

Virtual markets cater to the young and the tech savvy

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Simple messages, online marketing, interactive websites, Internet concierges and other electronic means of spreading information are the way of the future for smart builders.

But no matter the medium, homebuying is still an emotional issue and marketing campaigns provoke an emotional response, says Amy Talbot, the award-winning owner of the marketing firm, Avenue Design Group based in Ottawa.

The trend for online marketing will include websites that are interactive, says Talbot, who works with nearly a dozen builders. Not only can potential buyers see what models are for sale, they can take a virtual tour, find which lots are available, examine floor plans, inspect price lists and use a mortgage calculator to see if they can afford the final price tag.

"People will go in and qualify a homebuilder before the homebuilder has an opportunity to qualify them," she says. "That's probably the biggest trend."

Troy van Haastrecht, president of Mattamy Homes Ottawa, finds buyers short-list builders according to their sites before jumping in the car to visit models.

Urbandale's latest innovation is an award-winning paperless brochure. The company took all of the information in its paper pamphlets and interactive programs and put it onto a CD to hand out to buyers when they visit their sales centres. Extras include virtual tours of homes, photo galleries and a furniture locator program that lets buyers click and drag on sofas, beds and chairs to see if they fit into an appealing floor plan.

"It would surprise me if more builders don't jump on that bandwagon," says Glen Van Doormaal, Urbandale's director of sales and marketing. While some buyers



CREDIT: Chris Mikula

CNS / Amy Talbot owns Avenue Design Group, a marketing agency which brands and markets home builders. As homebuyers become more computer-savvy, smart builders are using websites and CDs, including virtual tours of homes, she says.

still prefer paper, younger, more computer-savvy buyers appreciate the CDs, which can hold an enormous amount of information, are less expensive to produce than print brochures and can more easily accommodate changing information.

Builders are also starting to use lists of e-mail addresses to send out news about new models, updates on construction, bonuses and deals available in a cost-effective way to stay in touch with potential buyers. "It's something that's really picking up speed in the homebuilder market," says Talbot.

"The tools they can use now are more sophisticated and they're tying it in with a marketing agency like ours."

Other innovations include an Internet concierge -- a salesperson hired by a builder to answer customer e-mails right away, not the next day. Proactive builders will also ensure their websites are highlighted when someone does a Google search.

"We are seeing two huge coming waves of buyers," says Talbot: the over-55 group looking for interesting housing options that include condos and bungalows, and a younger generation that's used to buying and finding information over the Internet.

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