



Buy the Right Tools

Technology delivers many tools for empowering a career in real estate sales. A smartphone, computer system, and web presence help make more productive use of your time as you provide the responsive services today's wired and Web-savvy buyers and sellers expect.

When you're just starting out, though, the cost of equipping yourself with the essentials can pose an unexpected expense. Set a technology budget—figure out what you can afford to invest without overburdening yourself with debt—and stand by it. Expect to work at least part of your time at home. So even if the brokerage or franchise supplies you with tools, you'll probably want to outfit a home office as well.

If you're starting on a shoestring budget, try to depend on your company. If they have a digital camera available to staff, borrow it as needed until you can buy your own. Buy only the tools you know you'll use.

Assembled here are items that should be found in every new real estate salesperson's technology toolbox.

Smartphone

If you buy nothing else, [get a smartphone](#). It's the one absolute essential for today's mobile real estate professional. Buyers and sellers will want to reach you throughout the day, and you will need to take and make calls, access the Internet, check e-mails, and update your social media accounts wherever you are. Further, [many smartphone apps](#) are geared toward helping real estate professionals in their everyday practice.

TIP: With mobile technology advancing at lightning speed, expect your smartphone to be out-of-date about a year after you purchase it. For this reason, know your upgrade options and early termination fees before you buy.

Starting out, opt for a basic cellular plan with affordable coverage in the areas you roam, during the hours you'll make most of your calls. However, the standard calling plan may not always be your best option. Most are based on daytime usage. If you're not sure yet when and where your phone will get the most use, talk to your peers about which carrier provides the best service and which plan they use. Make sure you can upgrade or switch plans without incurring additional fees before you sign the service contract. Also make sure your plan comes with enough data space to access the Internet during work hours when you may be away from a computer.

As an added bonus, smartphones can also serve as digital cameras and camcorders. Today, most come standard with at least a 5 megapixel sensor and some even have LED flash and an optical or digital zoom.

Computer system

[The computer](#) will be your hub of activity. When in your office, it's where you'll organize all information on clients and properties; compose correspondence and marketing materials; and access the Web, which is essential to nearly all real estate transactions.

Your big decision: a desk-bound or portable computer system? Desktop systems are more affordable, starting well under \$1,000, with the most value for your dollar at every price.

Portables—notebooks, netbooks, [tablets](#), and more—cost more than comparably equipped desktop systems. For the difference, though, your computer resources travel with you. If you're inclined toward a portable, try before buying: the keyboard and screen of mobile PCs may not rival what you'd expect in a desktop system.

Whatever your preference, you'll extend the computer's useful life by buying the best system you can afford now. Opt for the fastest processor, the most RAM, and the largest hard drive and screen your budget allows. Make sure there's some form of drive—ideally a CD-R or DVD-R drive—for backing up data.

Printer and more

The printer is a key component of your computer system, whether or not one is bundled with the computer. You want color: an inkjet when funds are limited; a laser printer if money isn't an issue.

For the most bang for your buck, check out a multifunction machine, or MFM. These combination printer/scanner/copiers handle all your document needs. They take up much less space since you won't have to have a separate unit for each task.

Web presence

Today's buyers search the Web first when looking for a home, and it's where many will initiate inquiries about listings and services. You need an ISP account for Web service, your own Web site or a page on your company's site, and an e-mail address where buyers and sellers can reach you. In addition to a Web site, it is also highly recommended (and totally free) to sign up for a few [social media sites](#) that will expand your web presence and help build your burgeoning personal brand.

For your Internet connection, a broadband connection, such as DSL or cable modem, is worth the expense.

Software

To get started, you'll need productivity software—applications for word processing, a database, graphics, presentations, and spreadsheets, usually purchased as a suite—and financial management software.

Real estate professionals also should invest in a contact management solution, either a generic program or one developed for the field. The software helps organize information about your calendar, clients, properties, and related activity. It's only as valuable as the information you regularly enter. Develop that habit from the outset of your new career.

If you don't trust your artistic instincts, buy a graphics program for marketing and print promotions. These provide templates to build the flyers, CMAs, postcards, and brochures that make you and your listings look best in print.

Digital camera

Nothing promotes the appeal of a home like a good color picture, online and in print. A digital camera will pay for itself over time in savings on film and processing. It's the best way to capture pictures destined for the Web. Prices start at about \$100, but you don't want one of the entry-level cameras. Spend a little more for an image sensor of with more megapixels, a power zoom lens that accepts a wide-angle lens adapter, and both an LCD screen and through-the-lens viewfinder. Sample several cameras before making your selection.