Make Full Use of
Available Technology to
Develop an Above Average Presence

By William Gladstone, SIOR, CCIM

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Many real estate agents are not using technology to its full potential. There are numerous reasons for this including cost, technical skills, hardware requirements, and a lack of understanding its importance. But in today's market, staying current with technology trends is critical to the survival of any business. Technology helps create an online presence, obtain information quickly, and enhance speed of response.

With that in mind let's take a look at some of the current trends:

- online business and social networking sites,
- Unified Communication (UC) systems,
- mobile phones and devices,
- Virtual Private Networks (VPNs),
- video conferencing, and
- remote desktop applications.

An added bonus of these tools is that many of them help us to "go Green"—a positive step for the environment. I encourage you to research these topics further on your own to learn how they can increase the viability of your business.

Business and Social Networking

The use of online networking services is not new. The difference is that in 2009 more businesses are using them strategically in an effort to communicate better with customers and clients. The most likely business and social networking sites for commercial real estate are CREOpoint, LinkedIn, and Twitter. CREOpoint considers itself a "global commercial real estate community," LinkedIn is primarily used for business networking, and Twitter is both business and social. All three sites are used to communicate with customers and clients. So far, I am not convinced that business and social networking, even through these sites, has been taken to its ultimate capacity. Mostly, I see people looking for market information and recommendations. I am not quite sure how that helps me bring about business with potential clients except on a sporadic basis. We are still testing the water with these Web sites as we seek to expand our business, increase efficiency and productivity, and generally move to new levels at higher standards.

We need to take advantage of the platforms available to us so that all contributors (brokers, customers, clients, vendors) can collaborate easily. Out of pure frustration with current networking sites, my group, the Bill Gladstone Group of NAI CIR, created and posted a video *(Commercial Agent Man)* on YouTube three months ago. Our goal was to see if it could help us move forward in this

process. Currently, with a little more than 1,300 views, I am not sure this qualifies as a networking site. However, it has performed much better than existing sites in communicating with clients and vendors on a more frequent basis. We are exploring a second video and studying CREOpoint closely as we continue our business networking. We are unsure if these sites will help our business in 2009, but we are giving it our best shot.

Unified Communication Systems/ Mobile Phone Applications

UC systems from companies such as Microsoft, Avaya, and Cisco are being used more and more by larger companies throughout the world. Mobile phones now have computer capabilities, customer relationship management software, address books, calendars, and instant messaging. When you are out of the office, you can access your computer right from your phone. This directly increases efficiency and productivity. When you receive an e-mail or fax from a contact, their name, contact information, and prior conversations are immediately accessible. Quick information retrieval and speed of response will impress your clients and customers. Another UC function allows you to add specific notes about your contacts, and that can help to create a more personal connection and ultimately retain long-term clients. Faster than ever, you are building relationships and completing transactions. For a better understanding of what UC can do, visit www.microsoft.com and watch the short video.

Virtual Private Networks

Use of VPNs is increasing as people look for faster and more secure ways to work efficiently while out of the office. Simply put, a VPN is network technology that enables the owner to securely share information with other users by way of a private link accessed by an IP address via the Internet. This eliminates the need for a physical connection between two computers in order to communicate. A VPN has the ability to connect geographically-remote locations to share resources such as printers and servers stored on a company network.

We use our VPN to gain access to our e-mail exchange server and shared file server and to access our database to prepare client call lists while working outside the office. Many times it allows us to finish simple tasks from home in preparation for the next day. It is a great tool to have while I travel for business trips and to teach seminars.

In the event of severe weather, members of my group can remain in the comfort and safety of their homes while working as if they were in the office. This capability eliminates the stress of traveling in treacherous conditions and allows a clear mindset for productivity. Maybe your employee's car won't start. Maybe the employee is at home waiting for the plumber or contagious with the flu. With a VPN, they can log in from home and not lose an entire day's work.

> *To increase your market share you will need to be on the cutting edge of technology, constantly improving and tailoring each trend for your own specific use.*

A VPN also ensures that your data is always secure and you have the ability to create a back-up automatically from the main server in the office. Access can easily be granted and denied as employees join or leave your company.

Going Green

Looking at our social responsibilities, using technology allows us to "go green" much faster. Remote web conferencing from your computer using video and audio helps save gas, reduce wear and tear on your vehicle, and reduce hydrocarbon emissions, along with other economic benefits.

At the Bill Gladstone Group, we use our Web site (especially for mapping) and e-mails as often as possible to help people understand our listings before we physically visit the site. This saves driving time and travel costs. We obtain all the necessary information when our group initially tours the property, and we make it readily available on our Web site. A client has seen the digital pictures and plans before arriving for an on-site inspection and tour.

Technology can help you increase your ability to collect information, your efficiency and productivity, and your speed of response simply and cost effectively—unless you choose not to participate. And the consequence of not participating may be that you will not be in the game when the third quarter *Professional Report* comes out in 2010. The competition is savvy; commercial agents using this technology are out-pacing those who do not. Your clients, customers, and vendors will judge you on your technology platform, and you will either participate with your competitors or be defeated. To increase your market share you will need to be on the cutting edge of technology, constantly improving and tailoring each trend for your own specific use. This is how to differentiate yourself from your competition. You must focus on your business and surpass mediocrity. Take advantage of all that is available for your use. Use the skills and dollars needed to shorten the learning curve as much as possible. Develop an above-average presence. It will not be a mistake; it is your future.