

# HOT SHOTS

Agents turn to professional photographers 'to capture the essence of a house' for their Web sites

BY ANDREA F. SIEGEL

The Baltimore Sun, November 30, 2008

At midmorning, sunlight streams through three sets of windows, creating an elongated pane pattern on the floor of a Reisterstown house.

"This is nice, because you have this floor, you have nice shadows on the wood," says photographer Craig Westerman, sizing up the room.

Click.

The image captures the breakfast room from the recessed lighting to the Brazilian cherry floors. It shows a slice of the kitchen at just the right angle to showcase the space's openness.

As the owner/photographer of HOMETRACK in Baltimore, Westerman makes his living photographing houses for sale - and he's snapped thousands of photos in the area since starting a part-time business in 1996 and going to full time in 2002.

This cavernous 7,100-square-foot house built on spec is empty, and Westerman's job is to convey in images its style and amenities.

"It's important. It's a new era where people can go online and decide whether they want to see [a house] or not," said the builder, Tom Dickson, president of Limited Homes.

One-hundred-plus photos later, Westerman's out the door. By the week's end, his three-person company will have produced a color brochure, and as many as 30 of his photos will appear with the nearly \$2 million listing on about a dozen Web sites.

A generation ago, this sort of business didn't exist.

But consumer demand for photos has exploded; would-be homebuyers have come to expect them as part of a property's marketing. More than four out of five house-hunters start looking online, and industry surveys indicate that listings without photos often don't make it onto their radar screen. Photos, especially the better ones, can show a house to its best advantage and give it an inviting air.

"You need to capture the essence of a house with photography," said Cindy Conklin, a partner in Yerman Witman Gaines & Conklin in Baltimore. At that company, photos are taken by outside professionals and agents as well as by a designer in a marketing wing, which also produces listing brochures. "I am big on how we represent our properties."

Brochures with crisp photos are house introductions and take-aways from visits. A listing agent's e-mail blast or postcard revealing a few photos may go to other agents to entice them to a brokerage open house.

"If someone is from out of town, and they look at 15 houses, it's important to have the brochure to help you remember what you've seen," said

Nancy Hubble, who leads the Hubble Bisbee Group of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage's Greenspring Valley office, and who has most listings photographed professionally.

If the seasons change while the home is on the market, her photos will as well, she said.

The ease of using digital cameras has empowered many agents and sellers to take photos themselves. As good as the pros? High-quality? Depends. Some are excellent.

Others, agents say, may be sufficient for the type of listing, presenting the home's features well and showing buyers what's in the house.

Professional fees can vary widely from under \$100 to several times that. Many agents reserve investing in experts for their pricier listings, or supplement the professional photos with ones agents or other staffers take.

Preferring a sunny day, photographers shoot overviews of rooms as well as frame their accents, show off their views and include features important to buyers. The house should already be clean and uncluttered, lights on.

The pros shoot every room, but they know the public spaces, especially the kitchen and family room, are the ones that most interest buyers.

"I take four angles, one from each side of the room," Westerman says, moving among rooms with his camera and flash. But he takes more to show size, cabinetry, countertops, layout.

"Whatever is unique to the house, such as architectural details, I take those," he says.

He shoots up from the front door to include the coffered ceiling, and from the kitchen through to a great room to show the molding of the arch between the spaces.

If needed, photographers adjust images for color, brightness, sharpness and background; they work with the agents on photo selection.

The sky may be added in, glare taken out, fire-place flames enhanced.

"In some instances, there are little things," said Bill Iampieri, who operates VirtualToursNow in Ellicott City and does other Internet marketing. "On the lawn, if there is a brown patch, I can take a piece of grass from one section and cover that, but I always check with the agent on that."

Some homes lend themselves to multiple photo shoots, especially for spectacular views.

"I made the mistake of saying 'this is really a dawn shot,' so I had to come back at 5 o'clock in the morning," Westerman said of his work photographing a luxury high-rise condo.



Terri Westerlund, owner of ReMax Le Reve in Highland, recalled supplementing the photos of an upscale house with an aerial view as well as with a dusk photo.

Photographers won't make the bed, but they regularly move items out of sight. Extraneous objects distract, and the viewer doesn't focus on the house.

Westerlund's son, Chris Westerlund, started Daybreak Photography this year to take house photos. He recalled moving a whimsical chess set from view in one house.

"It was a cops-and-robbers-type thing. But there was a half-naked flasher on one of them," he said.

High-quality photos increase the perceived value of the property, according to industry surveys. Conversely, bloggers advise that buyers may land a better deal on a house with few or no photos.

There are full-service companies that serve real estate agents nationwide, such as Utah-based CirclePix, which contracts with photographers in 44 states. There are custom outfits that specialize in regional markets, such as HOMETRACK and VirtualToursNow. There are in-house operations, such as the marketing arm of the Strata Group, of which Yerman Witman Gaines & Conklin is part.

Some companies provide a full line of marketing products. Others do only online work or only brochures. Some turn photos into holiday cards, set an online slide show to music, video 360-degree room panoramas, or create a photo remembrance of a much-loved homestead. Some do more custom work than others. Some give homes their own Web sites or put them on video-sharing sites.

Ron Howard, of the Ron Howard Group at ReMax Sails in Canton, takes his own photos.

"We make YouTube videos out of them. You can embed those videos into Facebook and other sites," he said.

"We do movies of the neighborhoods we are in," he said. "If I get a listing in Canton, I also post the Canton video."