Upgrading
Your
Web Site

By Mark C. Irvin, CCIM, SIOR

Mark C. Irvin, CCIM, SIOR, Mark Irvin Commercial Real Estate Services, Tucson, Arizona, has been involved in commercial real estate his entire adult life. His family has developed more than $150 million in office properties throughout the United States. He has specialized exclusively in office and medical properties since 1983.

Web sites have the potential to bring great value to your business. However, taking an unplanned approach on how your Web site is constructed can be a great waste of time and money. If planned and marketed effectively, your Web site will serve as a central clearing point where clients can obtain information. It also presents a consistent message and theme to the general public.

If someone needs more information on your company, a specific broker within your company, general information on the status of the real estate market, detailed information on a specific property you have listed for sale or lease, services provided by your firm, testimonials from other clients, or links to other sites providing real estate information, would they easily find it on your Web site?

Most real estate firms have a Web site. Our firm launched our first site in 1995, about the time Web sites became available commercially. We have always believed that technology levels the playing field and allows small firms like ours to compete with anyone.

Just recently, we choose to conduct a complete overhaul of our Web site and the way it provides access to the public. We also modified it so that we could update it internally. With our previous site, we had to go to our Web site firm every time we wanted to post an announcement, a new listing, or an update.

By today's standards our initial site, although useful in its pioneering role, was a dinosaur. Modifications were costly and time-consuming. New listings took a week to 10 days to get updated whereas today, they are done in minutes.

With today's access to software, many firms feel they are capable of designing their own Web sites. Although we could have taken that route, we elected to hire a professional Web site design team to work with us. We wanted a company that would take the time to understand our firm and what we were trying to achieve. We did not want novices but rather a company with a proven track record of designing other professional Web sites, and we found that in Anchorwave Internet Solutions.

Ask yourself a question: If someone wanted information on your real estate market and they accessed your Web site, could they reasonably

find what they needed? Try it yourself. Now, go to two or three of your competitors' sites and do the same thing.

Then ask yourself another question: Does your Web site reflect what you want others to see? Just like your receptionist, your Web site is the first, and sometimes only, image people get of your firm. Does it project the image you desire?

A Web site that is working and designed well typically serves a business in three key areas. First and foremost, it generates additional business activity. Second, a Web site can act as a credibility indicator to potential or existing clients. A Web site that represents your business well and is professional will instill confidence in the minds of your clients and a sense of your stability as a firm. Third, Web sites can reduce operational costs and improve communication through automation.

Web Use as a Public Relations Vehicle Promoting Market Research

Taking advantage of our Web site, we posted our annual Tucson Office Market Overview (one of the most detailed such report in our market) on the site, where it can be accessed easily by the general public—including our competitors. Prior to placing the report on our Web site, we printed and mailed it. We found that the majority of recipients read it and then tossed it away. Considering the cost to produce and mail the four-color report to about 2,500 clients—about $4.00 a copy—this translated into a cost of $10,000 a year.

Now, we direct clients to our Web site by mailing a postcard and sending an e-mail to let them know that the report has been updated and is available. We also add a similar message to our e-mail signatures and our voice mail.

Because the report is not in an electronic format, it can be generated internally and converted to a PDF document in days rather than weeks, saving us considerable time and money. When we have late-breaking news on the office market or complete our mid-year update, we follow a similar practice.

. . . what message and first impression are you conveying to the public through your Web site?

Our office market report has gained prominence over the years and is the longest continuously published such report focusing exclusively on office properties in Tucson. Our clients have come to expect it each year. In addition, we find that banking executives and real estate appraisers often use it for their business decisions. Having our market data quoted in their reports is the best publicity and endorsement we can receive.

Spotlighting Staff, Providing a Resource

Staff

In addition to promoting our market report, we also wanted to showcase our brokerage staff. Web site users can now access our site and get a full résumé and photo of everyone on our office brokerage team. If that information changes, we can update the site ourselves rather than having to wait for a Web site design firm to do it for us.

Services

Our Web site clearly outlines the services the firm provides. Listing the services is not meant to remove the interaction between our brokerage staff and clients. It is really designed for new clients and potential customers who want to do their own research by surfing the Web before they pick up the telephone.

Our firm is a bit unique in that we do not issue press releases on recent sales and leases. We feel that our clients' business is their business, and it is not our place to toot our horn at their expense. Rather, we use our Web site to post testimonials and highlight our community activities, especially in the nonprofit arena. Again, our site provides both a consistent message and a central clearing point for information.

Add Resources to Site Design

Finally, think about designing a Web site that people will look at as a real estate resource regardless of whether they use your firm to market their properties. Consider creating a link section that allows users to go to other sites to research individual

properties. The best place to start is to look at the "bookmarks" that you use all the time. We created links that allow users to get aerial photographs and maps, review tax assessor property data, view zoning and flood plain maps, analyze traffic counts, and meet other similar real estate needs.

Links to city and county Web sites, along with the Chamber of Commerce, Better Business Bureau, and other related sites are also included. SIOR, CCIM, Loopnet, CoStar, and other well-known sites are linked as well. You need to make sure you regularly check the links you have established to ensure they are up-to-date. Being considered as a "resource" means keeping your links up-to-date. It only takes a few times for someone to move on and retain a poor impression of your Web site if the links are not current.

Moving into Automation

It's fairly common to expect that a Web site will help generate new business leads and be a professional presentation for potential clients, but an area that many businesses overlook is automation. Simply put, automation is making your Web site perform the routine tasks that are manually performed by you or your staff. The process might sound a bit scarier than it actually is.

Let's look at one of the best-known examples of a company that uses its Web site to automate its business process—Amazon.com. Amazon has eliminated the need for sales associates or even a brick-and-mortar storefront by using a Web site that automates everything from sales to order fulfillment. Jobs typically fulfilled by people have been replaced by technology. Admittedly, this is an extreme example, and it is not expected that a real estate-focused Web site will take the place of personal interaction between brokers and potential clients. It is also important to note that automation within your business does not need be complex, nor will it eliminate the need for your staff.

Choosing a Multiple Listing Service

Most homebuyers are familiar with the Multiple Listing Service and its applicability and importance to the residential real estate market. Although commercial brokers have no one service like this, there are a variety of tools and ideas available that can be integrated into your Web site to improve communication with your clients and free up your time to focus on other tasks.

The best-known commercial listing services are LoopNet and CoStar. These two industry giants have locked horns for dominance and each has its pros and cons. However, both are excellent options to consider when you decide how to expose your listings.

Prior to the redesign of our new Web site at www.MarkIrvin.com, our staff members spent much of their time on the phone with prospects, brokers, and clients, communicating the details of the listings in our portfolio. This was in addition to the time spent faxing and e-mailing brochures over and over again. Sound familiar? When we chose to redesign our Web site, we integrated our listings and marketing brochures that are posted on LoopNet directly into our Web site so that visitors could easily locate them, whether they were looking for properties for sale or for lease.

We were already using LoopNet to distribute information about properties we had listed, but we were still spending too much time trying to keep our listings up-to-date in all the channels on which we post information.

Now that the firm's new Web site displays our LoopNet listings, one update to LoopNet simultaneously updates our Web site and the CCIM Web site as well. This is a huge timesaver and is similar to synchronizing your handheld rather than trying to maintain two calendars. Now we rarely fax or e-mail information; we simply direct our clients and colleagues to our Web site.

When a client calls for information, we go to our Web site and pull up the latest information on our listings and on our company, including our office market report. It is not only a resource for our clients; it is a resource for our entire brokerage staff.

We feel that information that is not communicated effectively is wasted, worthless, or worse still, potentially harmful to your firm's image. Don't forget to ask yourself every time you open your Web site, what message and first impression are you conveying to the public through your Web site?

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