

## Real Estate Web Design: Time for an upgrade

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The most successful real estate agents and brokers realize the value of their agency websites and are constantly working to improve them. Unfortunately, many agencies throughout the United States are still working with static websites that are difficult and costly to maintain.

But how do I upgrade? you ask. Often this is not a simple answer. You need to consider the needs of your business and your agents. How will you manage listings? Are you using a Multiple Listing Service (MLS)? Should your agents have access only to certain parts of your administration panel, and not others? What about logging agent and visitor actions on your website? Here is what you should look for in any real estate management system you contract for:

**Dynamic, searchable listings.** If your listings are not currently in a database and searchable, they need to be. This feature is the reason so many homes are sold online. It's the "shopping in your underwear" principle: if a web surfer can access information about your homes at 11pm, and in a bathrobe while watching *ER*, no less, a whole new window of opportunity is opened, allowing you to showcase your listings 24/7. He immediately emails you and sets up a showing; you arrive at your office the next day, get the email, call him, and you're on your way to making another sale.

**Easy contact methods.** All the interactivity on the Net won't help you if your potential client can't get in touch with you. Make sure that your newly designed website has plenty of opportunity for users to click to your contact forms: a link from every listing, and multiple contact methods (phone, email, etc.). Don't require too much information on the form, but make sure you get enough: at least a name, an email address, and a phone number. Also, don't rely on straight email links to get the job done: many computer users do not have a default email program installed, so when they click on your link all they will find is a setup wizard—a confusing and annoying situation for many users.

**Lead management.** The other end of the line of communication must be tied in: your lead management system must dovetail perfectly with your website. If you have an existing lead management system, see if your web design company has already built an interface for it, or would be willing to build one for your website. If you do not have a lead management system, find a website system that will provide one for you, seamlessly integrated with the site itself, such as the [AWS Real Estate Manager](#).

**System logs and user management.** Real estate agencies, unfortunately, are not immune to legal issues with personnel and properties. System logs help you track down what was done on your site, when, and by whom. Make sure that whatever real estate website you choose includes a system log that shows you key activity on your site. You'll thank yourself later when a dispute arises.

Likewise, you'll need to specifically manage which sections of your site certain agents are allowed to edit, and others they are not. The administration panel of your website should have a section for setting user permissions: whether a user can edit all listings, or only those assigned to him; whether he can add or delete other users on the system; how many listings he can have and how many images attached to each; whether he can access the system logs, etc. These features will help you properly regulate the bandwidth and quota your site uses so you won't incur extra charges each month, as well as avoiding duplicate work and conflicts among agents.

**Self-updating site pages.** If you've outsourced updating of your real estate website to a web design company, you know how expensive it can get. Such updates need not reach so deep into your agency's coffers. When researching your new site, see if it provides a tool to allow you to create whole website pages on your own.

But I can't write webpage code! you say. You shouldn't need to. If the site is designed correctly, you'll have a form that walks you through the process of adding page data and content, complete with hyperlinks, images, font formatting, table

creation and all the HTML essentials—with nothing required except a little aesthetic sense. With such a system, you could easily save \$2500 or more per year on outsourcing costs.

Whether you're starting a new real estate agency or are looking for a new design for your real estate website, this information should help you find an effective system that will suit your business's needs. Other items to consider are search engine friendliness of the website system, marketing skills the firm can bring to the table, and support. Armed with these questions, you can be sure you're getting your money's worth, and that you'll encounter as few problems as possible with the implementation and maintenance of you new website.

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