GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

TO LOCAL, INTERNATIONAL & LIFESTYLE REAL ESTATE

CIPS

Certified International Property Specialist

> **ONLINE MARKETING**

GLOBAL CHALLENGE: BUILD THE BEST REAL ESTATE WEBSITE

When shopping for a new television, finding a new doctor, or even before trying a new restaurant, most of us turn to the Internet during the decision-making process. NAR research tells us home buyers and sellers are no different—ninety-two percent of home buyers use the Internet in their home search*.

Whether they reach your site from a listing you have on **realtor.com®**, use a search engine to find a real estate agent in their area, or receive your name as a referral from a friend— you can count on consumers coming to your website to collect as much information as possible before proceeding with a listing or purchase.

Your website is arguably the most important and powerful marketing tool at your disposal, but if you're not comfortable building and maintaining one, websites can be frustrating. For global agents, the challenge may feel even more daunting, and yet trying to reach potential clients in far-flung places makes a website even more essential. Your site can serve as a global ambassador, shortening distances and forging new relationships.

This issue of *Global Perspectives* is devoted to helping you tackle the challenge of building a high-performance website and stacking the deck in your favor. With just a little bit of marketing savvy and technical knowledge—including knowing how to hire skilled assistance—you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much you can accomplish. Look inside for a bevy of tips on ways to turn your website into a marketing tool with global business-building impact! 🌏

*2013 NAR Profile of Home Buyers & Sellers report

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WHO TO HIRE?

Great websites don't just "happen."
They can, however, be distilled into three major components: DESIGN, PROGRAMMING AND CONTENT.

The best sites are equally strong in all three areas, offering visitors a genuinely enjoyable experience—access to useful information in an attractive and user-friendly format.

How can you create a site that measures up to these standards? In most cases, you'll have to hire the right people.

Here are a number of questions to ask, when deciding.

1. Design

The first impression of your website—and by extension, the first impression of you as a real estate professional—is what visitors see on your home page. Designs that hide or bury essential information (like how to contact you) should be avoided.

Think about what your potential clients want to find on your site. Deliver what they're looking for in an easy-to-access, visually pleasing manner. Text links are a simple, effective way to provide easy access to additional "drill down" information. Your design should also provide an enjoyable experience across a variety of web browsers, as well as mobile platforms. Currently, responsive web design is the best option meaning your site will automatically sense and adjust to the platform being used to view it.

Visitors on smartphones, for example, will see a single column of the main text and primary navigation options. (Instead of a microscopic version of the entire page.) With responsive design visitors don't have to scroll left and right, or zoom in to read pages, regardless of what device or browser they're using.

In general, the far left and right (or top and bottom) buttons are the ones most often used by visitors. If you want to highlight your international services, make this the first navigation button. Use the far right (or bottom) button for your Contact page, which should include a contact form, additional methods to reach you, your physical location and other essential information.

▶▶ QUESTIONS FOR DESIGNERS

Will you be creating an original design or modifying a template? Both approaches are valid, as long as you don't wind up with a "cookie-cutter" site that lacks originality.

How much will I need to budget for photography? Numerous sites like istockphotography.com, shutterstock.com and thinkstock.com make quality stock photography easy to obtain and relatively affordable. Prices range from under $10 to $50 or more, depending on quality and file size. (Fortunately, less expensive, low-resolution images are better for websites.) It may be more cost-effective to buy a monthly subscription package instead of individual photos.

Have you designed other real estate websites? An experienced designer who hasn't worked on real estate sites may still be a good choice as long as you're comfortable with their overall approach and they understand how to integrate content like featured listings or property search tools.

2. Programming

The "backend" of your site—the actual programming code—needs to be as clean and as effective as what visitors see. Clean code will make your site render better in a variety of browsers, including mobile versions. It also makes it more accessible to people with disabilities and safer—you never want any malicious code hidden in a template or plug-in.

Google's own engineer, Matt Cutts urges good coding habits for other reasons as well:

- It makes your site easier to maintain
- It makes upgrades easier
- Handing off your website to new staff is easier

If you are building your site with an eye on the future (and you should!) you need to start with clean code—and discuss several other important topics.

▶▶ QUESTIONS FOR PROGRAMMERS

How will you ensure clean code, and when might you think it's better to use invalid code? Clean code is preferable, but there are also legitimate reasons for bending the rules. Make sure your programmer can explain their reasoning.

Will my site include a content management system (CMS)? Which one do you recommend? A CMS makes it easy for you (or an assistant) to update your site

(changing featured listings, for example). While a custom-designed CMS is expensive, this feature is already built into platforms like Wordpress, an extremely popular and user- friendly option. Drupal and Joomla are two other strong contenders. Ask your programmer to give you a behind-the-scenes tour and explain their recommendations. People tend to prefer whichever CMS they know best; that's okay, as long as you agree with their recommendations.

Are you already familiar with property databases and how to integrate and display listings? In the U.S., most Multiple Listing Services offer Internet Database Exchange (IDX) feeds to accomplish this.

Will your programming support responsive design? As mentioned earlier, responsive design means your site will render properly on a wide variety of browsers and that mobile visitors will automatically view a modified easy-to-use version.

3. Content

The most important element of a high performing, customer-attracting website is excellent content. Focusing on content will also improve your rankings on search engines, bringing in even more visitors— and more business!

Start by thinking about the information your clients most want and the questions they tend to ask. If you provide easy-to-follow information that answers their questions, then other considerations—like keywords for search engines—will also fall into place. Your use of search-oriented keywords will be the natural result of discussing the material potential clients desire.

Visitors to your site should also have an opportunity to learn about your personality and your dedication to solving their

problems. If they feel they already "know" you, they're much more likely to pursue a business relationship with you.

For global agents, translations are another important consideration. Machine translation tools can easily convert your content into other languages, or let visitors select which language they prefer. If you go this route, be sure to check your content in other languages (or hire someone to do this) and make any necessary adjustments.

It should go without saying that "canned" content (pre-written content sold to multiple real estate agents) will not convey your unique personality or the specialized services you provide. But did you know that canned content also negatively impacts your search engine rankings? Google boosts sites with original content.

When it comes to content, don't skimp. Write your own or hire a professional to help.

▶▶ QUESTIONS FOR CONTENT DEVELOPERS

Do you have knowledge and experience writing about real estate topics? Are you also familiar with considerations for cross-border transactions?

Can you point me to examples of work you've done that will give me a better sense of how you'll approach developing content for my site?

How will you ensure my "voice" comes through in your writing, so my site makes a strong personal connection with visitors?

Will you be delivering original content that becomes my intellectual property?

How will we work together? What material will you need from me?

What other questions have you found important to ask, especially when developing websites for global visitors? Continue the conversation on the private CIPS Facebook page, Official Group: NAR CIPS Designees.

Note: To read more about website considerations for global agents, refer to the December 2012 issue of *Global Perspectives*.

ANATOMY OF A GLOBAL REAL ESTATE WEBSITE

Logo - Place it in the upper-left corner of every page and make it "clickable" to return to the home page.

Navigation - Your primary navigation links should define the focus of your site and help people find what's most important to them. Avoid drop-down menus (which are difficult for mobile visitors to navigate). Ask your programmer to add metatags for all site navigation. Use clickable "breadcrumbs" (e.g., Home > Communities > Smithfield) as another helpful navigation tool.

Graphics - Use relevant and visually pleasing imagery. Video is a good option, but let visitors decide if they want to view it (no auto-play upon landing on your site). All graphics should have alt-tags and give visitors a good idea of what you do before reading your text. Be sure you have the legal right to use all images appearing on your site.

Text - Keep a good balance between too few and too many words (with an eye toward search engine optimization). Use conversational language and don't be afraid to use (but don't overuse) your focused keywords. Keep your text (and the design as a whole) constrained to avoid long scrolling. Incorporate occasional text links directed to other sections of your site.

Translation - This feature sends a strong signal that you're interested in serving global clients.

Social Connections - Include social media buttons and encourage interaction.

Property Search - Place this on the upper half of the page, where visitors can find it without scrolling.

Call to Action - Encourage visitors to contact you and make it easy to do so.

Blog - Boost your performance in search engines by regularly adding new, keyword-rich content.

Walker Shore

Global Buyers | Listings

Greetings, and welcom
like a vacation! I've liv
others find a home in
North Shore or Tangle
each community.

I also have special trai
Brazil, Argentina and
to purchase or rent a h
specialized services.

Please tell me more ab
your call or email! (808

Warmly,
Barbara Walker

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Testimonials - Build your credibility by using the words of satisfied customers (get their permission, in writing, and identify them by full name and location, if possible). You can even use video for this, if your clients are willing.

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$ No min   to $ No max   All Beds ⬍   All Baths ⬍

ne to Richland's coastal community, where every day feels
ed in RIchland for over twenty years and love helping
the area. Whether you prefer the Harbor District,
wood Cove, I can share valuable real estate insights about

ning and experience helping buyers from Mexico,
other Central and South American countries who want
home in the Richland area. Learn more about these

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3-515-5511 or bwalker@wsrealty.com)

What clients say:

"Barbara is great! She patiently took time to thoroughly understand our
unique needs and helped us make much smarter decisions."

Tom and Judy Price
Homeowners in Richland's Harbor District

"We're from Canada originally, and buyig a home in a new, unfamiliar area is
always challenging. But Barbara made the process flow smoothly. Her local
knowledge and real estate savvy are top notch."

Marco and Estelle Descants
North Shore, Richland homeowners

Read more client testimonials.

555 Harbor Street, Richland, XX 51515   Global Buyers | Listings | Communities | Blog | About | **Contact:** email or call 808.515.5511   f 🐦 in g+

Footer - Use a basic navigation line at the bottom of each page, reflecting what is at the top of the
page and making it easy for visitors to dig deeper into your site without scrolling back to the top.
Also include a site map, copyright, terms of use, contact information, physical location (for search
engines) and perhaps another set of smaller social media icons. Keep the footer tidy and useful.

🌐

Getting Found:
"Search" Considerations

A key component of any website's design—and especially a site that aims to attract real estate clients from across the globe—is its ranking in search engines. What are the most essential things to know to help international clients find you?

Search engine optimization (SEO) naturally boosts your marketing results by pairing great content with good coding practices (e.g., using alt-tags on all images, title tags on headers and meta-tags on internal and external links). It includes a well-designed site with smoothly functioning programming on the backend, appropriate use of keywords, internal and external links, and seamless incorporation of social media links.

Search engine marketing (SEM) is sometimes used interchangeably with SEO, but is more focused on purchasing a place in the search engines through pay-per-click (PPC) ads (including Google Adwords), purchased index and directory inclusions, and web backlinks. SEM may be a great way to give a new site a temporary boost while SEO takes effect, but it's an expensive way to maintain a site that can't stand on its own merits (through excellent content, beautiful

design, social media integration and clean programming).

Many people and organizations call themselves SEO/SEM experts, but finding the best providers means understanding the basics and asking the right questions. Unfortunately, some Internet marketing firms employ techniques that can cause more harm than good.

THREE WARNING SIGNS

1

A firm promises "page one"
Most excellent website teams can get you into the top three pages, and the best ones have a good ratio of clients who are on page one for their preferred search terms. But be cautious about anyone who promises a page one placement. You do not want your website jumping to page one, only to be banned from Google for unscrupulous tactics. Be sure your provider knows their Internet marketing ropes and subscribes to legal "white hat" methods.

2

You're told not to worry about it
If an Internet marketing firm says they can help you, ask HOW, exactly. If they aren't willing to educate you on their basic approaches, or they tell you some version of "don't worry about it," be worried. If they say it's too complex to understand, assume their methods are suspect. Any good Internet marketing professional will be willing to educate you—their client—on what they do and why. The best ones will teach you enough that you can continue adding content that helps your website become an SEO powerhouse!

3

Reluctance to offer references
You should not only ask for references, you should talk to a company's current and past clients. If their work includes complete website development (not exclusively online promotion) visit the sites they've designed. If they look too much alike, if their content looks similar, if their clients don't want to (or can't) discuss what the marketing firm did for them—find another provider.

A good marketing professional WANTS you to worry about your website ranking. They want to help you do things that will improve your reach and will warn you of approaches that will hurt your results.

An excellent online marketing professional is your business-building partner who takes as much pride in your success as their own. Part marketing guru and part cheerleader, they help you move your website from barely there to marketing machine! 🌍

Asking "How much should my website cost?" is like asking, "How much will a new house cost?" It depends on the size, features and workmanship. Good websites are not cheap, but they're one of the best investments you can make in your business.

When budgeting for your new or re-vamped website, carefully consider how much business you want to attract and how important a website is for your services. In global real estate, where awareness and trust must be cultivated from long distances—and transaction opportunities can be significant—it's not very difficult to justify the expense of a good website.

Website
Pricing & Providers

Beware of Low-Ball Pricing

If someone offers to build your website for a few hundred dollars, find out why they are so cheap. They may be:

- Using free templates and canned content.

- New to the business and inexperienced (or less knowledgeable than you need them to be).

- Of the opinion that design is the only important part of a website and ignore other key aspects like programming, content and marketing requirements.

- Selling a hosting service and calling it a website. (It's become pretty common for hosting providers to offer free basic sites with their hosting services, but this is not a commercial-grade site and you may lose your domain name, website and content if you decide to change hosts.)

- The build-it-and-leave-it type, which means you'll have a static site and no way to make regular updates and upgrades as time goes on (and no one to ask when you have questions).

Pricing: The Facts

You should expect to pay between $100 and $200 an hour for design, programming, content and marketing services of the caliber needed for an excellent website. Few individuals have all these specialized skills; individual providers typically subcontract to other specialists to fill any areas they lack. Website firms usually have one or more specialists on staff in each of these areas with backup contractors to handle work during busy times.

It's worth the extra time and money to get professionals who understand how to work on a team, with the ultimate goal of building a site that delivers top-notch performance in the search engines, in user satisfaction and in sales conversions. If someone offers you a $500 website, you can assume they can't cover all these bases.

Finding Providers

Since agents' needs and preferences differ—and there's even more variety among web developers, including where and how they work—it's difficult to suggest a "best way" to find trusted providers. Try identifying good examples among other agents' sites and asking who they used. You can also join a group like Tech Support Group for Real Estate Agents on Facebook, where you can read about other agents' experiences and request recommendations.

Other Considerations

When building your site, make sure YOU stay in control of your domain name and website; check the administrative, technical and billing contacts to be sure your name appears there.

Select a host with great customer service (phone and email support), a daily full-system backup, built-in redundancies and 99 percent or better uptime. Enlist a website monitoring service such as SiteUptime.com or Site24x7.com, to make sure your site stays up and working for you. For just a few dollars a month, you can get notifications should your site ever experience "down" time due to a server issue.

Also recognize that your website is a living document. It will need updates, regular security upgrades and occasional changes. Unless you're planning to do this yourself, find a firm or individual who offers a service contract (annual, monthly or on an as-needed basis). A great website won't help you reach global clients if it lies stagnant and drops from Googles's top pages. Give your site regular attention and it will continue bringing you business.

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