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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

to local, international & lifestyle real estate

▶ BLOGGING AND SOCIAL NETWORKING

A Global Agent's Guide to Online Marketing

Marketing is an essential component of every global agent's success. But technology has changed—and continues to change—virtually every aspect of how marketing is done in the real estate industry, upending traditional techniques and forcing agents to learn the new rules of the game. And the pace of change keeps accelerating. Like it or not, the last website you built may now be woefully inadequate in the eyes of clients and search engines alike.

But if online marketing presents challenges, it also offers opportunities. Once you understand what is required to successfully capture the attention of search engines and online visitors, you can effectively "own" whatever market niche you set your sights upon. And it doesn't require a large budget or any paid advertising.

What is required is a website that is optimally designed for global traffic (discussed in the last issue of *Global Perspectives*), coupled with a steady stream of original content and online networking—the topics addressed on the following pages.

Inside, you'll find much more than online marketing theories and basic advice. Rather, you'll gain detailed, practical tips on developing and promoting your content, specifically appropriate for global agents. If you still have questions about blogging, social networking, or related topics please send them to cips@realtors.org so we can consider them for future issues of *Global Perspectives*. **GP**

BLOGGING RULES

How to Make Words + Pictures = Top-ranking Results

Years ago, the most important thing a real estate website could offer was property listings. Now, there are huge, well-funded sites that offer listings to anyone with access to the Internet. Competing with that information is not feasible for an individual agent. Fortunately, you don't need to.

The Importance of Regular Blogging

Blogging has become the best possible way to leverage your online presence and gain traction with Internet searches performed by your potential clients. Writing quality blog posts will not only appeal to the clients you want to reach, it is also the best way to court the search engines. Search is an agent's best friend, especially if you're trying to attract business across the globe.

Not convinced? Consider a 2009 study by HubSpot, which found that (primarily small and medium-sized) businesses with a blog on their website had far better marketing results, including 55 percent more visitors and 97 percent more inbound links. Since then, Google has implemented additional changes to their search algorithms that further benefit anyone using a blog to build their online presence.

Learning how to capture more traffic via blogging is simple. You need to do three things: 1) schedule regular blogging activities, 2) create content that will drive traffic to your blog, and 3) boost the SEO attractiveness of your posts. Read on to learn how to be effective in each of these activities.

Scheduling

First, determine what your blogging schedule will be and put it on your calendar. Whether it's daily, a couple times a week, or weekly—once you make the decision, don't deviate. What's the best blogging schedule? The best schedule is the one you can keep.

If you want guidelines, consider these: You should post something on your blog no less than once a week. Twice a week is optimal because it gives you the best SEO results for the least effort. Blogging more often is wonderful, if you are able. To stay on track, set aside time each week for blogging duties. You will also need to schedule time for social networking to help promote your blog, so don't overextend yourself.



Free Planning Resource

HubSpot offers a free blog editorial calendar template (Excel file) you can use to collect and organize blog topics, authors and track your use of keywords and call-to-action messages. To download a copy, go to bit.ly/ZgjVaB.

Most blogging software allows you to blog “in advance” and schedule your posts to go live even if you are out of town at a conference or on vacation for a week. Get to know this feature of your blog’s content management system (CMS) and use it to stay on schedule even when you are out of the office.

If you are using WordPress, as recommended in the last issue of *Global Perspectives*, the ability to publish on any date and time in the past or in the future is built into each blog post and can be determined when you write the post, or changed at a later date.

Encourage Loyalty

Once people start reading your blog, they will expect you to continue updating items based on the schedule they see on your site. If return visitors don’t find new posts when expected, they’ll leave disappointed.

Someone exploring global real estate issues will begin conducting their online research months before they make a purchase or put a property up for sale. Gaining their trust before they’ve even met you is essential for ensuring you are their “go to” person. Website visitors are fickle. You must consistently prove yourself for them to become loyal.

In the online world, trust and loyalty is shaped through information. Specifically, you must give your visitors:

- the information they want
- in an easy-to-digest format
- when they need it

In this way you’ll gain their trust and ensure they will return and recommend you to others.

Building Momentum

Every time a search engine visits your blog, it looks for new content. When new content is found, it is indexed. The more pages and information your blog offers, the more authority your blog will be given by search engines. More authority means your site’s ranking will be higher in a search engine’s results. Higher rankings = more visits by potential clients.

Scheduling time to blog is time spent marketing your services. Marketing is essential to your success. There should be no reason to miss your scheduled postings once you understand how important regularity really is. It can be accomplished with just a little planning.

Content Considerations

If you find yourself sitting in front of your computer at your designated blogging time—drawing a blank—you aren’t alone. Many would-be bloggers quit at this point, or once the first couple of posts are published, because a suitable topic seems too elusive.

Determining topics doesn’t have to be a battle. If you don’t know where to begin, make a list of the questions most often asked by your target clients. Add to that list whenever you think of a new question, or one of your clients or potential clients asks a new question.

How To Write Your Posts

On your scheduled blogging days, create posts that answer each one of the questions you have been jotting down, from the general to the specific. Don’t try to answer all of them in a single post. Rather, you should answer just one question per post—or a list of three, for example, if the questions are directly related. It is better to be more thorough and answer one question well, rather than be general and cover several in one swoop. After all, you will want those other questions for the posts that will follow.

If, for example, you are specializing in Jamaican property, you should craft posts to attract people seeking the type of property you handle. When someone searches for “retirement property in Jamaica,” wouldn’t you want to capture their attention?

If you have a beautifully crafted, informative post titled “How to select retirement property in Jamaica” (with useful information on how to do just that) your blog will likely appear near the top of their search results. Any potential client who reads this top-ranking blog post will know you are well-versed in how to succeed in this undertaking and will likely contact you.



Three Ways to Encourage Inquiries

- 1** Add a call-to-action at the end of some (but not all) of your posts relating to the topic. A final sentence such as, “Contact me to learn more about retiring in Jamaica” will work wonders!
- 2** Make sure your contact information is visible on every page of your site, including your blog posts.
- 3** Embed your email address and your phone number in the body of your posts for quick use by mobile and desktop users alike.

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BLOGGING RULES

How to Make Words + Pictures = Top-ranking Results

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Creating a blog that appeals to your desired clientele is simply a matter of thinking like they do, answering the questions they have, and offering your services to make their lives (and their property-buying experience) easier.

Driving Traffic With Content

You won't appear among the first ten results on Google or other search engines right away, but with a little time and diligence it will happen. It will happen faster and you'll maintain staying power if you add more posts on similar topics.

To boost your rankings and get more traction with your blog, write about companion topics such as:

- Financial reasons to retire in Jamaica
- Features on the local color of Jamaica
- Places "not to miss" when visiting Jamaica
- Jamaica's three best beaches
- The advantages of using a CIPS to find retirement spots in Jamaica
- 10 things you need to know before retiring in Jamaica
- Five great beach property photos from Jamaica
- An interview with someone who retired in Jamaica

Using these examples and continuing to add similar posts over time will improve your rankings and make your blog a goldmine of information for the very client you want to attract. You, of course, will have established yourself as the expert. Score!

Adding Images

An interesting, relevant image is an essential part of your blog post. It's not merely aesthetic; it's crucial for boosting your readership and your SEO. People are much more likely to read a blog illustrated with a nice image. Make sure you:

- Select an image that is a logical fit with your topic
- Make appropriate adjustments to the size of your image (see the next section for more details)
- Use only royalty-free images, or images that belong to you
- Add alt tags—text that describes images if the visitor's browser doesn't display them—to each and every image (read on to learn how and why)

The image should reflect the topic of the post and help tempt visitors to read more. Never use the same image to illustrate multiple posts, unless you are presenting a series of articles and are using the image to "brand" the posts as part of that series.

A Matter of Size

Tiny images don't provide the visual leverage you want. A larger, beautiful image will be more compelling. You should also ensure that the size of the image file is optimized for the dimensions of your blog posts. If the original image is 1300 pixels

8 Blog Image Resources



To search for free images, visit these sites:

- Google Advanced Image Search (google.com/advanced_image_search)
- Flickr's Creative Commons Images (flickr.com/creativecommons)
- MorgueFile (morguefile.com)
- WikiMedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org)
- OpenPhoto (openphoto.net)
- FreeDigitalPhotos (freedigitalphotos.net)
- Stock.Xchng (sxc.hu)

If you're using WordPress, you may prefer to install Photo Dropper (wordpress.org/extend/plugins/photo-dropper) or other similar plugins and search for images within your blogging software. Photo Dropper is particularly helpful because it automatically downloads photos to your server and inserts a link for the photo credit (and a link back to the Photo Dropper site).

wide, but your blog column is only 600 pixels wide, you should scale down the image. A too-large file size can throw off the rest of the layout, is slower to load, and will be less desirable in the eyes of your visitors and the search engines.

If you don't have an image manipulation program installed on your computer, you may want to consider using an online tool. Options include:

- imageoptimizer.net
- picresize.com
- shrinkpictures.com
- resizemyimage.com
- and many more, easily found with a simple Google search!

Observe the Fine Print

If you don't take your own photos, be sure the ones you select are legal to use. You can't merely go to Google Images and pick what you want. Using unauthorized images can result in a major legal quagmire. Even if you aren't caught, it's a bad business practice that could jeopardize your credibility with clients.

Make sure the image you select will be used according to the terms. For instance, some image sources are free to use in any way, private or commercial, while others are for personal use only. Some allow alterations, overlays and manipulation;

some do not. Some are free to use as long as you include a link to the owner. Check the fine print.

Tagging Your Images

Alternative tags, or simply alt tags, are keywords added to the programming code of a website that are visible when an image or object doesn't load properly. They also help make your site more accessible when non-visual browsers are used because alt tags act as a substitute for images, describing visual objects with text. You can also see alt tags when you "hover" your mouse over an image.

Alt tags play an important role in optimizing your blog for search engines, so you should never add a photo to your blog that does not include an alt tag. Most blogging software has a built-in alt tag option when you upload photos, but you can change this default to suit your preferences.

Select an alt tag that is concise, but describes the image in a way that will help boost your SEO. For instance, if you are specializing in investment condos for Texas A&M parents seeking living quarters for their son or daughter from outside the U.S., use a photo of an available condo to illustrate a blog entitled, "Condos Expand Options for Texas A&M Students and Parents."

Then, give that photo an alt tag such as "Investment Condo for Texas A&M Parents" rather than, "Condo" or "Buy a Condo Today!" (*Warning: Do not attempt to trick the search engines by loading up your alt tags with excessive keywords. Doing so may result in your site being completely banned from Google and other search engines.*)

Putting it All Together

Admittedly, there are a number of important details to cover to make the most of your blogging efforts. But once learned and practiced, they become second nature, like any other system you develop to run your business.

Content creation will become second nature too, as you become increasingly adept at spotting ideas for blog posts. Creating a blog that appeals to your desired clientele is simply a matter of thinking like they do, answering the questions they have, and offering your services to make their lives (and their property-buying experience) easier. **GP**

ONE STEP FURTHER: Use Social Networking to Expand Your Global Connections

Once your website content and design are working for you, it's time to spread the word about what you do for global real estate clients. Social networking will help give you more "face time" with potential clients, referral resources, and peers.

Social networking goes beyond using Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Pinterest and similar sites. Sure it's important to create a profile and/or business page on each of these sites, if you haven't already. But you need to do more than create them. You also need to work the social networking scene.



Here's how:

- Post to your social networking sites when you add a blog post alerting your followers, peers and friends, and including a short link to the post.
- Schedule a time to update your profiles on these networks aside from just blog alerts.
- Be friendly: social networking is a great way for people to get to know you.
- Encourage interaction by asking questions.
- Comment on other people's profiles by responding to their posts, answering their questions or simply liking their content.
- Ensure there are quick links for all the main social networks on your blog so others can easily share your individual posts.
- Encourage people to follow you by posting links to your social profiles on your website.

If you are a social networking "late bloomer" you can get a handle on the basics by checking out Mashable's guides. In addition to introductions to Facebook and Twitter at mashable.com/guidebook, they also offer a lengthy "beginner's guide" to LinkedIn and Pinterest at mashable.com/2012/05/23/linkedin-beginners/ and mashable.com/2011/12/26/pinterest-beginners-guide/. For tips specifically intended for real estate agents, consult NAR's Social Media for REALTORS® guide at tinyurl.com/crmqp7c.

Social networking can expand the reach of your blog and entice visitors to check out your site. It will also offer you great, high-quality incoming links if you handle things properly. Besides helping more people find their way to your site, those inbound links will benefit your efforts to gain traction with search engines.

Beware the Social Networking Pitfalls

It's easy to let your professional guard down due to the relaxed style of many social networking interactions. Be friendly, be helpful and always remain professional.

It's also easy to fall into the trap of too much social networking. Don't let this one aspect of your business and marketing plan monopolize your life. Instead, schedule specific times once or twice a week to check the sites you have opted to join and participate in conversations.

Regular, limited participation is preferable to constant participation for the health of your business and the sanity of your personal life. Remember: All things in moderation. That goes double for run-away social networking.

Beyond The Basics: Forums

When you are ready to jump beyond basic social networking, forums offer a great way to connect with people involved in your niche, potentially offering opportunities to speak directly to your ideal clients.

For example, you can find relocation forums and answer questions about relocating to the U.S. or living overseas. Look for expat sites by Googling "USA expat forums." Or, if you specialize in selling Florida property to foreign investors, consider looking for topics on Florida real estate on forum sites such as:

propertycommunity.com

propertyshowrooms.com/forum

expatforum.com

Once you've identified forums related to your particular area of expertise, your next steps are to:

- Create a profile (don't be overly promotional, but do list your CIPS credentials and spell out what that means using terms like "international real estate agent" and "global relocation agent"). Also be sure to include your website address in your profile.

- Search for real estate-related questions and answer them.
- Schedule a regular time once a week to go into the forums and find a topic where you can utilize and showcase your expertise.
- Stick with the top-ranked forum sites. (The quality of your incoming links and the number of views you get will be greater on the more popular sites.)

Advanced Networking and Linking Opportunities

If you already have the basics of social networking under your belt and are active in a few choice forums, you can reach even further to promote your site and your services:

- Consider writing guest posts for travel and retirement sites (or comment on real estate topics you may find there).
- Write articles for (or comment on stories relevant to your niche on) industry sites like ActiveRain.com, Inman.com, and Realtor.com.
- Join the CIPS Facebook page and participate in the conversations there (facebook.com/pages/Certified-International-Property-Specialist-CIPS-Network/55297212877).
- Follow Twitter feeds of complimentary services and interact with them. (For example, a search for "expatriates" on Twitter turned up a gentleman who specializes in U.S. income tax help for expatriots.)
- Consider making contact with local immigration attorneys, chambers of commerce, economic development boards and local international groups online and in person.

Social networking and other forms of online participation give every global agent an opportunity to expand their website's reach and connect with clients across the planet. The world has no boundaries on the Internet. Once you learn the best ways to leverage your website and social networking to their full potential, even greater success as a global agent can be yours for the taking. **GP**



CIPS Directory Listings: Are You Missing Out?

A quick glance at the CIPS directory proves that many designees have not completed their profile. Yet this could be one of first places people look to find agents with global real estate expertise. To take full advantage of your profile:

Add a photo. When you are dealing with people you won't meet face-to-face for a long time, if ever, building trust means giving them as much information about you as possible, including a personal photo.

Define your niche. In your bio, tell people what type of real estate you handle and what you can do for them. Don't waste this precious space recounting designations and acronyms that are already listed separately under the Specialties & Designations tab.

Simplify communications. Tell them what languages you speak or if you have translators available. In addition to providing phone and fax details, tell them if you are willing to Skype or Google Talk to discuss their needs. Also offer video conferencing options.

Include a link to your site. Not only will this help people learn even more about you, but it provides an invaluable incoming link from a well-ranked site—essential for improving your results with search engines.



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