

INCORPORATING TECHNOLOGY INTO CRE MARKETING PAYING DIVIDENDS FOR BROKERS

By Michael Hoban

There was a time, not so long ago, when commercial real estate marketing mostly consisted of a Yellow Pages listing, hanging 'For Sale/Lease' signs on buildings, and purchasing newspaper and trade journal ads. Prospective tenants would phone in for an appointment, meet with brokers, and tour the space. Building information was the sole province of the broker, and those closely guarded secrets were revealed to clients only during face-to-face meetings.

Then came the advent of the Internet and the introduction of online listing services such as CoStar and Loopnet, which allowed investors and businesses seeking space to glean the rudimentary details of a property, but not much else. In today's CRE marketplace, all of that has changed, as multiple marketing channels now provide not only highly detailed information about properties, but also enable brokerage firms and property owners to simultaneously promote their brand.

"Before, we spent all of our efforts trying to figure out how to drive people to our website, where they'd view the properties and hopefully pick up the phone," says Douglas Brockhouse, SIOR, principal with Bender Commercial Real Estate Services in Sioux Falls, S.D. "But now, virtually 70 percent of the selling is already done by the time they pick up the phone, because they've done their homework before they even call the broker."

Brockhouse and Bender, like many commercial brokerages and property owners, have recognized that in order to stay competitive in today's marketplace, there has to be a melding of old-school marketing techniques with emerging technologies – from social media and video to drones. The awareness came – not surprisingly – when the firm hired a pair of millennials, 27-year-old Bradyn Neises, a broker now with three years of CRE experience, and 23-year-old Mason VanEssen, the firm's new digital media coordinator. According to a 2014 report by the Brookings Institution, millennials are projected to make up 75 percent of the workforce by 2025, so reaching decision-makers in that demographic is requiring the CRE industry to explore new ways to deliver messaging.



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“These guys were constantly telling me that there were other mechanisms than the way I was doing things, and one day I just figured out that there’s 80 million millennials out there, and they’re making a lot more decisions than us old guys are right now,” says Brockhouse. So the firm ramped up its social media – Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter (for which Bender had 2,623 followers at press time) – posting market reports, property listings, and deal announcements to bolster its online presence. Bender also began using CRM software ClientLook, which enables brokers to share real-time updates on leasing and sales activity with property owners.



Neises also persuaded Brockhouse to hire a drone operator to shoot aerial footage of properties (as opposed to the more expensive fixed-wing aircraft), including a 100,000 square foot flex/office building that was for sale. Nieves used a free phone app (iMovie) to create a one-minute, high-quality video that combined the aerial footage with panoramic views of the warehouse and office space at the property, then pushed it out on social media outlets, generating a strong response. The firm recently applied the same strategy to a pair of lots by a nearby lake, and using a targeted Facebook ad, generated more than seven hundred viewings in just three days.

Brockhouse says that it is critically important to distribute information through a multitude of marketing channels, from old-school flyers to social media, “so that

whoever is tasked with looking for that property will be able to get the information they need.”

In 2017, AQUILA Commercial, an independent brokerage firm in Austin, Texas, was looking to differentiate itself in the marketplace. During a re-branding of the company, the question was asked, “Where else can we go to take (our firm) to the next level?” conveys Kristi Svec Simmons, SIOR, a principal with the firm. “And we decided that being the go-to entity for commercial real estate information is what we wanted to be.”

AQUILA began its re-branding with a highly interactive, state-of-the-art website, one that includes tools such as office space and rent calculators, checklists for prospective tenants and maps, as well as demographic information and market

reports for the metro Austin region. The website also features a *consistently* updated blog, white papers, and videos that feature brokers and principals discussing topics of interest to tenants and landlords – all of which are designed to draw traffic to the website and engage potential and existing clients.

The use of video was suggested by a consultant during the re-branding process, who stressed that the medium is the wave of the future. According to a recent report from inbound marketing gurus HubSpot, 54 percent of consumers want to see videos, compared to email newsletters (46 percent) or social image-based content (41 percent). The study also found that video content was the most memorable (43 percent) in comparison to text (18 percent) and images (36 percent). AQUILA hired a full-time videographer last year, and began producing high-quality videos designed to establish the firm as regional CRE thought leaders.

“It took us awhile to get everyone on board, but once people started seeing the quality of the videos, they came around,” says Simmons. It also became an easier sell when brokers began to see results. When one of the firm’s junior brokers recently posted a video to his LinkedIn

“IF YOU’RE NOT A TECH-ENABLED PRODUCT OR

SERVICE – NO MATTER WHAT INDUSTRY YOU’RE

IN – YOU’RE GOING TO GET LEFT BEHIND.”

page, he received over 2,500 views in three days, she reports. "Landlords do it all the time for their properties, so we thought, why can't we do it for our tenant rep clients, providing information that they are always asking about?" says Simmons. AQUILA now produces a couple of videos per week, generating hundreds of targeted views, and also translates some of the video content into blog posts for the demographic that prefers reading.

The videos, blogs and other content are then posted on corporate and individual Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook accounts, and are also distributed via a subscribed email blast. The marketing efforts are paying dividends. "We're getting more and more organic traffic to our website," says Simmons, whose marketing department conducts frequent audits of how the content is performing. "The consistency and quality of the content production is allowing us to get in front of people."

In addition to drones, video, and social media, there are also CRE marketing tools that, while not breaking new ground, are creating efficiencies and improving the quality of CRE marketing. SharpLaunch and Buildout are platforms that enable property owners and brokers to produce high-quality marketing materials for their properties. The former is geared primarily to property owners, but Buildout was designed specifically for brokers.

"It's not a revolution, it's more of an effective automation," says Vishu Ramanathan, CEO of Buildout, whose website tagline is simple and to the point: "Custom marketing materials. Streamlined listing process. Centralized property information." Ramanathan says his firm took a comprehensive look at all of the marketing work that was done for brokerages, and built a product that addresses the full spectrum of commercial real estate marketing for brokers. The software allows firms to quickly create and update professional marketing materials such as

flyers and brochures, using the firm's existing branding. The platform also allows users to automatically populate or update all documents with property information and graphics via one electronic form, and also creates individual web pages for each property listing.

Sim Doughtie, SIOR and president of King Industrial Realty/CORFAC International in Atlanta, says he was looking for a way to create more professional-looking marketing materials when he began using Buildout, "but the biggest thing is the time savings. Before, the turnaround with our graphic design company was 2-3 days. Now it's just a matter of hours."

King Industrial Realty is the largest industrial firm in Atlanta, averaging approximately 400-500 deals per year. The firm works in conjunction with Loopnet and the other listing services, but also tracks over 700 million square feet of properties in the region on its own database. "We have 25 brokers, and every 90 days we drive by every property and every space. We put all that information into our database and it populates automatically through Buildout. And changing out pictures and information is quite easy, which is important when we are selling multi-tract land listings where we are selling off a tract at a time," says Doughtie.

Chase Garbarino, who has founded a number of tech-focused startups and is currently CEO of HqO, a tenant engagement platform designed to help landlords optimize their property, cautioned those in the CRE industry who are reluctant to adopt technology.

"If you're not a tech-enabled product or service – no matter what industry you're in – you're going to get left behind," he asserts. "At first, (adoption of technology) will be an advantage in the marketplace, but at some point, as more and more brokers adopt, it will go from being an advantage to something that is the norm, and you'll be behind if you don't adopt." ▾

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