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FEATURE: 22 Bold Ideas for 2006

BY CHUCK PAUSTIAN

A calculated risk might be the tonic your business needs for a healthier bottom line.

December is a time for making resolutions and planning for the coming year, the perfect time to make a bold move that'll push your business to the next level.

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What's that? Concerned about getting too far out of your comfort zone? Don't worry. You don't have to be the real estate equivalent of Capt. Kirk and "boldly go where no man [or woman] has gone before." However, before you can climb higher, you have to let go and reach for the next rung on the ladder.

We've compiled 22 ideas to help you shed your business-as-usual mentality. There's something here for everyone, whether you're the bungee-jumping type or someone who prefers watching thrills on the big screen.

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Work the Web

The Internet's role as a marketing tool has been discussed, documented, and, quite frankly, decided. Nearly everyone in this business has an online presence, and with good reason: According to the NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS[®]' *2004 Profile of Home Buyers & Sellers*, 74 percent of all buyers used the Internet to find their new home. With such a large audience surfing the Web, it's not surprising that the same report found 72 percent of practitioners incorporate an online component into client marketing plans. One might find those percentages comforting and think there's safety in numbers, but the data also indicate that there's a lot of clutter online, so how do you stand out from the crowd?

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Optimizing your search engine strategy will help ensure that your site is prominently displayed when consumers enter certain key words or phrases in a search engine such as AOL, Google, or Yahoo. An optimization strategy basically uses a URL, file names, and other tags that incorporate key phrases to generate a higher ranking in search engines, which in turn leads to increased traffic and more leads. You'll need to spend time periodically to optimize your site, or hire somebody else to do it, but the additional leads you generate could make it worth the investment.

Of course, once consumers find your site they'll need a reason to stay. If you can offer not only great information but also a sense of your personality, they may be more likely to form a connection with you rather than another practitioner. There are a number of ways to do this. You can start a blog—or Web log—in which you offer commentary on real estate issues or questions. You'll need to commit to regular content updates and pick your topics carefully so that you can speak with authority and provide substantive information to prospects who receive your posts. Do it well, and your knowledge and style will be on display for all to see.

Zahara Mossman, salesperson at Zahara Properties LLC, a division of Beachfront Realty Inc. in Miami Beach, Fla., has begun using podcasts to infuse her listings with a bit of personality. She'll walk through a listing and make audio recordings of not only factual information but also her impressions and opinions. The recordings are turned into MP3 audio files and distributed to subscribers using really simple syndication (RSS) technology. She also posts the files, along with photos of the homes, on her Web sites (www.zaharaproperties.com and www.podcastrealty.com). "People can look at a complete audiovisual description of the property," says Mossman. "The reaction has been phenomenal."

Another way to add information and personality is to post video to your Web site. Dave Crockett, president of The Crockett Team Ltd. at Howard Hanna Smythe Cramer in Mentor, Ohio, uses video at his site (www.thecrockettteam.com), to introduce his team members. The initial cost was about \$10,000, and Crockett spends another \$1,000 when the video needs to be edited to reflect personnel changes. But he says it's been worth the cost. "It's my belief that the Internet has isolated salespeople from buyers," Crockett says. "Video is a way to connect with online buyers because people can see who you are and how you operate."