

# House-hunting in the digital age

In the past decade, a technological evolution avalanche has completely changed how consumers acquire just about everything in their lives, from travel packages to retail therapy solutions, and how they find their dream homes hasn't escaped modern life's pervasive digital migration either.



With augmented and virtual reality technology now becoming commonplace and social media a daily part of life, the face of real estate marketing has been totally transformed and is already moving beyond standard property search engines to where consumers actually spend most of their time on the web.

“The reality is that a significant percentage of consumers who have the means to be in the market for property spend large portions of their days looking at illuminated pocket-sized mobile devices. As smart phone users we’re subconsciously sucked into digesting social conversation and, for many, social platforms are also their main sources of news and community information,” says Graham Knoop, digital marketing expert and specialist realtor for Lew Geffen Sotheby’s International Realty’s southern suburbs office in Cape Town.

“No other form of media in history has made as deep an impact on property as digital marketing,” he says.

## Initial legwork made more convenient

One of the biggest changes is the convenience of being able to do most of the initial ‘legwork’ without actually leaving home, and the sheer volume of information means consumers can equate locations and value with comparative asking prices on a scale that would have been impossible in the age when print was king.

“Accessibility to information means clients are more educated and savvy than ever before. This is an incredibly good thing because informed buyers and sellers make better choices, and buying property is usually a financial decision that will affect your life for a very long time.”

Knoop adds: “Social media alone is an incredibly powerful tool for showcasing homes as well as a rich shopping portal for property.”

This is borne out by the 2017 edition of the *SA Social Media Landscape*, released by World Wide Worx and Ornico, which revealed that Facebook is now used by 14-million South Africans. YouTube is in second place with 8.74-million users, followed by Twitter at 7.7-million. LinkedIn’s steadily increasing popularity as a more business-orientated social media tool has the platform standing at 5.5-million users nationally.

## **Sourcing property information on Facebook**

Figures released by Facebook in early March noted more than 1.86-billion active users per month globally, a 17% year-on-year user increase. Facebook has 85%-plus more users than its nearest social media competitor, making it the international social media whale and increasingly the place to source property news and information on the latest stock coming onto the market – in-between interacting with friends.

Lew Geffen, chairman of Lew Geffen Sotheby’s International Realty, says: “While it’s no surprise that social media is becoming an influential marketing tool, what is interesting is the fact that of Facebook’s 14-million South African users, 85% are now accessing the site using mobile devices, which is a significant increase from 77% just one year before.

“Social media is also a great place to source information about new and trending apps, because nowadays the most innovation appears to be happening in these small tech marvels. There seems to be an app for everything, and searching for property is no different.”

## **View properties in 3D**

One of the most technologically advanced “new kids on the block” is Propscan, an app that provides South African realtors with the technology and consumers with a simple interface platform to showcase and view properties in 3D.

Propscan founder JP van der Bergh says the 3D technology gives realtors’ clients the edge over other homes being marketed with more conventional tools, the platform is competitively priced at a set rate without hidden monthly charges and because the app is being widely promoted to consumers as a free search tool with many unique features, property professionals reach their target audiences.

With properties showcased in 3D on Propscan, a simple twist of the viewing device will allow buyers to view features such as floor coverings, fittings and finishes in far greater detail than previously possible with still photographs.

Geffen says because the public’s consumption of news and information is changing so rapidly and radically, potential sellers choosing agents should regard posing questions about their marketing reach and strategy as high on the check list as the property valuation.

“There’s absolutely no point in getting excited about high-end valuations if the realtors and their brands don’t have the local, national and international reach on the correct platforms to communicate with a targeted audience of serious buyers. And ‘spray and pray’ definitely doesn’t count as a good marketing plan!”

## **Strategic digital marketing**

Grahame Diedericks, manager for Lew Geffen Sotheby's International Realty in Midrand, Johannesburg, says: "Strategic digital marketing can help agents reach a broad demographic of potential buyers at a pace never imagined during the reign of print advertising, and studies of consumer brand interaction reinforce why it's vital for sellers to select a real estate company that has a strong online presence.

"An optimum marketing strategy should now include social media, database advertising, property search portal and app placements, digital media showcasing, show days, outdoor boarding and high-end print material."

Diedericks adds that another major advantage of digital marketing is that it saves both buyers and agents a significant amount of time as the initial online research by buyers will whittle down the list of homes they eventually view.

"The ongoing progression of technology will increasingly fast-track the eventual goal of successful property transactions, with portals becoming more and more efficient and creating new innovative methods for properties to be showcased for agents and viewed to best advantage by potential buyers – all without them leaving the office or home.

## **Personal element**

"That said, there will also always be a personal element to marketing property and when it comes down to the wire, having a professional, experienced and legally-savvy estate agent at your side is a no-brainer to ensure a smooth sale that doesn't reveal any ugly, costly surprises weeks or months later. But what good digital marketing does is take properties to the widest audiences for sellers and efficiently help buyers narrow down their searches and save time by allowing them to discard home choices that don't suit their requirements."

Says Knoop: "When one understands that more than 70% of sales are the result of online enquiries, then agents and sellers can begin to re-calibrate where time and money needs to be spent.

"An agent with the correct digital support and knowledge will therefore achieve the best possible price for your home in the shortest possible time."

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