

VIRTUAL HOME STAGING

With the need for social distancing, many real estate brokers are opting for digital ways to show homes

MEGAN MARTIN

In these days of COVID-19, entire industries have had to adapt to survive. This has been particularly true for sectors that traditionally involve client-facing meetings, so it's no surprise that when the pandemic took over reality as we knew it, the real estate industry was shell-shocked. After all, how are people supposed to buy homes when they can't visit properties, meet with real estate brokers, or go to the bank for a mortgage?

With technology, that's how.

The real estate industry has, at this writing, not been named an essential service and has, therefore, been effectively put on pause by the Quebec government. Thankfully, its experts in several different areas have come together through technology to enable the industry to go digital.

When it comes to showing and listing properties, brokers and homeowners are turning to digital home staging.

Virtual staging entails digitally enhancing photos of properties with images of furniture and decor, all put together to create a

polished look ideal for marketing properties.

"Virtual staging follows the principles of traditional staging where we show the true potential of the space," said Ibtisem Hamani, owner and certified ultimate stager with Home Magic Touch, which services clients across Canada. "Our approach is unique in this industry because we have certified home stagers work in tandem with 3D modellers to produce stunning and balanced results that look incredibly real."

Given the current climate, it's no surprise that virtual staging is dominating the market.

"My business has transitioned from 80 per cent traditional staging to now 100 per cent virtual staging," Hamani said. "Like most companies during this time, our business has had to adapt and I believe we've done a really good job in doing that. Most of the business we're getting now is from brand-new Realtors and brokers, including many who have never done virtual staging before."

Even before COVID-19, virtual staging was growing in popularity because it's significantly less ex-

pensive than traditional staging. Now, given the restrictions imposed by social distancing, many brokers are realizing the benefits of virtual staging for the first time and so, in all likelihood, the surge in its popularity is here to stay.

When it comes to showing properties, buyers are unable to physically visit properties, so real estate brokers have turned to virtual tours and video meetings to fill the void.

"I feel like this pandemic is simply forcing the technological changes to come faster to the real estate industry than expected," said Amy Assaad, chartered real estate broker with Royal LePage. "Clients can now shop multiple properties with high-quality virtual tours, documents and offers can be signed and shared from your phone, and applications such as Zoom are drastically increasing the efficiency of meetings and reducing scheduling conflicts."

Virtual tours have proved to be quite successful and efficient in the past for showing properties to buyers who are in a hurry, as well as to foreign buyers.

"It is expected for purchasers to

want to physically visit the property before signing the act of sale," Assaad said, "so we've arranged this visit condition in the offer to purchase."

Buying property without visiting it is not unheard of.

"Buyers in new-construction projects often buy on spec, meaning they only have renderings and samples to consider," Assaad said. "Virtual tours are a drastic improvement to that, and your real estate broker is there to ensure you have the right conditions in your offer to protect you."

In addition to visiting properties virtually, home financing has also gone digital. Mortgage brokers are working remotely to ensure deal flow progresses.

"We're able to close deals while respecting the incredibly important social distancing measures currently in place," said Teddy Kyres, mortgage broker and president of Groupe Hypothécaire Orbis. "All of our forms can be filled out and signed digitally, credit checks can be done virtually, and lenders present us with their offers digitally. It's very doable; in fact, we've been doing this efficiently for a long

time so we're in a good situation to adapt to the current climate of no client-facing meetings."

As for appraisals, physical visits are no longer required. Instead, drive-by appraisals are being offered whereby the appraiser will examine the exterior of the home and then study photos of the interior and appropriate documentation in order to determine its assessment.

"This is true not just for purchases, but also refinancing as well," Kyres said. "If an appraiser doesn't have enough information online they'll do a Facetime appraisal, examining different areas of the home through video conference. It's amazing in a way; you can now essentially buy a house from your living room."

Everyone is adapting as needed to the current situation, he added. Even notaries are now capable of doing contact-free closings.

"Although there are clear challenges today, this crisis will increase innovation, the availability of information, and ease of transactions," Assaad said. "Ultimately, buyers, sellers and brokers alike will all benefit."



When creating a home office during these coronavirus pandemic days, make sure you get plenty of natural light and make provision for additional lighting options such as desk lamps and an overhead light fixture. PHOTO COURTESY OF HIRSH DESIGN & CO.