



## PRESS RELEASE

### Virtual Tours: New Career Choice for Professional Photographers?

**Traverse City, Michigan Oct 17, 2003** Four months after operating an Internet-based virtual tour business to supplement their professional wedding photography business, Ellen Hart of **Hart2Hart Wedding Photography** announced, "I believe the virtual tour business will surpass the wedding photography business. In fact, we may end up not doing weddings that much at all. I see this as more of a mainstay business than wedding photography."

Will virtual tour businesses become the next career choice of many professional photographers? What is it about the virtual tour business that makes it so enticing to photographers? What should you look for in a virtual tour business?

Our look at this new career choice for professional photographers begins in April 2003 when Ron and Ellen Hart, an international award-winning husband and wife photography team with a combined total of over 50 years of photographic experience, moved to Sandpoint, Idaho and relocated their Hart2Hart Wedding Photography business there. A month later, they became a Real Tour Vision™ (RTV™) Dealer ([www.realtourvision.com](http://www.realtourvision.com)) and began producing and selling 360° panoramic virtual tours of properties to Real Estate brokers.

Between the two of them, the Hart's have engaged in "virtually" every other kind of photography from whitewater rafting and Formula One Racing to concerts, portraits and glamour/boudoir modeling. The wedding photography business, though, has been the bread and butter business that, until now, seemed to be the most reliable revenue producer. Now all that is changing.

"Last May," recalls Ellen, "we were approached by a resort and asked if we could do virtual tours. Up to that point, we had seen some virtual tours on the Internet and were not impressed with what we had seen. But because I am always looking for new avenues of business, I told the resort that I would check into it and I began researching virtual tours on the Internet. I did some searches and found Real Tour Vision."

#### The Virtual Tour Business

Real Tour Vision is one of a couple dozen businesses that offer methods of producing panoramic virtual tours. For this article, we refer to virtual tours as those featuring 360° panoramic images created by stitching together a sequential series of still photographs taken completely around a room or location from the same starting point (so that a new image starts where another ends). The tours are posted on the Internet for 24/7 viewing.

Because panoramic virtual tours are a great substitute for an in-person visit, they are very popular among Real Estate Agents (who have a recurring need to promote properties), resorts, colleges/universities, theme parks, vacation towns and other places.

Depending upon the sophistication level of the business, some virtual tour businesses sell Do-It-Yourself Kits while others sell turnkey systems including camera, rotating camera mount and carrying cases. In all instances, software is either sold or accessed on the Internet in order to stitch the series of still images together.

However, in Ellen Hart's opinion, most virtual tours appeared in small windows online, had images that were out-of-focus, distorted or showed stitching seams.

By contrast, Ellen felt "The Real Tour Vision tours appear in a much bigger window, the images are crisp, clear, in-focus and they are not distorted in any way. The stitching between pictures is seamless and it is just a superior product.

"There were some other tour companies that had software and hardware you could buy, and it was less money than RTV, but they didn't have the support and they didn't have the training and they didn't have a lot of the other things RTV had. And, being unfamiliar with this area, I didn't want to commit myself to buying equipment that we wouldn't have a clue as to how to use and wouldn't have the support or training to back us up."

### **Business Popular with REALTORS®**

"There is a big application for virtual tours in Real Estate," says Ellen Hart. "So, we went to the REALTOR® that sold us the house we bought here and he said that he thought the broker at the real estate company where he worked would be interested in this.

"We sat down with some sample tours we had gotten from Real Tour Vision and we made a presentation to the broker, told her what we could do once we had this new technology, but said we needed some cash to buy some equipment and software. And she replied, 'how much do you need?' So, we pre-sold some tours to them equivalent to the amount of the check she wrote to us. That instantly paid for the software we needed from Real Tour Vision to start the business.

"Although this real estate company had seen virtual tours before, the ones they had seen were inferior quality to what we showed them. When we showed them the quality of the Real Tour Vision tours, they became very excited and said they really wanted to be the first real estate office in Sandpoint to have real high-quality virtual tours. This business started off fast for us.

"Now, some REALTORS® are finding that they can't get a listing for a luxury home unless they offer a virtual tour, because sellers are demanding them.

"Tours are hosted on the Real Tour Vision Server. However, they are linked to the REALTORS® website. So, when a shopper clicks on 'see the virtual tour,' the tour window pops up and they never know that the tour is coming from another website. All the information around the tour is customized for the REALTOR®, so there is nothing that competes with the REALTORS® website."

Besides posting tours on local REALTOR® sites, for an additional fee, tours produced using the RTV system can also appear on more than 600 national and regional real estate Web sites, such as ColdwellBanker.com, Century21.com, ERA.com, PrudentialRealEstate.com and RealtyExecutives.com. This is possible because Real Tour Vision is one of 21 companies recognized as an accepted provider of virtual tours by Realtor.com® and its PicturePath™ program. Realtor.com® is the official Web site of the National Association of Realtors®.

"Right now, a high percentage of the virtual tours we do are for Real Estate," says Ellen Hart. "However, we are talking with the Chamber of Commerce to do a tour of the local city where we live, we're talking to several Bed & Breakfast places, talking with a tourism board for a local town and talking to one of the local golf resorts. The golf resort has several interests in virtual tours besides their overnight lodging and their course. They are also interested in tours of the real estate they sell adjacent to the course as well as tours of rental homes they promote."

## **Why Photographers Have An Advantage**

"I believe that to excel at this business you need to know how to take pictures," says Ellen Hart, "because basically a panoramic image is twelve pictures that are stitched into one picture."

"Any virtual tour system, as good as it is, doesn't do tours automatically. There still needs to be a certain level of talent and ability in the person who is operating the equipment and using the software to turn out a really great tour."

"I know some REALTORS® have bought the equipment and are producing virtual tours, but from what I've seen on the MLS listings and things on the Internet, most REALTORS® don't have a clue about how to take a good picture."

"With the tours that we turn out, sometimes we do extensive color adjustments and light adjustments and so forth in PhotoShop to the individual pictures before we ever stitch them together. I'm not sure a lot of others do that because not everyone has a working knowledge of PhotoShop. PhotoShop is a complicated program and it has a steep learning curve."

"The RTV software, itself, does compensate somewhat for differences in light between one picture and another, but it doesn't do it all."

"Just as you can't make an artist by giving them paints and canvas, you can't make someone a photographer or a virtual tour photographer just by giving them equipment and software."

## **Selecting a Virtual Tour Business**

Some Virtual Tour (VT) businesses are available for sale to professional photographers. Other VT businesses employ tour producers while a centralized office handles all sales and marketing. In the Hart's situation, they purchased a turnkey business that may provide more long-term profitability and business tax advantages.

Before you buy or otherwise invest in a VT business, consider the following:

1. Business model. Does a successful business model exist? If you buy a business, what start-up costs will you incur? Is financing available? What profits can you expect within the first six months? The first year?
2. Camera operation and image quality. Can you use your own camera equipment or must you purchase specialized hardware? How easy is it to produce the series of panoramic images? Can "hot spots" in scenes (such as windows) be reduced or eliminated?
3. Software. What is the quality of panoramic images the software produces? How visible are the seam lines between photos? Is the software user-friendly or difficult? The degree of operating difficulty is especially critical if someone other than you may eventually be putting the tours together.
4. Training. What sort of support will you receive from the VT business? Do they have manuals and online FAQs to help you? Is there a phone hotline to answer your questions when you're in the field?
5. Distribution. How fast can tours be posted online? Are the tours you produce accepted by Realtor.com® and its PicturePath™ program for wide distribution through the Internet? Does this wider distribution cost extra? How much?
6. Features. How easy is it to navigate through a tour? What customization or special services will make your tours more attractive than competitors? For example, can the tour be emailed or downloaded easily by viewers? Does the virtual tour window provide space for customized banner ads, agency logos and a photo of the real estate agent or tour owner? Is there space for agent or business email and website links on each tour? Can audio narration of a tour or an audio description of the real estate brokerage firm be included?

7. References. Can you speak to others who bought the VT business? What do they like or dislike about the business?

### **A Year 'Round Business**

"Virtual tours may have a bit of seasonality to it, but not like weddings," says Ellen Hart.  
"Weddings are very seasonal. Most weddings are Saturday and occur in the spring and summer. Not a whole lot of fall and winter weddings where we live.

"However, virtual tours you can do year 'round. And where we live, where it's snowy in the winter, it may slow you down a little bit, but you can do tours anytime. The Real Estate business is somewhat seasonal, too, but they are listing houses year 'round and they need virtual tours of the interiors of homes even if the exterior is covered with snow.

"Our customers are very happy with the Virtual Tours we produce. And the homeowners that have had their home shot by us for virtual tours on the Internet are very, very happy with them. They think it's really great. In fact, one of the REALTORS® that listed a million-and-a-half dollar home received 97 hits within a week.

"And I've been real happy with RTV. They're always there to answer questions for you and they're moving in a forward direction. I'm real happy to be part of this team.

"It's keeping us busy!" says Hart.

### **SIDEBAR #1: Technical Details**

#### Camera equipment:

For panoramas that may also require enlargement for displays: D-60 Canon -- a six megapixel camera that produces 18 megabyte files. These digital images can be enlarged to either one foot high by six feet long or a foot-and-a-half high by eight feet long.

For real estate online images: Olympus 4000C – a four megapixel camera.

#### Real Tour Vision Equipment List:

Olympus Camera C-4000 zoom  
SanDisk 32MB Smart Media (2x)  
San Disk Image Mate  
Hakuba Wallet  
Battery Pack with Cord-Digipower (2x)  
Tripod  
Camera Bag  
Bogen -Low Profile Head  
Lens Cleaning Kit  
Panavue Image Assembler- Command line version  
RTV rotator  
Tour Builder Software

NOTE: As professional photographers, the Harts had about 80 percent of everything needed. They merely needed to purchase a rotator head to mount to their cameras and the RTV Tour Builder Software to produce the panoramic images.

#### A Word About Software:

"I think RTV's software program is the best one out there," says Ron Hart, the husband of the Hart2Hart Photography team. "However, because each image may be metered differently to accommodate lighting variances, there may be some stitch lines evident. So we most always do

some image manipulation with Adobe's PhotoShop to create the most perfect seamless panoramic image possible.”

## **SIDEBAR #2:**

### **Why the Real Estate Market Likes Virtual Tours!**

Virtual tours save REALTORS® time and money by:

- Showcasing properties online 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (24/7) on a global scale – holding an “Open House” every day without the hassle.
- Eliminating repetitious sales presentations.
- Pre-qualifying buyers.
- Reducing travel costs for the REALTOR® and prospects.
- Reducing property cleanup for showings.
- Enhancing listings with minimal curb appeal by emphasizing interior features.
- Minimizing interruptions for REALTOR®, as well as buyer and seller.

According to Ellen Hart, “One of the things that REALTORS® like about our Real Tour Vision tours is that there are no plug-ins or downloads in order to view a tour. People don’t want to download anything into their computer because they’re afraid it might conflict with some other program they have already loaded onto their computer.

“REALTORS® also like the Real Tour Vision feature that lets them download a tour onto their desktop and burn it onto a CD so they can send the tour to customers or other REALTORS®. So, even if someone doesn’t have Internet access, they can still view the tour.”

### **About Real Tour Vision™**

Real Tour Vision, Inc is a leading provider of virtual tour related technology solutions. Real Tour Vision maintains a Full Service Dealer Network which provides service in: USA, Canada, Mexico, Ireland, England, Spain, and South Africa. Real Tour Vision also offers self service virtual tour solutions for Real Estate Professionals. Real Tour Vision is based out of Traverse City, Michigan.

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