

REALTOR®

THE BUSINESS TOOL FOR REAL ESTATE PROFESSIONALS

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Tech It Up a Notch...

9 STRATEGIES FOR DOING MORE WITH THE TECHNOLOGY AND WEB SITES YOU ALREADY USE



By Kelly Quigley, Brian Summerfield, and Katherine Tarbox

“Less is more.”

It's an unexpected stance on technology coming from practitioner Brian Copeland, a self-proclaimed “100 percent mobile agent” who doesn't go anywhere without his iPhone, MacBook Pro, and MiFi compact wireless router. ■ ■ ■ But that's just the thing, says Copeland, CRS, of Village Real Estate Services in Nashville, Tenn. Those three tools are his tech arsenal. His laptop gives him access to client information, online services, and Web-based documents, while his iPhone also regularly serves as a camera, a financial calculator, a digital compass, and even a copy machine. (That's right, a copy machine—in lieu of making a photocopy, Copeland recently took a snapshot of a buyer's earnest-money check and sent it via e-mail to his office for record-keeping.) ■ ■ ■ “I'm constantly out of the office connecting with new people,” says the avid conference-goer, “but because I leverage technology I'm always in touch and getting work done.” ■ ■ ■ Because Copeland uses just a few pieces of hardware, he says it's possible to become an expert on each tool. “It's my opinion that you should use very little technology, but use it very well,” he says. Yet such a measured approach is rare, says former real estate pro Doug Devitre, who's now a technology trainer with St. Louis-based Doug Devitre International. ■ ■ ■ “A lot of people invest in technology because they perceive it to be a quick solution, but they never make time to learn everything it can do,” says Devitre. “We try to learn small pieces of everything rather than mastering the things we use most often.” ■ ■ ■ To help you get the most from your technology, we've rounded up expert tips, shortcuts, and resources. Time to start learning!

1. Tap Into the knowledge that surrounds you.

Looking for a great new real estate app for your BlackBerry? Trying to figure out how to incorporate cool graphics into your PowerPoint presentation? There are ways to boost your knowledge with minimal spending and frustration.

Befriend the geek. To find out about shortcuts, new apps, and shopping tips, ask the geekiest friends you have, Copeland says. “Find those people who love sharing their knowledge of technology. Let them know you love this stuff. That's how I found out about some of my favorite applications.”

Subscribe to niche blogs. If you don't have geeky friends, then find geeky blogs. “Usually there are one or two people who are considered the authority on a tech topic and are always serving up fresh material,” says technology trainer Devitre. For example, the blog MyTechOpinion provides real estate specific tips for social networking, smartphones and more.

Do an online search. “Type your tech question into Google and nine times out of 10, you'll find the answer in a blog forum,” Devitre says. Other helpful places to search: YouTube.com and SlideShare.net.

Pose your question to a group. Join real estate groups on LinkedIn (the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® has an active group of more than 17,000) and ask your industry-specific tech questions, says John Mayfield, CRB, e-PRO, broker-owner of Mayfield Real Estate in Farmington, Mo. ActiveRain and the RealTown network are also good communities for soliciting ideas.

Just play around. The best way to learn a new tool is to start using it. “Test the waters,” Copeland says. “I remember the first time I used Twitter, I was scared to death. Now I'm tweeting multiple times a day. We sometimes have a fear of trying the obvious.”

FACEBOOK IS THE MOST
POPULAR SOCIAL NETWORKING
SITE AMONG REALTORS®;
76% USE IT.

2. Engage your audience on Facebook.



In July Facebook topped 500 million active users, and it's a safe bet that many of your clients and prospects are among them.

Create a page for your business or community. Go to www.facebook.com and click on the "Create a Page" link on the lower right side of the page, beneath the "Sign Up" button. If your community or neighborhood doesn't already have a page, consider starting one. It's a great way to get your name out to the people who live in your market.

No hard selling. "Buy, buy, buy" messages are a turnoff, says social media expert Clara Shih, author of *The Facebook Era* (Pearson Education, 2009). Instead, post locally relevant updates about real estate, your niche, and your community.

Post and tag interesting photos. Everyone loves photos, so take lots of them! Tag your fans to draw them in and make them engaged. Copeland uses his iPhone to take photos of his clients' "Sold" signs, then gives the photos an artsy retro look with the Hipstamatic iPhone app. After he has tagged the photos, his clients sometimes choose the image as their profile shot.

Look for life-stage clues.

Read what your fans are saying about themselves on their own pages. Is someone recently engaged or pregnant? Such clues could signal that they're ready to buy a house, so drop them a note reminding them that you're available to answer their home buying or selling questions.

Give them a reason to come back. Provide incentives to keep clients visiting your page—an interesting news tidbit every day or a link to coupons at area businesses. Charles Nelson, owner of the national chain Sprinkles Cupcakes, would post a password for free cupcakes several times a day. Since that effort, the company's fan base has grown tenfold to more than 141,000.



Send your Facebook friends a quick wall message with a subtle reminder that you're a REALTOR®. Download the free Scribblez app, developed by the Center for REALTOR® Technology, at <http://apps.facebook.com/scribblez>.

3. Leverage the cloud.

Mobility is the name of the game in real estate today. Even if you spend time at an office, customers in the field expect information from you right away.

That's where you can benefit from "cloud computing," Mayfield says. The term generally refers to applications that are based on the Web rather than being tied to a computer. E-mail, photo sharing, and social networking are popular examples, but there are also a number of document-sharing applications that allow you to create, edit, store, and share documents on the Web.

Through these services, you can access your documents anytime and anywhere, as long as you have an Internet connection. Mayfield notes that Web-based storage is especially convenient if you have a tablet computer, which doesn't have as much memory as a traditional laptop or PC. "If you're using the cloud, you can literally take the iPad out of the box and it's useful." He recommends Google Docs, which has document templates including checklists and contact forms. You can access the documents from anywhere and share with people you choose. Mayfield also uses Google Calendar, which he set up to automatically sync with Microsoft Outlook.

Another way to leverage the cloud is through Dropbox, a free file sharing and online backup service. There is a charge for extra storage and other add-ons. After downloading the software, you can drop files into a designated folder on any of your computers, and that file will be available from any computer you've installed that software on. You can also use shared folders to collaborate with others, and you can control who can access those folders.

INTERNET EXPLORER IS THE PRIMARY WEB BROWSER FOR **86%** OF REALTORS®, FOLLOWED BY MOZILLA FIREFOX, GOOGLE CHROME, AOL, AND SAFARI.

4. Browse the Web more efficiently.



Most of the time you spend on the computer is probably on the Web. Here are some ways to create a better viewing experience and find what you're looking for faster than ever.

Change your view. On most browsers, you can make the text on your screen larger or smaller by pressing the Ctrl and + or Ctrl and - keys, respectively. To scroll down a Web page without using a mouse, just push the space bar; to go back up, press the space bar and the Shift key at the same time. Or, if you'd like to open a new browser tab, just press Ctrl and T.

Avoid toolbars. In general, you should stay away from downloadable toolbars from any site, even well-known and useful ones like Yahoo! and Google. Apart from cluttering up your browser, toolbars tend to use a lot of memory and slow performance, and they typically don't provide nearly as much functionality as the sites themselves.

Use bookmarks. Cataloging your favorite Web destinations can save you time. To bookmark a site in Internet Explorer, press Ctrl and D while on that site. In Firefox, click the star symbol on the right side of the location bar (where the Web address is). Firefox also allows you to categorize bookmarks by keywords, meaning you can navigate to the site simply by typing an associated term in the location bar.

Search a page fast. If you're having trouble finding information on a Web page, simply press Ctrl and F. A "Find" bar will appear somewhere within the browser window, allowing you to type in the word or phrase you're looking. On Firefox, search for a word on a page by pressing the forward slash (/) key.

5. Do your homework before buying anything.

What's on your tech shopping list? According to the latest REALTOR® Technology Survey, the top three tech tools that real estate practitioners will buy this year are a digital camera, a smartphone, and a mobile computer. Here's what to consider before making your buying decision. For complete Buyer's Guides on a range of topics, visit REALTOR.org/realtormag and search for "Buyer's Guides."

By Erica Christoffer and Michael Antoniak



Digital Camera

Will I be able to capture the whole room in one shot? For real estate photos, wide-angle lenses are a huge benefit. Make sure your camera has a 28 millimeter lens or wider (the smaller the number, the wider the lens).

How will it do in dimly lit settings? The higher the ISO rating—which, on digital cameras, is the equivalent of film speed—the more sensitive the sensor, meaning that the camera will better capture photos in low light. ISO speed generally ranges from 64 to 1,600.

What's the zoom? For the best photos, choose a camera with optical zoom over digital zoom. Digital zoom only enlarges and crops the image, while optical zoom uses the lens of the camera to bring the image closer in the frame.

How many megapixels does it have? The number of megapixels tells you how much information the camera will record in an image, but it won't tell you the quality of that image. You also need to consider the size and sensitivity of the camera's sensor.

What extras do I need? If you're the creative type, you may want to consider art filters. And if you love video and you're shooting a lot of it, consider spending a little more for 1080p HD quality. If you want to stick with more natural shots and you won't rely on your camera to shoot video, don't spend a lot for all the bells and whistles you won't use.



Smartphone

What software can I run on it? Software unleashes the practical value of any computer, and the smartphone's operating system determines what software is compatible. Make sure the applications you want or need are offered for the handset you're interested in.

Am I comfortable with the design? There's no substitute for hands-on experience, especially for a device that will be your communications and productivity hub in the field. Most models now boast touch screens for fingertip control of the phone and its software. That screen may also be your point of data entry using "soft" on-screen keypads. As a general rule, the larger the screen the more comfortable you'll be when entering data, browsing the Web, using software, or viewing listings. Those who prefer a more tactile experience will want to concentrate on models with a QWERTY keypad.

Does it take good photos? Smartphones can serve as your camera or camcorder on the fly, but the optics capabilities of current smartphones, particularly their zoom, generally don't yet rival those digital still cameras. Nevertheless, a smartphone with a 3 megapixel or larger sensor, a flash, and digital zoom may be good enough for four photos.

Does it have GPS? Some models have built-in GPS navigation capabilities; others calculate their location by noting nearby cell towers and access points. Either approach will guide you to your destination. If you plan to rely on the phone as your navigation aid, you'll want a larger screen size and a mounting bracket for your dash.

What's available in my market? Your final choice will likely be determined by the selection available from your cellular service provider. If you're set on a particular phone, like the iPhone, it may mean switching carriers.

Mobile Computer

What's your budget?

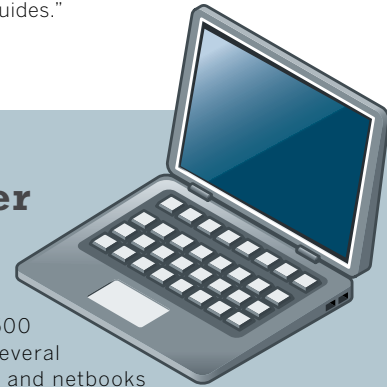
With notebooks starting under \$500 and climbing to several thousand dollars, and netbooks available in the \$200 range, budget is the logical place to begin. Set your price and you can then narrow your selection to the systems and brands that deliver the most bang for your buck. To extend your system's life, always buy the best you can afford.

Netbook, notebook ... or tablet? All three can be practical solutions for mobile real estate professionals. A notebook delivers the most performance and features and can serve as your primary PC. Consider both Mac and PC systems. Mac notebooks start around \$1,000, but their ability to run Windows and Mac software makes them a viable option. As the name implies, a netbook is a compact, mobile Internet terminal, perfect as a second PC for those who rely on Web-based applications and who can trade screen size for portability. Touchscreen tablets—Apple's iPad, for example—fall somewhere in between, combining essential functionality, Web access, and ease of use.

Which features matter most? What are your most important needs? There are trade-offs you might find acceptable, like a bulkier system for the convenience of a full-sized keyboard or a widescreen monitor. Key evaluation points: the type and speed of the processor; the amount of RAM and hard drive space; screen size; wireless support and Web access; security; the type and number of input/output ports; the unit's battery life; and the bundled software.

What's your best source?

If you shop only in stores, your selection is limited to their preconfigured systems. You'll find that the most aggressive price competition is among online retailers, but make sure that the reseller is an authorized vendor. Manufacturers offer occasional specials and great deals on refurbished systems, with warranties, on their Web sites. There, you can also mix and match features to create the best system for your budget and needs.



THE MOST POPULAR WEB SITES THAT REALTORS® USE TO PROMOTE THEIR LISTINGS, BESIDES MLS SITES AND BROKERAGE SITES:

REALTOR.COM 83%
TRULIA 51%
ZILLOW 50%

6. Increase your exposure on listing Web sites.

You probably rely on sites like *REALTOR.com* to promote your listings or direct clients to promising properties. Here are some ways to boost your presence.

Give each listing a compelling headline. Every listing that you enter into *REALTOR.com* should include a headline that creates urgency and describes some key benefits. Some attention-getting examples include: “Just Reduced,” “Motivated Seller,” “Next to a Great School,” “Large Pool,” or “Brand New Kitchen.” To edit the headline, go to your *REALTOR.com* Control Panel and click on Enhance My Listings. Select a listing, and then click on Edit Headlines.

Post 25 photos. It’s all about search results. Many buyers who visit *REALTOR.com* search only listings that have photos—the more photos you post, the higher your listing will appear in the search results.

Share reports with sellers. In your *REALTOR.com* Control Panel, select the Reporting feature to see how many people have viewed the property online. E-mail these reports to sellers to show how much online traffic the listing has received. If there are a lot of online viewings, but not many calls, it may support your case for lowering the price or making other changes.

Build out your profile. On Trulia and Zillow, fill out your profile entirely to showcase your specialties and experience. If a consumer is interested in learning more about you, they’ll read the profile before contacting you.

Answer consumers’ questions. Get active in Trulia Voices (www.trulia.com/voices) and Zillow Advice (www.zillow.com/advice), even if you don’t have listings on those sites. The searchable question-and-answer forums give you the chance to be seen as an expert as you respond to consumers who want to know about real estate in your city or in your area of expertise.

7. Seek new ways to create personal connections.

When used smartly, technology can facilitate interpersonal connections that lead to new business and improve your communication with clients—even when you’re meeting with them face-to-face. Here are some ideas:

Share your location. There’s much hype surrounding location-sharing Web apps, particularly Foursquare. This free app allows users to “check in” with the program at various spots around town and see who else is there. “It’s a great way to connect,” says Copeland, who notes that the app is especially useful at conferences. “I was in New York, sitting in a café, and I saw a guy sitting at the counter was also checked in. We started chatting, and 30 minutes later I learned that his brother was moving to Nashville.” A new client resulted.

Name your MiFi. If you need access to the Web when you’re running around town, a MiFi or similar device is a handy tool to have. This compact wireless router creates a personal cloud of connectivity that can be shared with multiple devices. Copeland suggests naming your network descriptively (for example, Berkeley Real Estate Agent with Blue Hat) so when other people at your location try to connect to the Web, they see your network’s name, are able to identify you, and will hopefully introduce themselves to you if they use your network.

Show, don’t tell. When buyers ask about neighborhood safety or school quality, respond by pulling up the data on your laptop or tablet PC. “A buyer pointed to a home and asked me why I didn’t show that one to him,” Copeland says. “Instead of sounding like a jerk and saying it was out of his price range, I pulled up the listing so he could see.”

NEARLY 90 PERCENT OF REALTORS® USE A SMARTPHONE TO CONDUCT REAL ESTATE BUSINESS, WITH THE BLACKBERRY BEING THE MOST POPULAR DEVICE, ACCOUNTING FOR 41 PERCENT OF REALTOR® SMARTPHONE USERS. THE IPHONE FAMILY COMES IN SECOND, USED BY 26 PERCENT OF REALTORS®.

8. Know your smartphone's shortcuts.

You'll find your **BlackBerry** a lot easier to use if you can master these tricks, courtesy of *PC Magazine's* Jamie Lendino.

Find your signal. Hold down the ALT button and type N M L L. Your signal bars will be converted to numerals to show you precisely how strong your coverage is.

Reboot. To quickly restart your device, hold the ALT key while pressing the CAPS and Delete button at the same time.

Punctuate. Press the space bar twice and your device will exchange those spaces for a period and space. While in e-mail mode, if you press space instead of @, your BlackBerry will convert it into the symbol.

Change your program. To quickly switch between applications hold the ALT key and then press Escape. A list of programs will appear.

Navigate your calendar. Under calendar options, switch off "Enable Quick Entry Field." You'll be able to select a view by pressing D for day, W for week, M for month, and A for agenda.

Browse. While searching the Web, press A to bookmark a site, and press K to retrieve those bookmarks.

Switch to letters. To dial a phone number that's represented in words (for example, 1-800-NEW-HOME), press ALT and type each letter.

Get to the bottom. Press T while browsing your e-mails to reach the top of your inbox and press B to jump to the bottom.

This collection of tips for your **iPhone 4** will help you get more done faster. For more, visit www.apple.com/iphone/tips.

Compose sentences quickly. Tap the space bar twice; the iPhone adds a period and space and capitalizes the next word.

Take a screenshot. Press and hold the Home button, then press the Sleep/Wake button. Your screen flashes and the picture of your screen appears in your Camera Roll.

Place a call on hold. On iPhone 4, touch and hold the Mute button to place a call on hold.

Save images from the web. In Safari, touch and hold an image to save it to your Camera Roll or copy it to paste into an email.

Tap to focus the camera. While shooting video or photos, tap the screen where you want to focus. The iPhone will also adjust the exposure and white balance automatically.

Use the compass with maps. Tap the Location button in Maps twice to use the built-in compass to orient the map based on the direction you are facing.

Scroll to the top fast. In Safari, Mail, Contacts, and many other apps, tap the status bar at the top of the screen to scroll quickly to the top.

Read the iPhone User Guide. For more tips, tricks, and instructions, tap the Bookmarks icon in Safari, then select iPhone User Guide.

9. Get up to speed on WordPress.

There are many blog publishing platforms out there, but WordPress is among the most popular and reputable in the real estate sphere, says NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS® Social Media Manager Todd Carpenter. Setting up a blog using this free, open-source tool is a great way to boost your Web presence and spread your real estate knowledge.

Get a free blog. If you haven't explored WordPress already, you can visit the site and sign up for your free blog at <http://wordpress.com>. You will need to pay a Web hosting service so you can have a dedicated URL.

Make it your own. Customize the design of your blog with free or inexpensive WordPress themes. Start your search at sites like www.woothemes.com, www.ithemes.com, and, of course, WordPress' own <http://wordpress.org/extend/themes>.

Plug it in. There are thousands of WordPress plug-ins that do everything from limiting access to your blog to randomly displaying lyrics of the song "Hello, Dolly" on your admin pages. Some popular plug-ins include Akismet, which reviews comments and filters out those likely to be spam, and the All in One SEO Pack, which optimizes titles for search engines. Another helpful (and free) plug-in for real estate pros is called Simple Real Estate Pack; it includes mortgage and home affordability calculators, a closing cost estimator, live mortgage rates, statistical charts, school data, and more.

Prevent "reblogging." If you want to keep others from "reblogging" your content—which may involve them using it in ways you don't approve of—simply insert this code into the beginning of your post: `<div style="display:none;"></div>` (Note: To do this, you have to be editing the post in HTML code).

Participate in a WordCamp. These casual workshops are held at sites around the world, giving attendees the chance to learn about new ideas and best practices from WordPress experts. In fact, there's a "camp" at the REALTORS® Conference & Expo in New Orleans this November. Attendees at every level of expertise are welcome.

Teach yourself more. You can watch dozens of video tutorials at <http://wordpress.tv>. ■

