

Photography: The Most Visible Reflection of Your Company's Brand

A Brokerage's Essential Guide to Getting the Most out of Its Visual Assets



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It's obvious from even a cursory glance at many real estate Web sites that the industry in general tends to overlook the importance of good photographs. Consumers don't. When even a used \$50 coffee pot on e-Bay has stunning, striking photos, consumers expect that sites marketing the most expensive item they'll ever buy – a home - would have at least the same.

The problem stems from two factors. First, most property marketing has traditionally been targeted to other agents, not consumers (thanks to MLS's). And second, photography has been a part of selling real estate for such a long time, but because of the agent-to-agent nature of MLSs, the purpose was primarily documentation, not marketing.

The difference is huge. Documentation results in, "Yes it's a house," while marketing results in "Wow, what a house." As sellers now need to market directly to consumers, thanks to the Internet, they need to start thinking like consumers, or at least looking at real estate marketing like consumers. And the typical consumer's attitude is: if you want to get my attention – WOW me.

Nothing wows better than stunning, striking photography. When a consumer is getting to know your brand, the most visible reflection of your brand, (and most likely to stick in their mind) is the quality of the photographs on your website and in your marketing materials.

So, VHT has created this essential guide to ensuring that your brokerage has the most stunning and striking images in your market and is visibly seen as far superior to your competitors. We've divided the guide into four main categories: 1) getting great photographs, 2) displaying great photographs, 3) managing your visual assets, 4) getting the most out of your visual assets.

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Getting Great Photographs

It all starts with getting the right shots. If the original shots are not good, all the Photoshopping in the world isn't going to help. Real estate photography is unique because of all the different types of lighting that need to be dealt with (natural, fluorescent, incandescent, etc.). Great photos require the same elements that anything of quality requires: time, the proper equipment and skill. Achieving images that highlight a home's key selling points and mask unflattering features isn't easy. But when it's done correctly it's the most powerful marketing tool around.

a. Use a professional.

OK, what other advice would you expect from a professional photography company? But, just as putting a FSBO sign in your yard doesn't make you a real estate agent, having a camera doesn't make you a photographer. Real estate photography involves much more than point and shoot. For the best results, rely on a professional, just as you're urging your clients to do. A recent VHT survey highlighted the impact that professional photography has on the perceived value of a property. High-quality photos increase consumers' perceived value of a home by nearly 13 percent. On a \$500,000 home, this equates to an increase in perceived value of \$60,000. There are a million other reasons to use a pro, but you can talk to our sales team about those.

b. Train your agents.

Not every agent will use a professional, so it's well worth the impact on your brand to make sure they at least take good photographs. Again, the quality of your property photos is a reflection on the professionalism of your company, so why not make it great? Some companies, like VHT, offer simple real estate photography classes for free, or you can create your own. It's amazing how providing basic photography tips and some remedial training once in a while can make such a huge difference in the quality of your images. VHT's training program has proven that it's a very useful exercise to show agents examples of bad shots and common mistakes (awkward angles, too much ceiling/floor, crooked walls) alongside ideal property photos with an explanation of how to achieve them.

c. Create and enforce company standards.

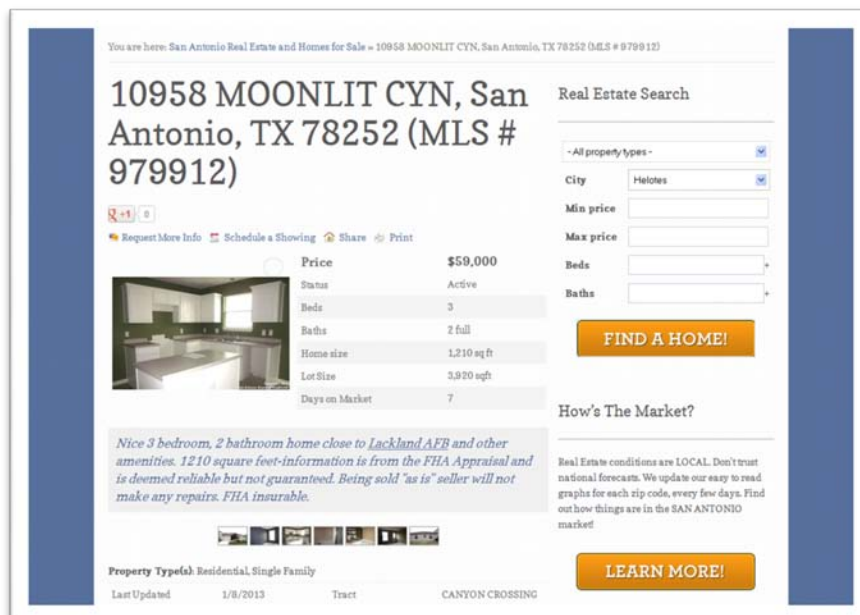
It's your name over the door and your brand value you're trying to build. It makes sense to set standards around that brand when it comes to visual marketing. Don't accept blurry, crooked or pixilated images. Build consistency on your site by telling your agents which type of shots you want for every property. Provide them with examples of how photographs of your listings are expected to look. Anything less should not be acceptable.

Displaying Great Photographs

This is where most companies fail completely. Even if an agent gets or takes great photographs, if they aren't displayed properly it defeats the purpose and makes it hard to enforce standards. Why buy a Picasso and then not put it in a place of prominence?

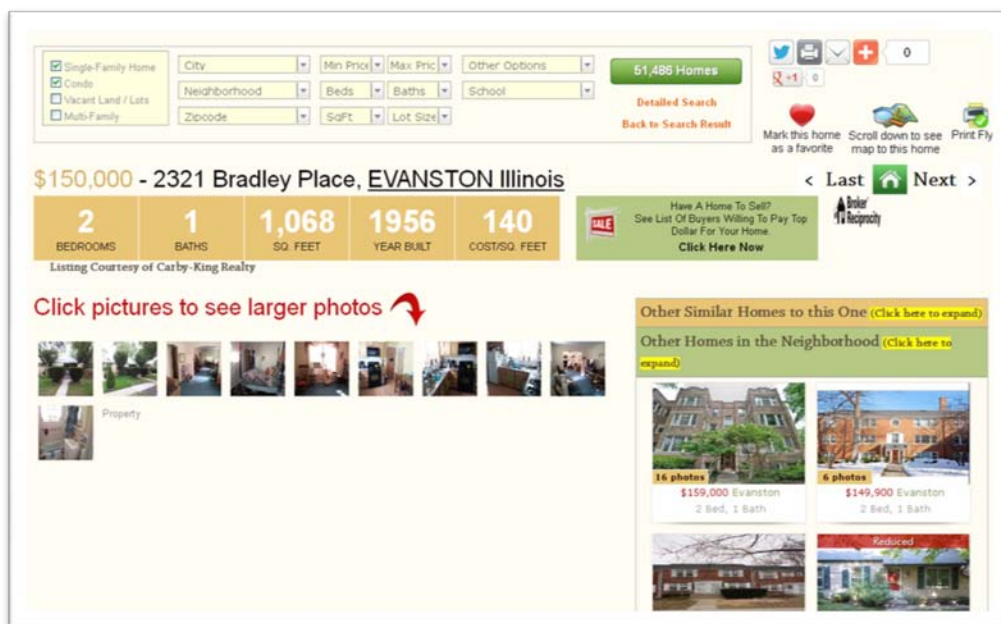
a. Size

Nothing is worse than small photographs. Most MLSs shrink photos to almost unviewable sizes to save on file space – relatively low-resolution 320x240 photographs scream, "Our company is stuck in the 90's." The storage wars ended years ago. Storage and bandwidth are cheap. Photos come out of today's cameras at huge sizes, so go big or go home.



b. Position

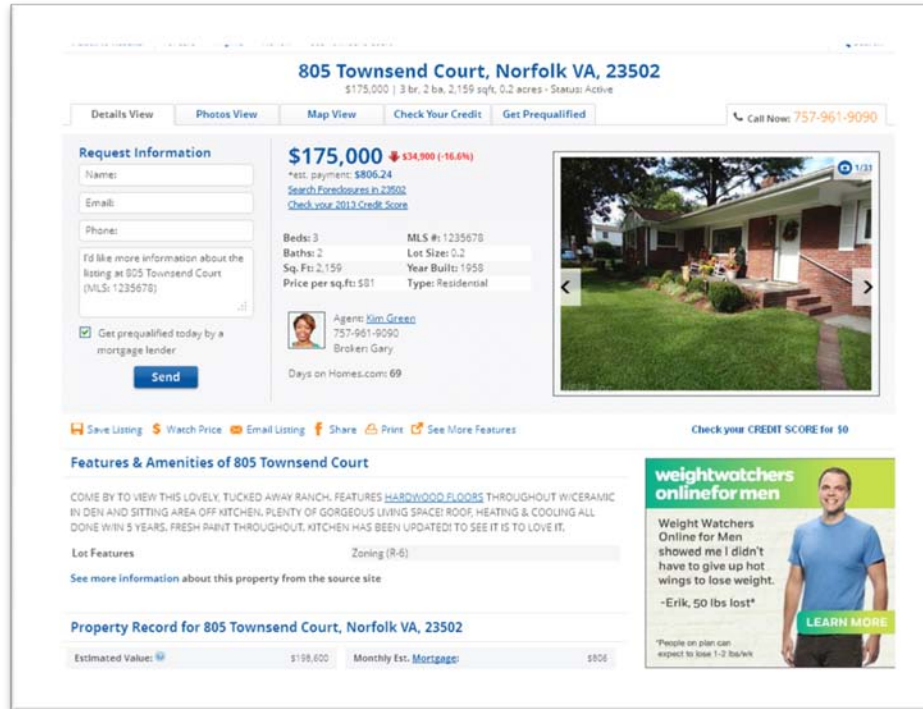
Photos are much more important to a consumer, especially early in the home-buying process, than data or text about room sizes, tax rates and other information. Put the photos front and center on your site. They should be the main focus of any property details page, right along with a call to action. Great photographs affect, move and motivate people better than anything else. Use that to get buyers to schedule an appointment or request more info or whatever your best Call To Action happens to be. If the picture sells them, they can easily get the rest of the data/facts by scrolling down.



c. Clutter

Good design is all about simple elegance. Don't ruin the effect of a great photograph by surrounding it with clutter: thumbnails that are too small to see, five different calls to action, and/or a ton of text. These all detract from the power of a great photograph. Let good photos stand on their own and do what they are meant to do – entice consumers to engage.

Clutter

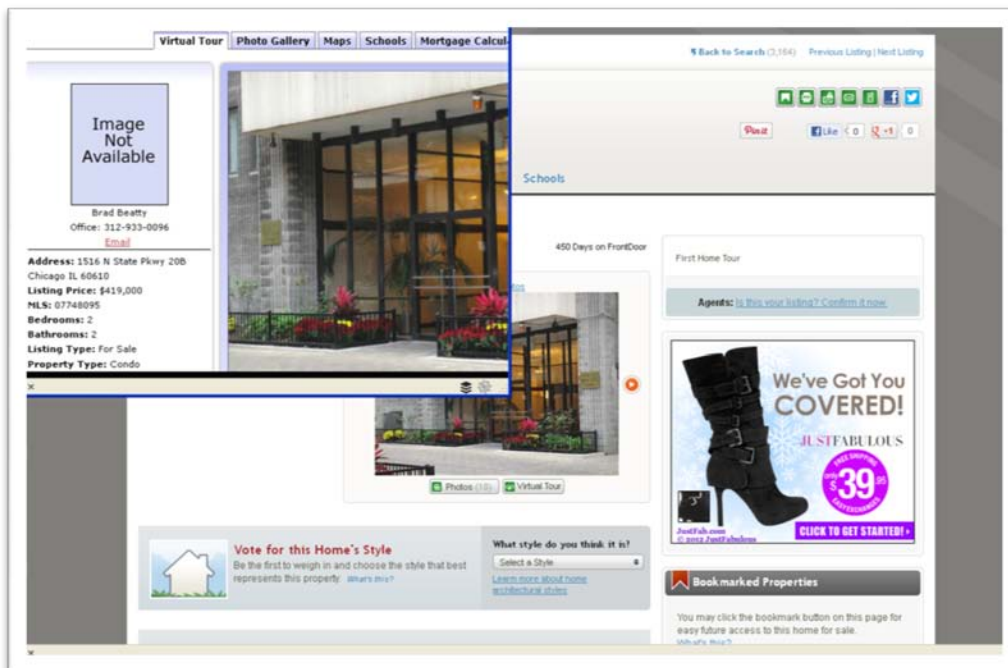
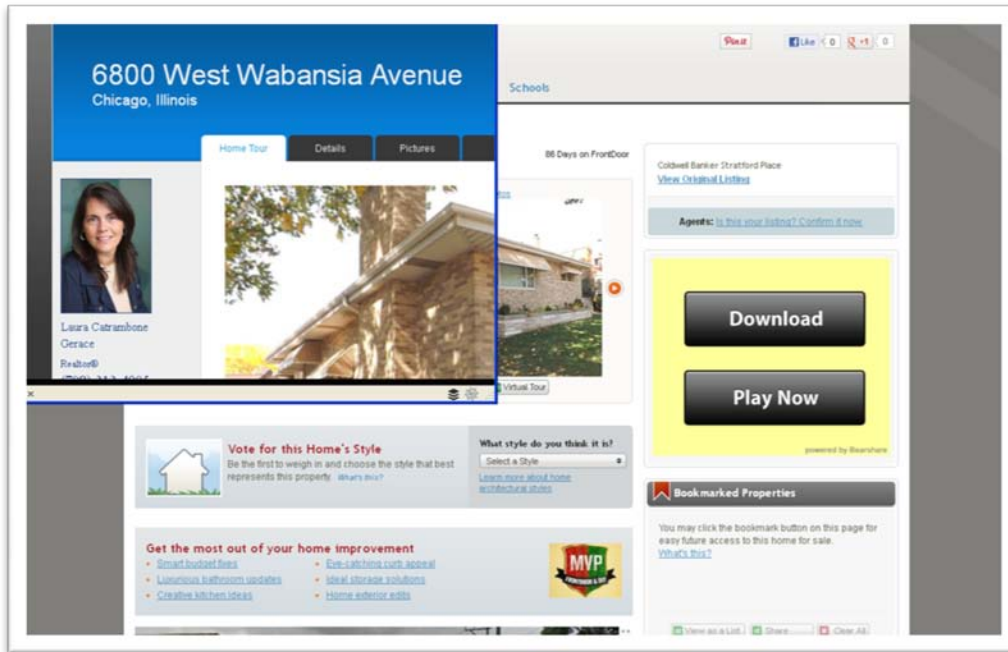


d. Yard Sale

If you or your agents do utilize multiple photography or virtual tour companies, decide on a standard display for your site. Either embed the visual right in your property details pages or pick one style of viewer. Having viewers/virtual tours from multiple companies on your site not only makes it look like a yard sale, it's very confusing for consumers and it does nothing for your brand. Most virtual tour company viewers confuse customers on your site with a different set of Calls to Action and a different set of tools/features, and worst of all, the virtual tour company's website typically gets all the SEO benefit.

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Yard Sale



e. **Quantity vs. Quality**

For some crazy reason, a number of real estate sites have taken the importance of photographs to mean 'the more the better'. But when it comes to quantity vs. quality, in real estate, quality will always win. Early in the buying process, consumers are scanning hundreds of homes. They are only looking at a few photos per home. Your listings have to put their best foot forward or they're likely to get passed over.

Even later in the process, most viewers are only looking at a few scenes: front, kitchen, living room, master bedroom, master bath, and view or back. The more stunning and striking those scenes are, the more likely buyers are to inquire further. If the display includes 10 shots of the foyer and shots of 3rd and 4th bedrooms, you're just creating diminishing returns on the Wow factor.

Managing Your Visual Assets

a. **File sizes**

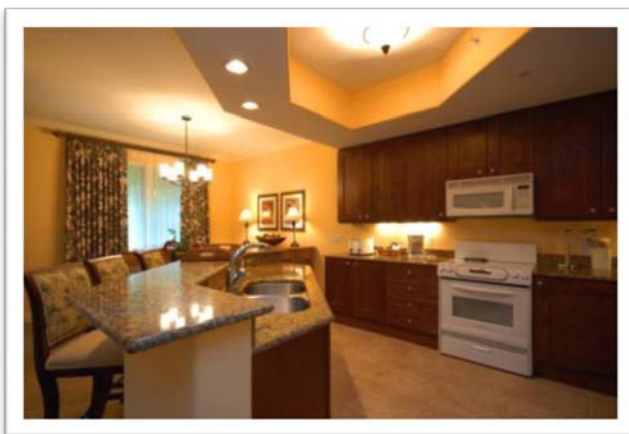
If you want to display your images in "Full Screen" to really make an impact, you need to save your images in large file sizes. Nothing wrecks a photograph more than trying to expand it. You can always shrink an image but never, ever blow it up, especially one that's previously been shrunk/compressed, i.e. MLS photos.

b. **Originals**

The most impactful change any brokerage could make regarding its visual assets is to STOP using copies from the MLS. Your agents have the originals- give them a simple solution for getting them to you. That way you have the largest size and the flexibility to use the image as needed. MLS's compress, crop and watermark images. That's fine for other agents to see but you shouldn't have to use that garbage in your consumer-focused marketing.

c. **Optimization**

Even though digital photography has made it easier than ever to snap a photo, all it's really done is make it easier to shoot more bad photos. It's almost unthinkable to have photos go straight from the camera to your marketing/website without any type of quality controls. With all of the different challenges a photographer has to deal with on site, in particular all the different types of lighting, it's best to have an image specialist correct, optimize and/or enhance every image that goes on anything with your name/brand on it. This will help create a consistent look across your inventory, or at least create some consistency from room to room on a particular property. This avoids the kitchen looking bluish, the bathroom looking yellowish, the bedroom looking too dark and the living room looking overly bright.



Before



After

Getting the Most ROI from Your Visual Assets

a. **SEO**

When you have the original images, you have an asset that no one else has. Every other site has the same listing data and the same MLS version of the photographs, but you have a unique piece of content. That is search-engine gold. This tells the search engines that you are the authoritative source of that photo, you are the original author and that is what they look for in #1 rankings.

Take advantage of that fact. Name all of your images. Tag all of your images. And when you distribute to other sites, don't share those advantages with them. If they want the SEO benefits of your images let them name and tag them themselves. Set up a site map of all your images and where possible, create a page for each image. If a picture is worth a thousand words, you've just increased your search engine presence a thousand fold.

b. Video

Video is a very popular marketing tool. Full-motion video (i.e. walkthroughs) tends to be expensive and the quality suffers due to all the changing lighting conditions. A well-produced motion capture slideshow video is many times superior to a full-motion video. The image quality is better and the flow of the video is much more natural. There are tons of automatically-created videos, and those are great for search engines. But for consumer marketing, nothing beats a professionally produced visual tour of a property. Great photos provide a solid foundation for a visual tour.

There are several key factors to consider in producing a professional-looking tour: First, the transitions and motion effects should accentuate the scenes - they shouldn't be repetitive or focus on odd parts of the image. Second, the music should be appropriate to the scenes and not just randomly applied. Third, be sure to provide an overlay with contact information and property details. Fourth, consider adding voiceover narration. And whatever you do, avoid the temptation to create the next Titanic. Most homes can have a pretty compelling story shown in less than 60 seconds. A tour that runs longer than a minute will probably be hitting diminishing returns again.

c. Timing

We know from experience that agents are anxious to get new listings on the market. But, everyone knows that first week is critical. Why not take the time and effort and get the photos right? If an agent sacrifices quality in racing to get photographs in so the listing can go live the day after signing the listing agreement, it's not doing anyone any favors, least of all your brand. It's better to say 'photos coming' and create some anticipation, than it is to put out a less than stellar presentation.

d. Copyrights

Being the most valuable listing asset you have, you need to protect your photos. U.S. law says that whoever created the work automatically owns the copyright. Whether photos are taken by your agents or professional photographers, make sure you get rights to use those photos. Copyright infringement carries unbelievably high penalties and is pretty easy to prove in court.

Conclusion

Your company's visual assets have significant marketing and SEO value and they deserve some thought. Photographs can be a very powerful competitive advantage if used correctly. Or, they can drag your brand way down, if not.

It's pretty simple to lay out rules and guidelines for your organization that will make your property photos a secret weapon in the battle for buyers. Like everything else, you just have to do it. You would never put unflattering or amateur-looking photos of yourself or your agents on your Web site because it wouldn't reflect well on your brand. This is even more true when it comes to photos of your listings. In consumers' eyes, property photos are the most important visuals on your site, so why not make them great?

About the Author



Brian Balduf is an industry veteran who has worked with hundreds of brokerage firms in the last fifteen years. Brian Co-Founded VHT Studios 15 years ago and has looked at tens of thousands of real estate photos since then. Brian is an experienced marketer and technologist who was involved in the early days of wireless data and Internet marketing. Today, the founder of VHT spends most of his time helping leading brokerages understand and take advantage of online marketing and other digital technologies.

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VHT is a leading provider of digital marketing technology and services to companies offering unique properties, locations and products who need a comprehensive, cost-effective solution for customer acquisition and driving revenue on the web. VHT Studios provides professional photographers, image optimization specialists and state-of-the-art technology for producing the finest visual imagery. VHT ImageWorks is an integrated and automated platform that includes a comprehensive array of tools that businesses need to increase site traffic, leverage their visual assets and improve sales conversion. The platform requires minimal effort on clients' part, and has delivered measurable results to industry-leading brands by increasing the volume of visitors from search engines and engaging online visitors with alluring visual presentations of their offerings

VHT's team has decades of experience in marketing, technology, search engine optimization and professional production, management and distribution of visual assets – including photographs, video, multimedia tours and Video on Demand television spots for 3,500 client companies. Venture-backed VHT is based in Rosemont, IL.