

When you market your house online, make sure the images are picture perfect

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If you're selling a home, making a first impression on potential buyers happens way before they walkthrough the door.

More than 80 percent of homebuyers report using the Internet to look for a home, according to a survey by the National Association of Realtors. So photos posted on real estate Web sites are arguably one of the most important components to getting a home sold as quickly as possible, and for the highest price.

"I've got a buyer right now who spends two hours every evening looking at homes online," said Melody Prestifilippo, a Realtor with Keller Williams Realty's Ballantyne, N.C., office. "If it doesn't show the kitchen, he won't investigate further."

According to an article in RIS Media, a real estate trade publication, homes with 20 or more photos received almost 10 times the number of leads and more than 15 times the number of showings as homes with only one online photo.

And a researcher with real estate Web site Zillow.com found that over a seven-day period, listings with at least one photo were likely to be viewed 41percent more times than listings with no photos. Jim Schmid, a Concord, N.C.-based real estate photographer who handles photography for the Allen Tate Co., says having good photos of your home online will put you ahead of lots of homes on the Web, where dark, blurry and poorly composed shots are common.

"If a buyer is coming from out of town and they have two days to look at houses, which 10 do you think they're going to ask the agent to show them? The ones that look good," Schmid said. "People make the decision in one to two seconds about whether they're going to click on that house."

Realtors say they're well aware of the power of good-- and bad -- photography, and many are quickly trying to master the art of picture taking.

While Allen Tate offers free professional photo packages to clients selling homes for \$350,000 and up, Schmid has started giving photography workshops to Allen Tate Realtors who want to learn to take better shots themselves.

The first workshop was standing-room-only, Schmid said, with about 40 agents in attendance. Allen Tate Realtor Lyn Briggs says she makes every effort to have great photos before listing any home on the MLS. She has a certification in home staging, so she works with clients to get their homes decluttered and spruced up before snapping the photos.

"Getting good photos up there as soon as possible is important, but you don't want to haphazardly put them in there," she said. "In this market it has to be in the best condition it can be."

Briggs invested in a good camera, complete with a wide-angle lens and tripod. College photography courses taught her about framing photos, getting the best possible lighting and even tricks like photographing in mirrors to get angles that would ordinarily be impossible.

"We only photograph on a Carolina blue sky day," she said. "We don't put the house on the market until we can take the photos."

"Those first 30 days are so crucial," she said. Buyers "are always looking for the newest, latest and greatest."

LOOKING TO MAKE A STUNNING FIRST IMPRESSION?

Professional real estate photographer Jim Schmid and Allen Tate Realtor Lyn Briggs offer these tips:

Force the flash. The flash makes colors pop and fills in the shadows, making the room look brighter. For all interior shots, turn on all the lights, open the blinds and use a flash.

Make sure the sun is shining on the front of the house when you take the exterior shot. If you must take the photo and the sun isn't shining on the house, over-expose and/or force the flash. Try to over-expose the image with the exposure compensation button (normally a little button with a +/- on it, often used in conjunction with a dial or menu function). Turning the "+" should lighten the exposure, "-" should darken it.

If the house is on a hill, tilt your camera to shoot. The plane of the camera must be parallel to the house, or else the home will appear strangely shaped. Try stepping back, maybe even across the street, to shoot farther away. Or hold the camera as high over your head as you can to gain height, and click away until one is well framed.

Make sure a shadow falls on the lens to avoid lens glare and dreaded sun spots. Get some help and use an umbrella to block the sun if you need to.

If you don't have a tripod, hold your elbow in to your sides to straighten your camera out. It's one of the best ways to keep rooms from looking crooked in photos.

Use a wide-angle lens. It's your best bet for capturing as much as possible of each room.

Take exterior photos while the grass looks great and plants are in bloom. If you're even contemplating putting your home on the market this fall or winter, take a photo of it now. Avoid posting photos with seasonal decorations.

Showcase your home's best attributes. Most buyers will want to see the front exterior, kitchen, main living area or family room, and the master bedroom. But if you have a superb entryway or luxurious master bath, snap those, too.

Still not sure? Look into hiring a professional. Real estate photographers usually charge around \$100 to \$150 for about 20 photos, Schmid said. Don't expect them to bring fancy lights or stage your house, though. The typical session only lasts about 30 minutes.

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