999
Where: Aluminium, Queen's Centre, 58 Queen's Road East, Wan Chai, tel: 2577 4066

What: The Malia collection
Why: This stainless-steel, polished tableware by Sambonet is highlighted with a gorgeous faceted diamond design.
How much: Bowl (10cm, HK\$490; 14cm, HK\$740; 18cm, HK\$900); bread basket (HK\$980); cheese pot (HK\$750); oil and vinegar set (four pieces, HK\$2,460)
Where: Exclusivites, 1 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2521 8626



What: Gaulino chair
Why: Oscar Tusquets Blanca, who designed this chair, took his inspiration from Salvador Dali's surrealism and Gaudi's La Pedrera in Barcelona.
How much: HK\$11,100
Where: Design Link Showroom, 1/F, Ruttonjee Centre, 11 Duddell Street, Central, tel: 2868 0991



What: Glitter wallpaper
Why: Add bling to your rooms with this US-made acrylic-coated, screen-printed, paper-backed design.
How much: HK\$1,200 a roll
Where: Goodrich Global, Gallery, 2/F, De Fenwick, 8 Fenwick Street, Wan Chai, tel: 2136 0577



What: Moissonnier's Meridienne day bed and footstool
Why: The pinnacle of fine French craftsmanship fit for a king... or queen.
How much: Daybed, HK\$82,225; foot rest, HK\$16,675
Where: Heather and March, 1/F, Prince's Building, Central, tel: 2530 0686

Q & A WITH OUR EXPERTS

Q: I bought a flat about seven years ago when I was living in London. I later moved back to Hong Kong and let the property to a friend. But he recently decided to leave Britain and would like to terminate the lease. Should I sell the property or look for a new tenant? What do you think about the prospects for the residential property market in Britain? I haven't monitored the market closely given that I am not residing in London now. I think the one-bedroom apartment is now worth over £210,000 (HK\$2.69 million). It is in a quiet area in southeast London and it is about 10-15 minutes away from the neighbouring Surrey Quays and Canada Water stations. It has a nice view of the dock.

downturn will translate into the residential property market. Which district is of good value? Some friends suggested I look at Tsuen Wan because the district is being transformed from an industrial area into a commercial one, and the property prices there are still affordable. Some say I should forget about flats along the MTR line. They say Hong Kong Island is out of the question and I should eye the New Territories.

A: The drop in share prices has some influence on the residential property market but the impact has been small and is rather short-term. We saw some owners

Patrick Chow

Seb Warner

I would re-let the property and benefit from a very healthy rental yield. This would help pay off any remaining debt and any surplus that was left over could be used to improve the flat. The housing market in London is in a very healthy position at present, with steady growth following the downturn of 2008. We expect prices in London to continue to rise this year and throughout 2012/2013, at a rate of 9 per cent this year and 8 per cent next year for central London. The Canada Water and Surrey Quays areas have undergone a huge transformation over the past 10 years and will continue to improve due to new infrastructure and amenities. I would wait until the property has grown to around £250,000 and then I would sell it – £250,000 is below the 3 per cent stamp duty threshold and therefore would be a perfect price at which to sell. Seb Warner is regional director of international project marketing at Knight Frank

slashing prices by up to 10 per cent in the two days right after US' credit rating downgrade. However, many owners have stood firm on asking prices since then. Indeed, we anticipate inflation and a weak US dollar in the next two years. These two factors will continue to boost flat prices. It is hard to say which district is of good value because there are different types of properties in one district. Usually, the higher the price, the better the quality of the apartment. Properties in the city centre, along the railway lines or on Hong Kong Island more easily retain their value. Patrick Chow Moon-kit is head of research at Ricacorp Properties



Tsuen Wan property prices can be more affordable. Photo: Bloomberg

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Got a question? Do you have a property related query for our experts? Send them to property.post@scmp.com

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ON THE MARKET



Project: a single house in Stanley
A three-storey single-number house in Stanley with about 4,600 square feet offers four bedrooms – including three en suites – a study room, living and dining rooms, fully fitted and equipped kitchen, maid's quarters, private garden, roof and plenty of car parking spaces. Asking price is HK\$168 million negotiable. Agent: Ricky Leung of Colliers International (9869 6889)



Project: Residence Oasis, Tseung Kwan O
A 755 square foot flat near Hang Hau MTR station has three bedrooms. It captures a view of a swimming pool on the housing estate. The development consists of six high-rise buildings and a shopping arcade, The Lane. Asking price is HK\$4.6 million. Agent: Ice Yu of Centaline Property Agency (6477 0214)

