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Virtual Home Tour

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When a potential home buyer can't get out right away to tour a listing, savvy real estate agents hold an open house on the potential buyer's computer screen using a virtual home tour.

A virtual home tour are not just a cool gimmick real estate agents use to show off their technological prowess. Consumers demand a virtual home tour. Seventy-eight percent of those who shop for homes on the Internet say the most important feature when searching online is multiple photos -- followed closely by detailed property descriptions and virtual tours, according to the 2003 National Association of Realtors Profile of Home Buyers and Sellers.

What's more, those who demand virtual home tours are more likely to be smarter, wealthier consumers in their prime home-buying years, compared to those who don't take a virtual home tour. On a typical day, 2 million people are using the Internet to go on a virtual home tour, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Those virtual tours are not always a virtual home tour. They also take viewers to far off places on Earth and beyond, say, to Saturn, and include vacation destinations, colleges, art exhibits, hotels, and notable homes like the White House and Taj Mahal.

A virtual home tour, however, are among some of the most common virtual home tours taken. Pew's nationwide phone survey to examine the impact of the Internet interviewed 914 adults, 534 of whom are Internet users. The survey said those who take virtual home tours were more often single, white, women, aged 28 to 49, earning \$50,000 a year or more, graduate degree holders and broadband access subscribers.

Home buyers like a virtual home tour because they provide them with an immediate and efficient way to view and eliminate the homes they don't like and choose the homes they want to go see in person. For home sellers it can mean less foot traffic, but just as many, if not more eyeballs on their home for sale.



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It's a particularly common tool in the high-end market, where the best are professionally produced in living color, often with voice-overs as if the real estate agent is along for the tour. The best are also easy to navigate, allowing you to smoothly tour the listing room by room, as if you were walking through the home and looking up and down, left and right.

Technology has improved immensely and costs have plummeted since the first jerky images rotated with fits and starts on a computer screen, but it still takes a clean, speedy broadband internet connection or a download to a computer with a fast video processor to fully enjoy the virtual home tour without unwanted stop-action.

Overall, the Pew study said, 45 percent -- 54 million -- of American adults who use the Internet have taken a virtual home tour, but more -- 60 percent -- of those who have broadband internet connections at home and 62 percent of those who have broadband internet connections at work have taken a virtual home tour of some type.

Virtual home tour making also takes skilled professionals to output high-quality, life-like videos. A virtual home tour produced unprofessionally can harm a listing more than help it. Occasionally, the best virtual home tour may not be of the home itself, but, say, of its unobstructed view of the mountains, hillsides or meadow. Putting a home's unique feature in its best light with a virtual tour and leaving the rest to good old still photography remains an option.

For example, it's nearly impossible to overcome "bloating" rooms when the confines of a small space forces the virtual tour maker to snap on the wide angle lens to capture the flow of the room. Real Hollywood magic on the silver screen or an in-person visit remains necessary to see a home as it really exists.



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