

# from website to web presence

Today's Home Builder exists in a world of inter-connected online communities, yet many are not fully adjusted to the need for a well-designed and user-friendly website, let alone the many other ways a builder must exist online. This white paper explores the new home builder Internet footprint, and, drawing on the expertise from many home builder marketing and sales professionals, makes the case for movement from simply having a traditional website to complimenting a robust website with a thoughtful, nuanced web presence.

## a brief history of web trends

With the introduction of the Model T, Henry Ford gave the world something new, an automobile affordable for the masses, produced on a mass scale. The automobile had been something for the elites, a luxury item, but now, thanks to Mr. Ford, the automobile would quickly become ubiquitous, essential. The Model T was introduced in 1908, and by the 1920's most Americans who drove learned to do so using a Model T.

Let's imagine the year is 1908. Two men are in the horse whip business. Neither can see the future. This new car that has come along has some similarities to the horse-drawn buggy and simply replaces the power source – the horse – with an engine. Both men might agree that horse-and-buggy transport has a certain elegance, that these

automobiles are clunky and unsightly. Neither man likes what this obvious change represents, both to their industry and to the future. And both men face the same choice: innovate, or stick with existing, tried-and-true business models. And so one man makes a switch, begins manufacturing car pedals to be used in the newfangled machine. The other sticks with what has been successful for decades. Now: guess who succeeds.

When did the Internet begin? Debatable. Let's say this: the Yahoo! search engine launched in 1995. Google incorporated in 1998. Facebook began in 2004 (and in March of 2010, Hitwise.com ran a report showing Facebook as the most visited U.S website, surpassing the mighty Google). Twitter began as "Twtr" in 2006. The Internet is changing, and how we use it is changing too.

Many home builders were slow to recognize why an elegant, user-friendly website was a good idea, though, especially as we exit the recent recession, this is an ever-shrinking minority. However, many home builders, and many extremely smart and capable sales and marketing professionals in the real estate space, are not recognizing a more recent shift, a shift as clear and definitive as that from horse-drawn carriage to automobile. Once upon a time, meaning only four years ago, a home builder could invest in a nice website and call it a day. But this is changing, splintering. Now, you must have a web presence of which the website plays an important but by no means exclusive role.

Let's dissect what is happening to the internet by analyzing several important web trends. We will address: Websites; User Generated Content; Social Media; Platforms; "The Living Internet"; and "pay-as-you-go" models. Each will be dealt with in some detail.

## websites

You need a website. The assumption here is that if you are reading this, you understand the value of having a website, you get why you need a place to draw traffic, where you clearly make a compelling case, collect leads, and control the message. You understand that a web presence begins with having a website, allows you to attract prospects and service your market, to stay in contact with your demographic while answering the questions and conveying why you are unique and desirable. To stay in touch. Creating the right website means creating an impact based on a well-honed strategic, creative and technical plan.

## social media

The social media revolution has radically democratized information and content, meaning once a home builder could dictate from the top down and attempt to totally control message, now everything has been flattened as the message is disseminated by thousands of voices. Web users, like TV viewers, once sat there and passively consumed content but now the once passive consumer is now an active content producer. New technologies are now being used to create a dialogue. Much has been written on social media in the builder space and a New Home Feed white paper on home builders and social media can be accessed here:

<http://blog.newhomefeed.com/white-papers/social-media-101-for-homebuilders/>.

For now, let's briefly focus on arguably the single most important aspect of social media: the blog.

Blogs are crucial for moving beyond the antiquated "have a website and call it a day" model. Builders must blog. As Carol Flammer of mRELEVANCE and author of "Social Media for Home Builders: It's Easier Than You Think," available from [BuilderBooks.com](http://BuilderBooks.com), explains, "A blog is the most important aspect of any social media marketing program for many reasons, one of which is a well-built blog will increase website traffic by 50 – 200%." "Well-built" means user-friendly, search engine friendly, well-written, and informative for its readers.

Many agencies who work with builders are somewhat puzzled by builder reluctance to embrace blogging, because when your job is to be aware of all the ways to use the web to sell homes, the reasons keep adding up and are more compelling. To understand builder hesitation, [Graphic Language](http://GraphicLanguage.net), the agency powering [New Home Feed](http://NewHomeFeed.com), informally polled clients to understand why builders hesitate to embrace blogging.

Vanessa Andrews, Marketing Manager at [Shapell Homes](http://ShapellHomes.com), shares, "I do not have the time or the staff to maintain a blog, and I believe strongly that something like this should be maintained -- or at least co-maintained -- in-house." Time pressure, especially given the current environment in which builders must do more with less, is intense. Andrews adds, "I don't even have time to field the sales email!"

Jennifer Bell, Director of Media & Public Relations at [Warmington Homes](http://WarmingtonHomes.com) understands why a blog is important, but does not yet have one. She explains, "A blog needs to be

relevant, informed, interesting, sought after and read regularly to be truly worthwhile. It's a tall order!." No doubt about that. Jennifer adds, "While I would like to think we are capable of achieve these things, frankly I'm not sure if ROI (in terms of time and energy) truly make sense at this time. It is as simple as that. I like the idea in theory however, and a blog remains on my "To Do" list." Bell also gets it, but again, it's a question of devoting time and resources.

Some builders, even some really smart builders, remain unconvinced of the necessity to blog. One anonymous Marketing Director adds, "We are not blogging because of the additional manpower needed to manage the site and we cannot draw a direct line from blogging to an increase in sales."

Can you draw a direct line from a blog to a sales increase? Yes. Consider this: A blog can bring traffic up 200%, and web traffic means leads and community traffic and leads and community traffic means homes sold. And yet from builders we keep hearing it's a question of priorities, and a blog isn't at the top of the list. **It should be.**

Katie Wynne, Social Media Manager at award-winning Southern California marketing and communications firm [Gunn/Jerkens](#), explains why builders should overcome the perceived barriers and start blogging. "Social Media and your online presence are more than ancillary components of your overall marketing effort," Wynne states. "They're now a necessity. Homebuyers don't want to be told what to buy and when: they want a trusting relationship in which they are heard and understood. Without an online social presence, builders are missing out on some massive long-term returns. And with the ever-growing power of search engines like Google, the absence of a blog and social profiles has a much larger negative impact than you may think."

Allison Buffum, Online Marketing Manager, blogs for [SummerHill Homes](#). When asked why SummerHill Homes blogs, Buffum explained, "We realized there was a void between typical press/news releases and useful information for homebuyers and

homeowners. Through our blog, we are better able to communicate with our market, especially with younger, first-time buyers, by being a little less 'corporate' to break through the usual marketing chatter and help our buyers find the information they need and want. The blog has been a perfect way to communicate and at this point we can't afford not to blog."

To a builder who understands why a blog is important and yet still feels like there isn't time, two points. First, you do not need to do more than 1-2 posts per week, and really, who doesn't have time for this? If still there is not time, the second point is this: can a builder afford to hire and entrust an agency to speak in the builders' voice? If the resources to manage the blog in-house truly are not there, then how can a builder afford not to hire and entrust an agency to speak in the builders' voice?

## user generated content

The concept of "user generated content" emerged in 2005 out of the new media production circles. The concept is fairly comprehensive, meaning any media form where the end user generates content accessible to the general public. Think about Wikipedia, where anybody can write or edit an article on any subject, which then is accessed by anyone who accesses that content. Think about on Amazon.com where some content, in the form of reviews, is available to everyone and may be written by anyone.

For our purposes, we will focus on two examples of user generated content: Yelp and Google Sidewiki.

### Yelp

Yelp, accessed by over 25 million people every month, is a company incorporating aspects of social networking, user generated content in the form of reviews, and local search into a website of the same name. It works like this: you are on Newbury Street in downtown Boston. You want some pizza. So many pizza choices! Use Yelp (a very popular iPhone app incidentally) and you can see which pizza joints are liked, and disliked, by Yelp users. As a result of the website's popularity, a Google search for a specific pizza joint will likely reveal the Yelp page for that pizza joint, and all the positive and negative comments on the pizza joint.

Similarly, if you are a home builder, and your name is Googled, there is a good chance that reviews of your company on Yelp will appear on the first page of search results.

Transparently with these reviewers in the public eye, be the commentary positive or negative, goes a tremendous distance towards righting a perceived wrong and significantly improves perceptions of the company. Yelp is becoming an essential tool for anyone gathering information online, and should not be ignored.

## Google Sidewiki

Google Sidewiki has been addressed with some depth in a New Home Feed White Paper, available here:

<http://blog.newhomefeed.com/white-papers/google-introduces-sidewiki/>

Launched in late 2009 with the full-backing of the monolithic Google, Sidewiki allows anyone to comment publically on any website. With Yelp, a person to Google a home builder might have the option to click into Yelp.com for more information on the public's impression of the builder. With Sidewiki, user-generated commentary will be right there, unavoidable, in plain sight. Meaning anyone can comment positively or negatively on any home builder.

Yelp, Sidewiki, and other sites like pissedconsumer.com will have a very significant impact on the builder space and absolutely cannot be ignored. Resources must be devoted to being aware of any negative commentary, and unhappy prospects should be immediately addressed. Because forums for user generated content are built upon a foundation of openness and transparency, the disgruntled will need to be publically addressed. The negative of an unhappy person can easily be turned into a positive by reaching out publically, engaging the person about their issues, and demonstrating a commitment to doing what is right. Sometimes this can cause the negative reviewer to remove negative commentary. Other times it can demonstrate to the public compassion, and a commitment to striving always for excellence. However, because a search for a home builder can easily reveal unhappy people who have not been engaged, then the negativity can quickly become unmanageable, costing the builder leads and ultimately sales.

## platforms

A platform is a means to deliver content. A newspaper is a format to deliver articles. The newspaper is the platform for the news. As the migration online continues, a platform would be the iPhone, which is the means by which content is accessed. Facebook is a



platform. The old Microsoft would be an early example of a web platform. In the real estate world, [Zillow](#) and [Trulia](#) are two examples of platforms delivering the content of homes for sale.

Platforms vie for dominance, to be the “go to” for consumers. Trulia wants home browsers to use only Trulia, Zillow wants home browsers to use only Zillow, and so forth. The amount of people to use these sites dictates what they can charge advertisers for ad space. So eyeballs on their website are very important.

Even though the Trulias and Zillows of the world want to claim as much of the home-browsing audience as possible, it won't happen. So a home builder or broker needs to get their content – their listings of homes for sale – onto the various available platforms. Tools like New Home Feed make distributing content across platforms like Trulia and Zillow much easier, by saving time and resources by allowing for instant listing and updates to listings.

## “pay-as-you-go” models

Collegehumor.com. Thedailybeast.com. Soon everything under the Rupert Murdoch sun. These are examples of sites where fees are collected in traditional ways. The website has content. People want it. Ad space is sold, so advertisers get in front of a specific audience. In the real estate space, think again about Trulia and Zillow. Zillow, for example, comes up with this cool tool, “zestimates,” where people can see estimates for the value of their home, or their neighbor's. Good content leads to eyeballs on the site, and eyeballs on the site command ad dollars. It's old-school, top-down marketing. And when you know of a website where your demographic can be found this model can be very useful.

Tice Burke, Manager, Strategic Partnerships at Trulia, explains how Trulia works for home builders. “Trulia provides builders the opportunity to reach a targeted audience of over 6.5M potential home buyers. Builders are able to geographically target their listings and their advertising message directly to a substantial pool of consumers who are actively engaged in the process of buying a home.” Builders can take advantage of Trulia and similar sites by making absolutely certain their listings are on Trulia. (Trulia is included in [New Home Feed's core network](#). Builders may also

purchase geo-specific display advertising on Trulia, Zillow and other similar sites, and take advantage of the traffic we know is accessing the site.

## “the living internet”

The Internet lets people express naturally, in whatever language they choose. And people enjoy publically sharing thoughts and even hobbies. Consider Digg, which lets people flag and share stories, which harnesses, as Michael Wolff says in the March, 2010 Vanity Fair, individual “autodidactic expertise” to turn a profit. Consider Twitter, a real-time database of what users are experiencing. It’s the Living Internet. Having just a static web page? So last decade.

## conclusion

Once upon a time being online meant having a website and social networking meant happy hour with colleagues. Things have changed. Now, as the Internet changes, so has the ways in which information is gathered. A home builder must have an elegant, user-friendly and intuitive website with all the information a potential buyer needs. And the home builder must also use social networks to more casually communicate with prospects while providing useful information to potential (younger) home buyers. Meanwhile, because the online community – strangers, some hostile – will have a strong role in the narrative about your company, you must also be aware of and speak to narratives pushed by this community. You must even take steps – directly and otherwise - to contribute to emerging narratives. And finally, because the web is truly living, resources should be devoted to mitigating negative publicity while circulating and emphasizing the positive. It’s complicated! But it must be done.

Tom Nelson, CEO of digital marketing agency **NDG Communications, Inc.**, says it well:

“Homebuyers now start their buying process online first, using many different web resources to shop by elimination—deciding which precious



few communities they will actually visit in person. Online success requires you to be where your prospects are looking; continually ready with the fresh content they're looking for." **You can no longer ignore what is happening online.**

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Digg, Yelp, Sidewiki...while the ways information is gathered online cannot be controlled or stopped, the savvy builder can recognize and take advantage of these trends. Builders are encouraged to contact any of the experts at [New Home Feed](#) and [Graphic Language](#) and any of the experts quoted in this white paper.

Call 415-836-6760 for more information.

