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## Residential brokers ride social media wave

**Real estate agents show New York savvy, build brands and win followers with YouTube, Facebook and Twitter.**

By [Amanda Fung](#)



*Buck Ennis*

**THE TWEET SPOT:** Corcoran learned to use Twitter to find and reach people moving to the city, Matthew Shadbolt says.

In the past year and a half, residential real estate broker Gus Waite has posted 35 YouTube videos covering everything from the character of different Manhattan neighborhoods to how-tos on finding the perfect place. Altogether, they have drawn more than 2,600 views.

The founders of PostGradApartments.com were so impressed that they called Mr. Waite to strike up a venture. In July, they plan to launch a sweepstakes for recent graduates moving to the city. Mr. Waite will help the winner find an apartment at no fee, and pick him or her up in a limousine to be whisked off to lunch at a top restaurant.

“I am planting my seeds,” said the 49-year-old broker, who debuted a blog last month: YourNYagent.com, geared toward simplifying the process of renting an apartment in the city. “Blogs and videos are hugely effective in branding me within the real estate industry.”

Mr. Waite is among a growing number of individual residential brokers who have begun using social media over the past five years to increase their visibility in the crowded world of real

estate. More recently, many brokerage firms have followed suit, making a companywide effort of harnessing Facebook, YouTube and Twitter to share their local knowledge with readers, drive traffic to their websites and raise their companies' profile.

Rather than using these tools for direct sales pitches, the firms are primarily embracing them as a means to showcase their expertise. Posting an amazing prewar triplex penthouse on the Upper West Side or an open house at a trendy property overlooking the High Line may make sense every once in a while, but most opt for a softer sell. They post information ranging from restaurant recommendations to neighborhood happenings—which over time builds the relationships and trust that may eventually turn fans into clients.

“The next generation of buyers does everything online,” said Frederick Peters, president of Warburg Realty Partnership, which boasts 388 fans on its 1-year-old Facebook page. “We need to make ourselves available and build a following.”

## **Proving value in online world**

### **Commercial agents shun social networking**

While many individual brokers and firms in the residential market have embraced social media in recent years, the same cannot be said of their peers in the commercial sector.

“Commercial brokers are slower to adopt, because their business is driven by tighter-knit, private relationships,” said Suzanne Rosnowski, a partner at public relations firm Quinn & Co. “Social media is just too public for them.”

That makes Ben Friedland a clear exception of long standing. The CB Richard Ellis Inc. senior vice president created his LinkedIn account eight years ago and now has more than 500 connections.

“A significant portion of my business is generated through social media tools,” he said.

Over the past year, Mr. Friedland has been encouraging his CBRE colleagues worldwide to take advantage of social media, teaching small groups about how it is affecting the sales process.

“With all of today's communication tools, businesspeople can get slammed with information overload,” said Mr. Friedland. “One of the key values of social media is that it allows people to sift through all the noise and focus on information that's come through credible, reliable sources.”

—*Amanda Fung*

Management at Stribling & Associates Ltd. feels much the same way. One month after her promotion to director of marketing and business development—a new position—former broker Elizabeth Ann Kivlan established a Facebook page and a Twitter account for the company. She stresses Stribling's growing awareness that it needs to make the huge online community aware of its bona fides as an expert in neighborhoods and home buying.

“The hope is to get more brand recognition to drive people to the Stribling site,” said Ms. Kivlan.

Stribling acquired 162 Facebook fans in its first two months, courtesy of tidbits such as its posting about the popular Milk & Cookies Bakery in Greenwich Village.

One of the earliest real estate users of social media is Halstead Property, which has 900 brokers in the tri-state area. Three years after the brokerage began using Facebook, the social media juggernaut has become the fourth-largest source of traffic to the company's website, which attracts 2 million unique visitors a month.

“Our whole social-media mantra is to be industry and neighborhood ambassadors,” said Matthew Leone, director of Web marketing and social media for Halstead, which boasts more than 3,200 followers on Twitter and almost 2,400 fans on Facebook. “People are really buying into a neighborhood.”

Similarly, The Corcoran Group, which has more than 1,100 brokers in the city, started using Twitter two years ago. Initially, it tweeted random apartment listings and real estate news stories. But after getting little response, it began downplaying the stories and started focusing on engaging tweeters who have recently moved to the city.

“Now we reach out to people who need assistance,” said Matthew Shadbolt, Corcoran's director of interactive product and marketing, who searches for people tweeting about moving to the city and sends messages to them directly via Twitter. “We use it as a lead-generation tool.”

Corcoran has now attracted 5,500 followers on Twitter, which has become the firm's most effective social-media site for getting new business, Mr. Shadbolt said.

## **Brokers launch apps to reach users on the run**

As more people rely on their cell phones and other mobile devices to keep up with the world, residential brokerages are creating various apps in a race to follow them.

Some 18 months ago, The Corcoran Group, an early leader in the effort, launched a free iPhone app that now has roughly 30,000 users. It shows sales and rental listings and also helps users find shops, restaurants and other services near their current location.

It's difficult to measure how many calls or e-mails agents get from app users, but Corcoran interactive chief Matthew Shadbolt says the effort seems to be working. To tap more consumers, Corcoran created an Android app that has drawn 5,000 users since it debuted in October.

“Our primary goal for all our interactive platforms is to get people to take online conversations offline,” said Mr. Shadbolt, adding that users of the iPhone app spend three times longer accessing Corcoran info than those surfing the firm's website.

Two years ago, Warburg Realty Partnership launched an iPhone app dubbed AroundMe, which was named one of *Time* magazine's 50 best iPhone apps of 2011. AroundMe pinpoints a user's

location and helps him find nearby amenities, as well as available properties that Warburg is exclusively marketing.

“It's not going to change business overnight,” said Frederick Peters, Warburg's president. “It's just a way of getting your brand out there.”

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Other brokerages are having success with YouTube. Two-year-old Miron Properties, with 19 agents, has its own YouTube channel, featuring how-to videos on buying, selling and renting an apartment in the city.

“YouTube has been wildly successful and produced real customers for us,” said Miron's founder, Jeff Schleider.

It cost a few thousand dollars to produce the videos.

“They are well worth it,” Mr. Schleider added.

For a whole generation of real estate brokers who have begun using social media for work, it's already so much a part of their lives that it can be difficult to separate the personal from the professional uses.

For example, Halstead broker Renée Fishman recently reconnected via Facebook with a high school classmate now living in California; as it turned out, the friend needed help selling an Upper East Side studio apartment. Ms. Fishman got the job, and the \$325,000 property is now in contract.

## **A LEG UP WITH FACEBOOK**

“She knew I was a real estate broker because of Facebook,” Ms. Fishman said, adding that making the connection helped her beat out a broker who actually lives in the building.

As brokers are finding out, using social media does carry some risks. Tweets, videos and other postings can alienate potential clients just as easily as they can impress them.

Mr. Shadbolt once posted on Corcoran's Facebook page what he thought was a fun item on downtown Manhattan's 10 best cupcake shops. The post quickly drew at least one protest from an annoyed reader who wanted to know what on earth that had to do with finding an apartment.

Undeterred, Mr. Shadbolt replied, asking what kind of information the sender wanted to see Corcoran post on Facebook.

“People are often surprised when they get a personalized response from a big brand,” Mr. Shadbolt said. “It can be very powerful from a brand perspective.”

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