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Reprints

Issue/Article
Orders

Current
Advertisers

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Nov.Dec.03

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Online Tools Help Brokers Effectively Manage Time and Communications

by Jim Young

Brokers constantly are on the go — visiting sites, researching properties, preparing documents, and meeting with clients. To successfully accomplish all of these tasks, communication and time management skills are essential. Yet sometimes even seasoned real estate pros struggle to balance their busy schedules. Today's technological tools can help both novice and veteran brokers more effectively manage their time. In particular, virtual meetings and instant messaging are two technologies that slowly are gaining ground in the commercial real estate industry. Brokers who don't integrate these tools into their business procedures to maximize their time minimize their communications capabilities and potentially could lose both business and profits.

Meetings That Span the World

Although virtual communications tools have existed for more than five years, the mainstream business world only recently started taking full advantage of them. There has been a substantial increase in users during the past year alone.

Today's online meeting products have improved functionality and reliability. Many now include easy document manipulation, the ability to switch control among multiple users, highlight tools for illustrating important points, editing and viewing permissions, and the ability to handle memory-intensive programs. The technology and computers also are superior to previous incarnations: Users no longer have to restart or reboot their systems because the program freezes or crashes, losing valuable information. In addition, today's programs are so easy to operate that in some cases users simply open the program and type in an Internet service provider's address to create an online, real-time meeting.

Online meeting products also offer live video conferencing capabilities. Although this technology has been enhanced greatly in the past few years, it is not as widely adopted in the business world as in the consumer world. Many brokers remain unaware of these programs' advantages or are apprehensive of the possible security implications when using online programs. Currently, families and consumers use video tools more frequently than business executives, but this is likely to shift as companies increase their technological capabilities.

Multiple vendors provide online communications services. For example, WebEx Communications (www.webex.com) uses proprietary MediaTone technology to power online meetings that can include real-time presentation delivery, application sharing, and document editing. Users can employ video, audio, and language translation to enhance conferences and can record meetings for future use.

With Microsoft NetMeeting (www.microsoft.com/windows/netmeeting), commercial real estate professionals can send text messages, transfer files, exchange and edit graphics, and share programs during real-time video and audio conferences. The service uses data encryption, user authentication, and password protection to secure information transferred during meetings.

Genesys Conferencing (www.genesys.com) offers three levels of online services. Its Meeting Center integrates Web, audio, and video conferencing for small meetings; moderators of large, global meetings can use its Video Services option. Event Services allows remote users to participate in company conferences, seminars, and other large-scale affairs.

Most online conferencing providers charge for their services, typically a flat subscription rate or a per-usage fee, depending on the user's requirements. Visit www.conferzone.com/vendor/collabconf.html for a list of more online meeting vendors.

Quick Messages Get Quick Answers

Instant messaging — using Internet-based software products to send quick messages to a recipient's desktop, cell phone, or personal digital assistant, with their permission — is changing the business world. Sales teams in different cities and brokers around the world now are able to query colleagues anywhere and get an instant response without picking up the phone or logging into e-mail.

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For example, a salesperson in California is on the phone with a client who asks an important question that needs an immediate response. The person with the answer is more than 100 miles away and unavailable by phone. In just seconds the salesperson sends an instant message and receives an answer. For property owners and managers, these kinds of tools allow for quick communication between building employees and company headquarters. Likewise, brokers showing their clients prospective space can negotiate with sellers or landlords in real time via their PDAs.

Instant messaging cannot be taken lightly, as it no longer is considered a teenager and techie's domain. This type of enhanced long-distance communication is expected to reshape how business professionals correspond.

For example, the latest version of Microsoft MSN Messenger (messenger.msn.com) has a variety of new enhancements, the best of which is video. Anyone with a Web camera can send live, high-quality video with the click of a button. While it once was a small window that produced a jagged video stream, the picture is now bigger, very clear, and quite smooth. It actually enhances instead of detracts from conversations.

Yahoo! Business Messenger (enterprise.yahoo.com/products/msg) tailors this technology for the workplace, including features such as information technology administration control, encrypted messaging, and integrated logging and archiving capabilities. AOL Instant Messenger 5.2 (www.aim.com) also encrypts messages for improved security, offers enhanced file transfer capabilities, and provides a forwarding service so users needn't be connected to receive messages. The newest edition of ICQ's instant messaging service (www.icq.com) provides translation into 18 languages.

For more information on vendor news and products, security, and usage trends, visit Instant Messaging Planet (www.instantmessagingplanet.com).

Instant messaging comes with its own rules and etiquette that need to be learned and followed. Brokers who send instant messages every few minutes quickly will wear out their welcome, much as if they walked into someone's office or called to ask questions that often. Therefore, instant messaging should be used only when appropriate.

Brokers also should know the personalities of the people with whom they are communicating. Some people don't object to high-frequency use, while others only want to receive instant messages in emergencies. For more instant messaging etiquette tips, visit www.pcworld.com/howto/article/0,aid,99405,00.asp.

Three years ago, use of these technologies was scattered, but now the business world is embracing these new timesaving tools. There no longer are excuses to avoid exploring their benefits — ignoring these communications trends could result in time-management disasters. These small innovations could very well change brokers' business styles forever.

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