



TAKE IT TO THE NEXT LEVEL...AND BEYOND

MORE THAN A WEB SITE, AN INNOVATIVE BUSINESS SOLUTION

What exactly is the next level, how do we get there and what's beyond that? The next level can be different for each and every one of us, depending on where we are at currently, and there's always something beyond that. Within the real estate industry you'll find everything from the hometown company to the national franchises. What we cannot forget is that there are similar challenges both face in building their business. One of the biggest challenges a company faces is creating a Web site that is tailored specifically around the business and custom built to fit their needs as well as the needs of their clients. According to the 2005 National Association of Realtors® Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers, use of the Internet to search for a home has risen dramatically over time, increasing to 77 percent of buyers in 2005. This really puts the pressure on brokers and agents to differentiate themselves from the competition. Having just a "basic" Web site does not attract homebuyers the way it has in the past. Real estate professionals are realizing that there's a much greater need to have Web sites that are marketing driven, interactive and user-friendly. *RealtySuccess* magazine had the opportunity to talk with a hometown company and a national franchise to find out what they've done to reach the next level and beyond.

Hometown Charm

Aaron and Adrienne Thompson, owners of Excelsior Real Estate, located in the western suburbs of Minneapolis, Minn., have successfully taken on the challenge to become an independent, community-focused real estate company. Their desire was to differentiate themselves as the non-corporate "hometown company."

RealtySuccess: What challenges did you face in starting a real estate company without using a "big name" franchise?

Aaron Thompson: Starting a real estate company is a challenging endeavor under any circumstance. Doing so without relying on a "big name" franchise for brand recognition is an even more-strenuous objective to

tackle. We wanted to capture market share and generate name recognition - and doing so efficiently and effectively is the difference between the companies that succeed and those that fail to get off the starting block. We've successfully taken on the challenge to become an independent, community focused real estate company.

We also realize that marketing is paramount in all aspects of the real estate industry. We wanted to gain a significant advantage in the marketplace by combining new technologies with proven marketing methods. As everyone knows, the Internet has become an integral tool for showcasing listings, simplifying the home-search process for clients and generating new clients. However, there is a significant difference between having a static Web site and creating a professional, functional Internet-based tool for sales, marketing and communication.

RS: What steps did you take to make sure people saw your company as their "hometown" real estate company?

Adrienne Thompson: Our vision was to create a unique, teamwork-based environment

in order to provide highly personalized and professional real estate services. Our desire was to differentiate ourselves as the non-corporate "hometown company." Excelsior Real Estate's carefully selected team is made up of real estate experts who love to live, work and play in the lakes area. We strive to bring home buyers and sellers together who feel the same way.



www.thinkexcelsior.com

Aaron Thompson: Our investment in a professionally designed Web site has proven to be a crucial step in branding and selling our services. It has been the ideal platform to demonstrate our commitment to technology, leveraging our marketing expertise, meet and exceed the needs of our clients and reach new customers. There were a variety of Web design companies we considered and the one we chose met our criteria: a consultative approach, cutting-edge technology and the energy and team effort that they embodied, very much like that of our own.

RS: What features did you look for in a Web site, and how has the response been?

Aaron Thompson: A visual, welcoming Web site design is key to attracting Internet users to "dig deeper" into the Web site. By taking advantage of broker reciprocity from the local board of Realtors, we capture additional buyers by showcasing all listed homes within the area. The user-friendly format and innovative mapping features simplify the home-search process, and our "featured listings" include property disclosures, plat maps, and an extensive collection of photos, which have proven to be extremely appealing to our clients. Plus, by offering tools such as mortgage calculators, open house listings and community information, we have an easy, one-stop spot for home buyers to research prospective homes.

RS: What additional elements did you utilize your Web site for to achieve your desired market presence and increase your client base?

Adrienne Thompson: The first step was to create a browser-friendly Web design and take advantage of experts in search engine optimization so that our Web site quickly rose to the top of popular search engines. A Web site is only as effective as the number of people who can find it, use it and ultimately buy or sell their home. We're able to keep a close eye on Web traffic statistics, so we can measure the effectiveness of our advertising, by monitoring where visitors came from and how they found our site.

Our Web design company took our commitment to being the "hometown" real estate company seriously and decided to support the community by creating an in-depth, interactive community section to our Web site. By offering up-to-date information on area events, local school information, and the history of the area, we're creating awareness within a wider audience than just current home buyers and sellers.

The final piece was creating an online/offline branding package with professionally designed brochures, direct mail and print advertising that has helped drive traffic to our Web site from a wide variety of avenues. Our Web development company helped us create the branding package with customized online brochures, which have proven to be extremely appealing to our clients. By maintaining an experienced marketing team and in-house graphic designer, our brand is expertly managed and effectively grown. This unique approach also enables the sales team to dedicate more of their time to client needs.

Through solid systems that combine marketing, technology, creativity and teamwork, we've managed to successfully market and grow our independent real estate company, bring a personal touch to technology and small town flair to the real estate industry.

Corporate Power

Alan J. Smith, President of RE/MAX Professionals in Colorado, purchased RE/MAX Professionals in April 2006 along with two other Realtors. All three saw the potential to impress and improve the company and designing a new look for the company Web site was a high priority. Their challenge was to implement a Web site designed to attract and hold the customer's attention. Their other challenge was to develop a Web site that generated results. They interviewed various Web site designers across the country and after choosing one, they were excited to announce and unveil all its potential to the rest of their Realtors.

RealtySuccess: What was the response from Realtors at the unveiling of your new Web site?"

Alan J. Smith: The unveiling came at the company's first Sales Rally under the new ownership. The dynamic site was indeed impressive. This portion of the rally opened with the "old company Web site" and immediately progressed to the new site. Everyone was immediately impressed with the improvement. While many of the Realtors already had personal Web sites, all of our Realtors have listings on the company Web site and were excited about the new appearance. From the RE/MAX balloon floating across the header to the flowing banner with the featured listings the site instantly grabs your attention.

RS: What did you look for as being some of the most important features on your new site?"

AJS: Today, buyers and sellers are visiting the Internet for their initial trek into the real estate market, and RE/MAX Professionals realized the need to have a site that will capture and hold their attention. The design of the new site does just that. It is colorful, and extremely informative, allowing visitors to view all Multiple Listing properties, always returning them to the company site. As with most Web sites today, a virtual tour is just a click away, but research has shown buyers are often too impatient for the tour to load, therefore a show of up to 54 photos of a single listing is available with the point of your mouse.

One of the most attractive features with the photos is mouse-over technology. By rolling the mouse over the picture it automatically displays on the screen. It eliminates the time it would take to click and wait for a new screen to load.

RS: What has excited Realtors and clients the most about your new Web site?"

AJS: Realtors are excited about the various resources the site offers. A list of our preferred vendors gives visitors a chance to make contact and get estimates on needed repairs or services. Our sellers are delighted with the format in which their homes are

being presented. Our buyers are pleased at how user friendly the site is. Many of the resources are available without even signing up to access the information—making it one of the friendliest sites around. Potential recruits can even visit and take a brief online survey to see how they might fit into the field of real estate and into RE/MAX Professionals in particular.

RS: How important was it for you to improve your company Web site?"

AJS: Having a professional Web site is one of the most valuable marketing tools in real estate today. Being able to offer a site of this caliber to our Realtors and our customers has been a huge step toward improving the impression and profitability of our company. We have the most recognized logo in the world of real estate and now we feel we have a Web site that will enable us to market our real estate to its fullest advantage. We're not stopping here, either; we have partnered with a company who will strive to keep us up to date in technology and provide solutions for moving ahead in an ever-changing environment.

Conclusion

Whether you're the "hometown" company or the national franchise, there are solutions that can take you above and beyond. While there are many templates out there for real estate professionals to choose from, they lack the custom features that set your site apart from the rest. Excelsior Real Estate and RE/MAX Professionals decided their answer was a custom built, innovative Web site with real estate experience, a revolutionary real estate business system and wide-ranging Internet marketing tools. Using these examples, you can take your own business to the next level...and beyond.

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