

Guide to Using Photography in Real Estate Marketing



For Realtors and Home Sellers

by Larry Lohrman 3.0 Edition 2011

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This guide is about the important role photography can play when marketing real estate. I've spent 10 years working in the Seattle's eastside real estate market with my wife who has been a top listing agent in that market for 22 years. So I've witnessed first hand the contribution that good photography can make when selling property. My wife and I would list 30 to 40 homes a year. I made a point of talking to all the buyers of our listings and asking them about how they found the home they were purchasing. It was striking how many of their stories were in some way involved with photography.

It is not surprising that strong images play a big part in marketing homes. Images are the center of marketing everything. Decades of television and magazine ads have raised everyone's visual expectations to a very high level. Our visual expectations are high and our attention span is short. In marketing, you cannot capture and hold anyone's attention without strong still or video images.

So why is it that only about 15% of real estate marketing uses professional photography? I believe the primary reason is that real estate listing agents in most locations have to spend marketing money up-front and risk the home seller getting frustrated if the home doesn't sell and contract with another listing agent. So for listing agents the money they spend on marketing is risk money. One way around this problem is to put a clause in your listing contracting that if the home seller goes with another listing agent they have to reimburse the original agent for marketing costs.

Another reason is that residential resale listing agents tend to be focused on getting home sellers to the right price. I've had friends who are listing agents say, "Photography doesn't sell homes, getting it priced right does." Sure, price is THE most important factor in selling a home. A

home that's priced too high will not sell just because it has great photos.

However, once a home for sale is priced near the correct market value it has to compete with all the other properties in that location, price range and set of features. Getting buyers to come look at a home in today's online search market is a matter of standing out from the other hundreds of properties a home for sale is competing with. Photography is the only way to do that.

The fact is, once a home is priced right photography makes a huge difference. My goal for this guide is to list some of the classic articles and studies in the area of real estate photography and to illustrate some of the basics of how to recognize good real estate photography.

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IMPORTANT REAL ESTATE PHOTOGRAPHY ARTICLES

The following are some of the most significant articles on the subject of real estate photography in the last 5 years. These articles show an increasing awareness of the importance of real estate photography in marketing homes.

1. ***In Real Estate, A Picture Is Worth \$1,000 or More***, WSJ real estate blog, Oct 2010: This article is a summary and recap of the original Redfin study listed below.
2. ***A Photo is Worth \$1000***, Redfin Blog, Oct 2010: The original Redfin Corporate blog post that talks about a study done in the Seattle area that shows for homes over \$300,000 professionally shot photos increase the final sale by anywhere from \$938 to \$116,076.
3. ***Proof that Great Photography Sells Homes***, PFRE, Aug 2010: This article reviews the study that Kris Bjarne Haug of New Orleans did that shows how his professional photographs increase the MLS traffic of his clients' listings. Kris Bjarne Haug's photographs get an average of 134% more traffic than comparable homes in the same zip code an average of 145% more traffic than comparable listings in the same MLS area.
4. ***Real Estate Photography Tips For Realtors - Don't Do it Yourself, You'll Lose Your Commission Check***, On ezinearticles.com, by Josh Sanders.
5. ***National Association of Realtors 2009 Survey Results***. The important statistic in this survey is that 90% of home buyers use the internet in their home search. After 2009, the NAR surveys seem to have changed and don't ask this question. The point here is that virtually all home buyers are using the internet as a central part of their home search process. What I have not seen being covered in recent surveys is that home buyers in 2010 and 2011 are now using smart phones in their home search process because companies like [Zillow](#), [Redfin](#) and [Realtor.com](#) have mobile phone Apps that aid buyers in finding homes for sale in a neighborhood.
6. ***The Successful Combination of Photography and Real Estate***, RIS Media, April 2008: This article reports on a study by point2.com that shows the more photos on a listing the fewer days it is on the market and the greater percentage of the original price it sells for.
7. ***For the Real Money Shot, Hire a Pro***, *Globe and Mail*, Aug, 2007: Similar article to the *New York Times* article.
8. ***The Pix that Get the Clicks***, *Los Angeles Times*, May 2007: Similar article to the *New York Times* article. In the spring and summer of 2007 people in the US didn't realize the real estate market was about to crash. So much of the media was commenting on the real estate.
9. ***Making Every Pixel Count***, *New York Times*, Feb 2007: This is a classic article that even though it is many years old and has quite old statistics, it beautifully describes all the key motivations for demanding great photography to sell real estate.

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The Purpose of Real Estate Photography

Photographs are a central component of marketing a property. The primary function that photos perform is to get prospective buyers to come look at the property.

In today's market where virtually all home buyers start their home search online, a little thumbnail of the front of the property becomes the first reason buyers choose to look at more photos of your listing over the 50 other properties at the same price in the same area. Great interior photos in turn become the reason a buyer chooses to physically come look at your listing instead of the others.

Benefits to the Real Estate Agent

As a real estate agent there are even more compelling reasons for using great photography to present your listing:

- Your home seller client will be pleased how you are presenting their property.
- It's a well established fact that great photos and marketing materials are a way to get more listings. Neighbors of the listing property watch carefully how a property is marketed. If they like what they see, they will ask the agent to list their property when the time comes to sell.
- If you are competing for a listing, the commitment of professionally done photography and marketing materials can help you win the listing.

As the marketing expert in charge of selling your client's property it is all important these days to understand the way marketing photos work so you can use photography to maximum benefit whether you are shooting your own photos or hiring a professional photographer.

The Ten Essentials

Here are 10 essential principles that you can use to give your marketing photos maximum effectiveness:

1. **The primary purpose of a real estate marketing photo is to present the features of the property.** Make sure that each photo visually supports this purpose. Any visual distractions that divert the viewer's attention from this purpose need to be eliminated. Items 3 through 9 below are the most common distractions that pull the viewers attention away from the purpose of the photo. Also, photo composition is all important because it controls the photo viewer's attention and focuses it on the purpose of the photo.



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The two preceding photos illustrate how the angle the photo is taken from can focus attention on the most important features of a room. In the photo on the left it is not clear what the most important features of the room are. In the one on the right, attention is focused on the fireplace and the large window.

- 2. Use a wide-angle lens to shoot interiors.** Wide-angle lenses increase the feeling of space in interiors. What's a wide-angle lens? Lenses with a wide enough angle of view to shoot interiors don't usually come with off-the-shelf or point-and-shoot cameras. For interiors, a lens should be between 14 mm and 24 mm effective focal length.



- 3. Remove clutter and stage interiors for best results.** It's a well known fact that staging homes pays off. Homes sell faster and for a higher price when they are staged. Most lived in homes have too much clutter. Photos will look better and show more of the home if clutter is reduced and furniture is staged by a trained home stager.



- 4. The primary exterior shot is THE most important photo.** Spend extra time, money and effort to get a “knock-out” front photo because this is the photo that will be seen most and first by prospective home buyers. Online thumbnails of this photo must entice the buyer to look closer at the property. Many homes benefit from an elevated front shot where the camera is 10'

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to 20' above the street level. Find a photographer that does elevated shots.



interiors.



- 5. Render interiors light and bright.** Bright interiors are up-beat and make a more positive impression on the prospective buyer, so you want light and bright photos. Amateur cameras often under expose. Special lighting equipment or photo editing techniques must be used to get interior photos to come across light and bright. Lighting, along with controlling window brightness, is probably the most challenging aspect of real estate photography. The two common approaches to interior lighting are to shoot bracketed exposures or to use multiple small flash units to light

- 6. Vertical lines (walls etc.) must look perfectly straight.** We live in a world where we unconsciously know that all walls are perfectly vertical. When a viewer sees a room where the walls are not parallel with the side of the photo, the viewer is visually distracted and disoriented. A voice in their head is saying, "This is not right". Verticals that are not perfectly straight with the edge of the photo is the first indication of a non-professional interior photographer. Compare the two following photos and notice the visual tension in the first one where the walls are not vertical and the horizontal ceiling line is not horizontal.

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7. **Vertical and horizontal lines must be straight.** Wide-angle lenses cause lines near the edges of photos to curve so special efforts and software must be used to remove distortion.

8. **Don't let bright windows distract.** Unless special lighting or photo editing software is used interior windows will tend to look too bright so the view out the window is not visible. It is always possible to show the view out the window if the view is an important selling point of the property. However, special work by the photographer may be required to make sure the exterior view is clearly visible. Bright windows distract the viewer's attention because the eye naturally moves to the brightest area in the photo. Sometimes the view outside is not important, while other times, with view properties, being able to show the inside and the view out the window is critical.



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9. **Don't let color casts distract.** Strong color casts (typically a strong orange color) distract the viewers attention.



10. **The way photos are presented online has a huge impact on the overall effectiveness of marketing a property.** Photos have the most impact when presented large (800 x 600 pixels or larger) and in a smooth, easily controllable slide show. Real estate sites typically do not present photos in the most effective way possible. One of the purposes of a virtual tour or slide show is to maximize the impact of marketing photos.

You can hire a photographer that uses these principles or you can use these principles to shoot photos yourself if you are technically inclined or have support staff that shoot your photos. But either way, you are the listing agent in charge of marketing a property, so use these principles to produce, select and present your marketing photos for maximum effectiveness.

Since these are well accepted photographic principles, most experienced real estate photographers follow them without being told, but there are some that won't. It's easy to think because you have a digital camera that you can be a professional. Remember, you are the marketing expert, it's your job to make sure the marketing is effective. If it isn't, ask questions.