

# Are You Part of the **Internet**

A study by the National Association of Realtors, "Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers," recently pointed out that 80 percent of homebuyers begin their home search on the Internet, up from 41 percent just four years ago. If you're not on the Internet where people are searching and gathering information on their next home, you're missing a huge pool of potential homebuyers. That's why **Modern Homes** recently interviewed a panel of Internet professionals and a manufactured home retailer who smartly utilizes the Internet to learn how the manufactured housing retail sector can more effectively use the Internet to sell more homes.



# Revolution?

## **The panel includes:**

*Greg Pray, national account director for Move, Inc.'s New Homes Division and channel manager for Move's Factory-Built Housing Division, who has assisted hundreds of site-built and factory-built new home builders sell their homes online.*

*Dawn Lang, president of Manufactured Home Monthly Publications, Inc.® which publishes Manufactured Home Monthly® and operates ManufacturedHomes-Today.com®, a national multi-list Web site for manufactured housing retailers, communities, service providers, finance companies, and manufacturers.*

*Doug Gorman, owner and manager of Home-Mart, a manufactured home retailer in Tulsa, Okla., who has focused time and resources on reaching potential home buyers through the Internet.*

*Greg Katanick, chief operating officer for ManufacturedHomeSource.com, which focuses on bringing prospective buyers of manufactured homes in contact with retailers in their area.*

## **1. Why should a retailer use the Internet as a sales tool? Don't people need to visit a retail sales center to "see, feel, touch" when buying a home?**

**Pray:** Certainly a consumer will ultimately visit a retail location to purchase the home. However, with so many people conducting research online at some point in their home search process, it makes good marketing sense to be part of that search process. From basic research, such as who is the closest retailer to me for brand X homes, to more detailed topics such as how does manufactured home financing work, to which floor plan meets my family's needs, consumer will conduct research online. If they don't find you online, they are less likely to find their way to your retail location. Even if they first found you by pulling into your retail location, they will likely also visit your Web site to find answers to their questions, while at the same time gaining a sense of who you are, before they commit to possible their largest lifetime purchase. Is your 24-7 silent salesperson up to par with your local competitors?

**Lang:** There are several reasons to use the Internet as a sales tool. Number one on the list these days is the price of gas, which makes it cost-prohibitive to drive around looking at model homes in numerous sales centers. By utilizing the Internet, consumers are able to look up local retailers and see what models are available. Then once they have narrowed their search, they can make one trip to the retailer of their choice. Secondly, many consumers today are informed buyers. With the ability to research online, Internet-surfers are able to see the wide array of homes, manufacturers, and amenities that are available. If they don't find your products and information online, then you aren't even in the running to capture the consumer's interest. Once they have seen various desired home layouts online, they will narrow their choices by what appeals to their needs. Only then, will they go and do the actual "feel and touch" part of the process, as they have already done the "see" online. The advantage to this system is that you see contacts that are further down the sales funnel. They already know what they want, and therefore, many times are simply coming into your sales center to confirm that what they saw online is what they really are looking for in their next home. Finally, Internet advertising saves time. A lot of busy people like to utilize their time well and have found that browsing the Internet at their leisure, from the comfort of their own home, saves them time spent "house hunting".



**Gorman:** A large percentage of manufactured home customers are shopping extensively on the Internet before they ever go out the door. Many will evaluate the quality the retailer's Web site as a basis to determine who is on their short list to visit.

**Katanick:** If you're not on the Internet, you're missing an entire demographic of potential homebuyers. In addition, the typical Internet homebuyer has a higher household income of around \$15,000 per year than those who do not use the Internet in their home-buying search. This normally translates into a better home-buying prospect to secure financing and purchase a higher-priced home. Finally, prospective homebuyers are finding the professional salesperson they ultimately purchase the home from. With more people going to the Internet for their home-buying search, the factory-built housing industry is shifting its marketing strategies to include Internet-based marketing.

## 2. How can a retailer better utilize the Internet?

**Pray:** Is your Web site up to date? Is all the information correct and updated on a regular basis? Is the look and feel of the site up to current standards? Use your competitors as a good benchmark. While thinking about your typical customer and the questions they ask, is your Web site putting its best foot forward as a 24-7 silent salesperson?

**Lang:** The best way to take advantage of the unique aspects of Internet advertising is to be in as many places online as possible. Consequently, you get noticed when you list your homes for sale on multi-list Web sites. Since the Internet is a visual medium, inclusion of photos and floor plans is imperative. Also important, is for you to answer the commonly asked questions people are most likely going to have about your homes. Are the homes only for

sale in a specific community? What is your sales area? What kind of homes do you offer? Do you handle set-up? What are all of the services offered by your company and are those services included in the price or not? If you have a Web site, it should be listed on all of your online and media advertising to drive traffic to that site. If you do not have a Web site, and have your homes listed on a multi-list Web site, then you should still direct potential consumers to your individual site page on that multi-list Web site on your advertising whenever possible. For example, a great place to do this is on the company answering machine message, so after-hours callers can still 'see' your homes for sale, even when your office is closed.

**Gorman:** Look at your own Web site from the eyes of the consumer. Make sure it appears easy on the eyes and is easy to navigate. Utilize lead generation resources and monitor where the leads are before they come to the retail site. Determine which resources are generating leads that become sales.

**Katanick:** The Web site you use for your Internet marketing campaign needs to represent your organization in a visually appealing and informative manner. It should be organized in an efficient and logical way so that potential homebuyers can easily find helpful information while not feeling confused or overburdened by the data on the Web site. An Internet marketing campaign entails more than just setting up a Web site for your company. Web site content, Web site optimization, and a sound business process behind handling the Internet leads are essential to making an Internet marketing campaign successful.

## 3. If a retailer doesn't already have a presence on the Internet, how can they create such a presence? What are the costs and how much time will it take? How does a retailer ensure that he or she is visible on the Internet when people search for a home?

**Pray:** Depending on the retailer's size and goals, they can achieve an Internet presence via two main methods. First, they can place an advertisement on an Internet Listing Service. This is the easiest way to gain an Internet presence with only an email address required. Method two, which gives you more control over your presentation and allows you to have your own domain name, is to have a Web site of your own. There are many templated solutions on the market today that work well. For a larger retailer, a custom Web site may make the most sense. Costs can vary from approximately \$60 per month for a templated solution, to several thousand for a custom solution. Plan more time to launch a custom Web site, and realize you will need to allocate some time ongoing to keep your site up to date. Having a Web site without promoting it is like having a retail location without a sign out front. Once you have a Web site, you should promote its address everywhere as well as purchase advertising with the specific goal of bringing the researching and interested consumer to your Internet doorstep.

**Lang:** The easiest way to create an online presence is for you to get your home listings up on as many multi-list sites as possible. Some multi-list sites, offer assistance in getting you started with a Web site, as well as, supplying a link to import your home listings to your own Web site so that each home listing only has to be entered once. If a retailer has a Web site, putting up home listings on other Web sites that link

back to your own Web site is a good way to bring in traffic. This also helps increase your Web site's ranking on Google, Yahoo, and other search engines. Another way to increase visibility, even if you have no Web site of your own, is to list your homes on as many different Web sites as possible.

**Gorman:** To create a presence, a retailer must find a satisfactory Web designer. The time should be just a few days and the costs will vary depending on how complex the proposal is and the number of pages required. Most sites can be created for a thousand dollars or so. Once created, the retailer should experiment with various search engines to see where they turn up in searches on various key industry words. Ideally, the retailer will appear on the first page of the prominent key words.

#### 4. What kind of content should a successful Web site contain? Is there such a thing as "too much" information on a site?

**Pray:** Start with the basics: hours of operation, location, your history, brands, and what differentiates you from your competitors. Make sure this information is kept up to date. Second, add information about the brands and models you carry. Include images, virtual tours and other selling points of the homes you offer. Educate the consumer and build trust. Give the consumer enough information to answer as many of their questions as possible, letting them know you are there to take them the rest of the way.

Just as you do your best to make your model home inviting and comfortable for a potential customer, you need to do the same with your online presence as part of a cohesive and targeted market-

ing effort. When a potential customer enters your Web site, the strategy is to get them the information they want as efficiently as possible. If done correctly, more of your targeted online users today become home buyers tomorrow.

**Lang:** A successful Web site should contain a wide variety of information to consumers in a clean, updated, organized format. It should provide searches of your available home listings, area communities, available service companies, financing options, manufacturers, and more. Industry information, FAQ's, news and other helpful tools to assist consumers are an added bonus. The most important information you can offer is home photos. Providing several different photos of a home is preferred, both inside and outside views. Also, offering in-depth information about each home listing is vital.

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## INTERNET REVOLUTION

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If information is hard to read, has many flashing items, is disorganized, and/or clutters up the page, then you need to consider how effective that site will be. Will it turn away, confuse, or discourage potential clients? You need to consider how you want to have your homes and company represented.

**Gorman:** The site should be reasonably educational for the consumer. The consumer will want to see pictures and floor plans too. The site should provide background data on the retailer's history.

**Katanick:** The Web site content should be valuable to potential homebuyers, including an emphasis on your organization's products and services, presented in a visually appealing and informative manner. The content should be organized in an efficient and logical way so that potential homebuyers can easily find helpful information while not feeling confused or overburdened by the data on the site. Another important aspect is to be able to easily capture prospective homebuyer profile data.

### 5. How should a retailer respond to an inquiry generated by their Web site or Internet presence?

**Pray:** The primary answer to this question is: in a timely manner and in the way they want to be contacted. If you are not going to respond within 24 hours or less, your efforts will be diminished. Be a courtesy provider of information via personal communication that answers the interested consumer's questions. Do not make the hard sell. If the consumer supplied a phone number, feel free to follow-up on your email reply with a strategic phone call.

**Lang:** You should take your cues from the email, if the interested party has

*“Web site content should be valuable to potential homebuyers, including an emphasis on your organization's products and services, presented in a visually appealing and informative manner.”*

included their phone number, you can contact them immediately. A bonus to having your information on the Internet is that while on the phone with a potential client, you can encourage them to get on the Internet right then so you can then guide them to the homes you offer that would best meet their needs. This gives them visuals to look at while they are on the phone with you, rather than having to wait for them to come into your sales center. On the other hand, some people may request that you contact them by email; in that case, an immediate response via email is still warranted.

**Gorman:** A response to an Internet inquiry should be timely (no later than 24 hours and preferably within one hour) and should answer any questions they may have mentioned.

**Katanick:** Developing and implementing a sound business process for handling Internet leads is critically important in a successful Internet marketing campaign. The first step is “how” the Internet lead should be contacted. Research shows that such leads should be contacted by a phone call, preferably within 20 minutes and no later than 24 hours after the initial contact. The impact of a phone call within minutes of a prospective homebuyer submitting their information is far more powerful than if they receive a packet of information in the mail or an email response some time later. Emails and mailings are effective, but should be used as a complement to the phone call. While you can leave a message, catching

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the prospective homebuyer live on the phone is the key to success. So multiple contact attempts may be necessary!

#### **6. A retailer has a lot of other things to attend to at the retail sales center. Why should a retailer make responding to Internet inquiries a priority?**

**Pray:** Let's first define an Internet inquiry to properly answer this question. A consumer has found your Internet listing or Web site. In effect, they have toured your retail sales center and made a conscious decision to cross an anonymity barrier by completing an information request form, giving you their email address, telephone number and generally a personal request. This "person" should be responded to quickly, as if they were standing in your sales center asking a question.

**Lang:** The retailer that handles their emails as an important means of cultivating new contacts and responds accordingly will reap the most benefit. A timely response from you can only reflect well on your company and keep a potential client from moving on and looking elsewhere. The sooner you respond, the more professional you appear, plus you have a greater chance of catching the contact while their interest level is high and focused on looking at your specific homes. If you wait, your potential client may end up on another Web site or looking at homes offered by a competing retailer.

**Gorman:** An Internet lead can be a very hot prospect. A timely response gives the prospect an indication of how the retailer will respond to service calls once a home has been purchased.

**Katanick:** Responding quickly is the key to success with Internet marketing. Research shows that the best way to sharpen marketing efficiency and enhance the sales

process on the Internet is for companies to invest in resources, either internally or externally, that are dedicated to timely and personalized lead follow-up.

#### **7. What kind of help or support should a retailer expect to receive from a manufacturer(s) for his or her marketing efforts? What kind of support should a manufacturer be providing to improve a retailer's Internet marketing capabilities?**

**Pray:** Most manufactures should have graphical assets available for a retailer to incorporate into their own Web site.

Logos, elevation images and other pertinent information should be available for the retailer to use. Many will have a list of retailers on their Web site, linking searchers from the manufacturer site to the local retailer's site. Cutting edge manufacturers will supply a Web site solution, lead generation assistance via

specific marketing initiatives and sometimes a method to manage and track the leads the retailer receives.

**Lang:** From our perspective, as an Internet advertising provider, we appreciate manufacturers who provide Web-ready, professional photos and floor plans that can be used to supplement the retailer's photos. Manufacturers that assist retailers in having a Web presence are giving their retailer an upper hand. This assistance allows the retailer to focus on sales rather than on how to create and maintain a Web site.

**Gorman:** Manufacturers should provide links to the retailer's site. The manufacturer should also see the leads they receive are sent promptly to the designated retailer. The manufacturers should also consider providing workshops to improve the performance and appearance of the sites of their retailers. ■



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