

FEATURE Savvy real estate brokers still among the first to plug into and profit from latest in technology

Wired realtors

ALAN ZISMAN

WESTERN INVESTOR

Perhaps surprisingly, technology pioneers seem to include a large number of realtors.

They were among the first to pick up on fax machines, pagers and cell phones. According to the U.S.-based **National Association of Realtors**, 97 per cent of all realtors own a personal computer, 95 per cent have a mobile phone, 77 per cent own a digital camera and 40 per cent own a PDA. At an average of \$1,431 per year, the average realtor spends more on technology tools than on marketing.

Virtually all realtors surveyed worked for firms whose websites included real estate listings, and over half have their own web pages. Nearly all use e-mail, and 50 per cent of the realtors polled conducted at least a quarter of their client communications via e-mail.

Vancouver realtor **Linda MacNeill** reminisced that she can “remember some of the real ‘techie’ realtors with huge phones that had a big shoebox container for the battery.” But, she adds, “Of course, people then were more patient. It was okay if you returned a call the same day. Now people expect a call back within a few minutes”.

Now, many in the industry have also moved to products like **RIM**'s Blackberry or **Palm**'s Treo for always-connected e-mail. Many realtors have also added WiFi wireless Internet access to their laptops, but that only provides access within range of a “hot spot” – a wireless base station in a hotel lobby or Internet café. Alternatively, products like Vancouver-based **Sierra Wireless**'s AirCard (available from many cell phone companies) act as a



Photo: Fraser Valley Real Estate Board

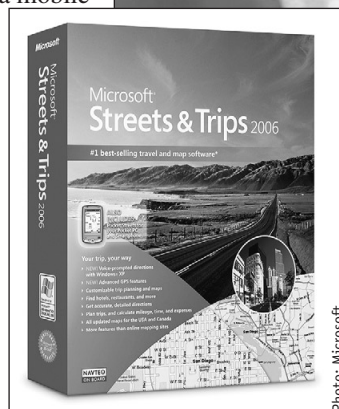


Photo: Microsoft

Touchbase system allows Fraser Valley realtors to link with MLS data and with other realtors. Microsoft has aimed its new mapping software at the real estate market, with downloads available to cell phones and PDAs.

wireless modem plugging into a laptop's PC Card slot, offering slower connections, but ones that are always available.

Pocket MLS

Even without an Internet connection, a high-tech realtor can pack a lot of up-to-date information in their pocket. Pocket Real Estate software for PDAs running Pocket Windows (like **HP**'s iPaq models) or Palm lets a realtor carry the Multiple Listing Service database for instant access to listings, showings and more. The software includes a mortgage calculator. (www.pocketrealestate.com)

Realtors were also among the first to move to digital photography. Digital cameras combined with affordable inkjet or colour laser printing make it possible to output a handout

on a new listing almost immediately, and to e-mail copy for ads. The **Real Estate Weekly**, for instance, now accepts the bulk of its realtor advertising via e-mail.

Take those same digital photos and put them onto a laptop, and a realtor has a tool to show off buildings to clients.

Today, website **Housingmaps.com** lets web-surfers pick a U.S. or Canadian city (including Vancouver) and a price and see houses located on a **Google** map, along with links to the ad for the house on the popular **Craigslist** site.

As a result, many clients are going online to check up on listings before meeting with a realtor. MacNeill again: “Before, the realtor had most of the information. Now much of it is very public on the MLS sites. Typically, my clients have a great deal of knowledge prior to ever meeting with me.”

Smarter clients

Empowering clients does not seem to have hurt realtors, however. According to **Pennsylvania State University** associate professor **Steve Sawyer**, “The expectation was that real estate agents would go away once consumers could see all the home listing information, but the number of real estate agents has increased, not decreased, in the last 10 years.” According to Sawyer, clients are now better informed and demanding better service from their realtors.

The **Fraser Valley Real Estate Board** has attempted to further streamline communication for its members. Last year, the board launched Touchbase, a 24/7 web-based messaging system. Linked in with the MLS system, the service allows realtors to send messages directly to each others' PDAs, cell phones, pagers or e-mail without having to go through an office. (www.touchbaserealestate.com)

GPS

Realtors are likely to continue their fling with technology. Few realtors surveyed, for example, are yet making use of GPS (geographic positioning systems).

Search giants **Google** and **Yahoo**, popular with potential home-buyers, are increasingly offering professional services aimed at realtors. For example, **Google Earth Pro** is available in versions customized for residential and commercial real estate, merging real estate data, maps and aerial photos and offering virtual fly-through tours of neighbourhoods and showing nearby retail, transit, schools and other facilities.

This year, **Microsoft** released **Streets & Trips 2006**, which is aimed at the real estate market. It allows maps and other information to be downloaded to cell phones or PDAs.

Bringing us down from the virtual tour, however, MacNeill warns, “Sometimes tools like these cause me to question whether we are just ‘playing’ with the technology. In the end, in real estate, people need to talk and to physically view the properties.” ♦