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Residential brokers spiff up their Web sites

Firms employ new technology and social media to lure more online visitors and compete with third-party sites.

By [Amanda Fung](#)

Local residential brokerage firms are embracing technology in a move to remain competitive and lure buyers to their Web sites.

Elika Associates, a small Manhattan-based brokerage catering to just buyers, is the latest firm to launch what has become known as a virtual office Web site, or VOW, feature to its regular Web site. Visitors who register for the service on the Elika Web site will be able to browse property listings citywide from different brokerages. The feature helps brokerage firms compete against third-party sites like StreetEasy.com, which allows buyers to search for different properties across the city for free. So far, the new offering is being well received—95 individuals have registered for the feature since it launched a week and a half ago and the average time spent on the site by a user is 10 minutes, according to Gea Elika, founder of the brokerage.

“The great thing about VOW is it provides accurate, updated and complete information,” said Mr. Elika. “It’s a one-stop shop so buyers do not need to deal with multiple brokerages.”

Larger brokerages such as Halstead Property launched VOWs for individual brokers in January, and Prudential Douglas Elliman is expected to unveil its enhanced Web site incorporating a VOW feature next month. AC Lawrence Real Estate was one of the first firms to implement a VOW companywide. Companies are using different vendors like On-Line Residential to power these sites.

“VOWs level the playing field for corporate and boutique firms,” said Antonio del Rosario, president of AC Lawrence Real Estate, which has 40 agents. “Everything will be on your Web site whether you’re a big, small firm or one man show.”

Meanwhile, brokerages that do not plan on launching VOWs are offering new social media features to enhance their Web sites. On Wednesday, Warburg Realty Partnership unveiled its new site, which incorporates Facebook and blogs. On the day of the launch, the site doubled its traffic, according to Lori Levin, marketing director of Warburg. Earlier this year, Century 21 NY metro launched a Live Agent Chat on its site, where potential renters and buyers could connect with an agent and instant message. Late last year, Corcoran Group launched an Apple iPhone application, which among other things allows iPhones to display apartments and open houses near the user's location.