Best Show in Town

The boom in real estate TV shows gives CRSs a chance to get ready for their close-up.

By Mary Ellen Collins

Michele Reneau, CRS, GRI, thought it was a joke when producers from *House Hunters* called to ask if she'd be interested in appearing on the show.

"They found me on REALTOR.com," says the broker-associate with Carolina One Real Estate in Charleston, S.C., "and when I asked why they picked me when there are thousands of people on there, they said they were looking for a friendly face. It fell into my lap, and I thought it would be great exposure."

Along with the housing boom came an abundance of real estate–related TV shows focused on staging homes, pricing homes, renovating homes and more. These programs continue to fuel Americans' collective fascination with real estate, in addition to their curiosity and voyeurism. The real estate TV boom has also increased the demand for personable REALTORS® who can deliver natural-sounding advice and guidance in prearranged situations. Producers are searching high and low for viable candidates, and those agents who land a spot in the limelight are faced with a host of challenges and potential rewards.

Breaking In

Agents who are actively seeking this type of exposure know that networks and production companies post casting calls on their Web sites, but producers also look for agents who have a strong presence online.

"The casting agents are kids out of college who are Googling, so get a video demo on your Web site. Get on YouTube or Wellcomemat.com," says Brian Copeland, CRS, with Village Real Estate Services in Nashville. Copeland has appeared on HGTV's *House Hunters, Good Buy, Bad Buy* and *Top 25 Homebuying Tips*, as well as TLC's *Flip That House*.

Reneau recommends that you "build your reputation through social networks, advertise on REALTOR.com and Trulia, and have a Web site that identifies you as a

Model house: Steve McAlister/Getty Images; Movie set clapboard: Creatas/Punchstock

local expert, with lots of extra pages and relevant information."

Ashley Richardson, CRS, ABR, with Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage in Baltimore, landed on *House Hunters* after the producers had seen her Web site and liked the houses she represented. That appearance led to two subsequent appearances on *What You Get for the Money*, which airs on HGTV and FLN.

Copeland says his first appearances on *House Hunters* led to an invitation to film the pilot for a new HGTV show, *Good Buy, Bad Buy*. "The producers of *House Hunters* told them I was a low-maintenance agent who always had a lot of young, cool buyers at good price points."

For Amanda DiVito Parle, CRS, CLHMS, with RE/MAX Alliance in Denver, a professional referral resulted in a gig on HGTV's *My First Place*. "A local young couple had been accepted to be on the show, and the producer told them they needed an agent. They each had a parent who was a REALTOR® in another state, and they went through their connections and referred their kids to me." DiVito had met the young woman's mom at a RE/MAX conference, so the mom put her daughter in touch with DiVito.

Behind the Scenes

The amount of work involved in filming such shows varies, as does the level of "reality" that comes across in the final program, but most CRSs who have been featured agree that they underestimated the time commitment involved in their appearances.

House Hunters producers told Reneau to call when her clients decided on a house. Then, she had to find two other houses to tour and film for the episode. "The producer said, 'Oh, just get two other similar houses,'" says Reneau, "so I chose two properties that the clients would have looked at." Her buyers had considered a lot of new construction, but several builders declined to have those houses filmed because they didn't want to televise the fact that the buyers didn't choose them.

Of the two sessions of two-day filming, Reneau says, "I thought it'd be boom, boom, boom, and we'd be done. But it was two eight-hour days for me, and four eight-hour days for the buyers. And that was for 22 minutes of air time!"

For *My First Place*, DiVito scheduled showings and alerted the production company so they could get waivers signed before filming her and her buyers touring each house. DiVito then taped lead-ins to the properties at the studio. The producers invited her to do another episode with a buyer she already had, but since they were already far into the homebuying process, they simply re-created it. "We filmed the house they bought, and after the closing we went back to two other houses they'd looked at and pretended to be seeing them for the first time."

With no buyers or sellers involved, *What You Get for the Money* has a less labor-intensive filming schedule. "It was so much easier than *House Hunters*," Richardson explains. "I chose homes I had either sold or listed. The camera pans the house, and then they film me outside the front of



Creating Educated Consumers

An explosion of reality TV accompanied the growth of the real estate bubble, with networks capitalizing on heightened viewer interest in all things home-related. And that interest has created legions of buyers and sellers who consider themselves experts. Educated consumers can make the REALTOR®'s job easier, but people who believe everything they see on TV, even when it's tweaked for dramatic effect, present a challenge. CRSs give the highest marks to shows that tell it like it is.

"[HGTV's] *Property Virgins* is good for first-time homebuyers because the host is very firm about being realistic," Michele Reneau, CRS, says. "When people say, 'I can only spend $350,000, but I want x, y and z,' [the host] spells it out: 'You can have this, or you can have that.'" Reneau tells her sellers to watch three hours of HGTV so they can learn what buyers say about houses before and after they are staged or renovated.

Ashley Richardson, CRS, adds that on A&E's *Flip This House*, "There are always disasters, so it's a true warning to people who are thinking about doing it. Don't think you can just slap on a coat of paint and make a boatload of money — that's not how it works."

While agents love sellers who already understand the need to declutter and stage their homes, Brian Copeland, CRS, says shows like HGTV's *Designed to Sell* can foster naive expectations by emphasizing condition over price. "They give the impression that if the colors are exactly right and the furniture is perfectly placed, you're going to get offers at the open house. It's unrealistic to concentrate on condition when the reality is that price is king."

Working with TV-savvy clients is a double-edged sword; while you acknowledge the real lessons they've learned, you must occasionally remind them that no one really buys a house and seals the deal in 30 minutes.—MEC

the house, answering questions about what draws people to the area." During two five-hour filming sessions, she talked about five houses in five price points that aired on five different episodes.

Copeland says *Flip That House* was the easiest show to do because it only required one day of filming, during which he critiqued the finished renovations. However, he describes *Good Buy, Bad Buy* as the American Gladiator Super Bowl for REALTORS®.

"It's very intensive. It took almost a full week. You really have to know your stuff — the neighborhood, how much certain renovations will cost and whether some upgrades will overprice the home for the area." Copeland, a housing inspector he recruited, and his buyer toured a ranch and a traditional-style home she was considering, discussing the pros and cons of each to help her make her final decision. When the experts announced at the end, "It looks like the good buy is … the ranch!" the buyer clearly wasn't expecting that answer.

"You could see the shock on her face," Copeland says. The buyer said, "Now, I think I'm even more confused." Although no one expected that response, Copeland sees an advantage in a show that doesn't end with a clear resolution.

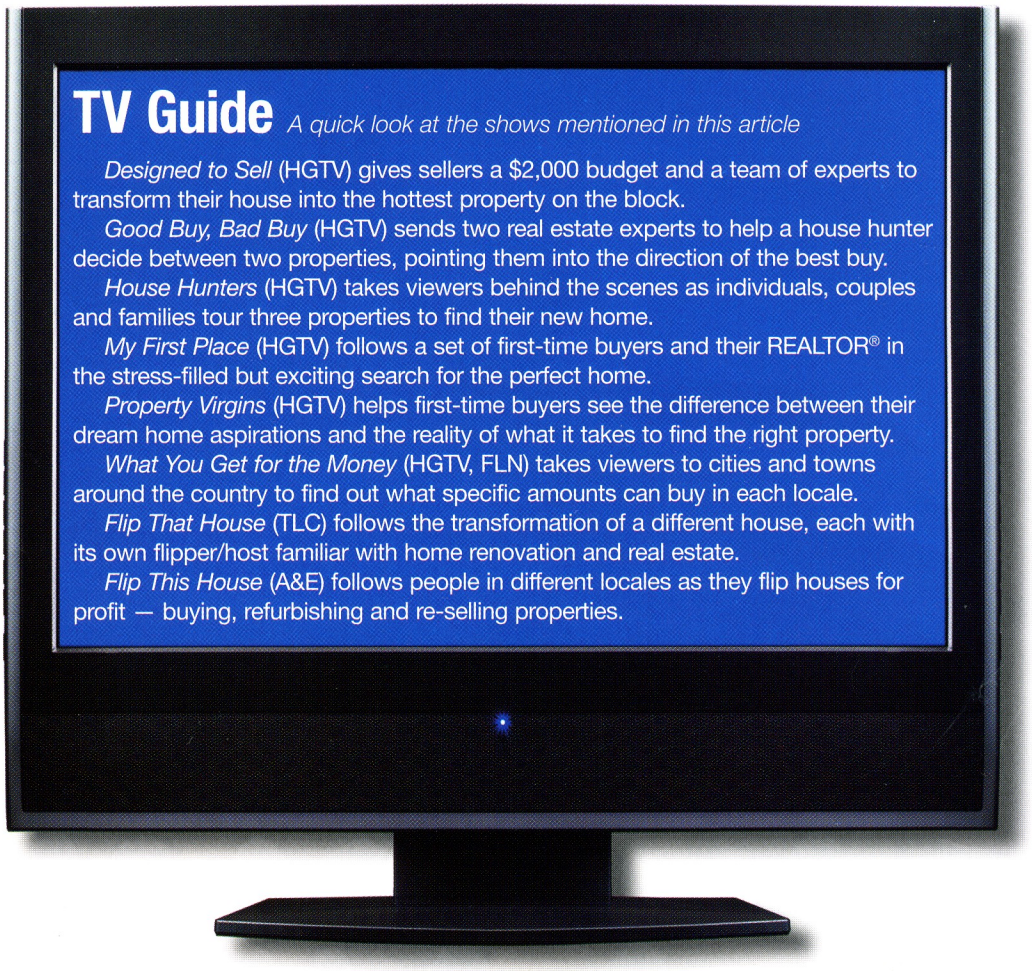
"This is real life. It shows the consumer that real estate reality isn't always perfect."

Is It Worth It?

Those CRSs who have appeared on TV say they have significantly raised their profiles, enhanced their credibility and generated new business. But not everyone is ready for an encore.

"The primary benefit is notoriety among my sphere of influence," Reneau says. "People think, 'She must be doing something right.' I don't regret doing it once, but I don't know that I'd do it again. I didn't realize the time investment. I was away from business during the week … and you can't have your phone ringing on set. Right now, my schedule doesn't allow for that."

Richardson has gotten clients and referrals from her *House Hunters* and *What You Get for the Money* appearances and says, "I would do either show again, anytime, no question! I just re-sold the house that the people bought [on *House Hunters*]. We put up a sign that said, 'As seen on *House Hunters*,' and I got a lot of activity on the house because of that."



Copeland estimates that his TV appearances have garnered him several million dollars' worth of advertising. He says *Flip That House* is the only show he wouldn't do again because of the influx of calls he got afterward.

"They weren't leads — they [were people who] just wanted free advice from someone on TV. I had calls from all over the country like, 'Jim and I are flipping our house up here in Wisconsin and we have some questions. Should we put granite countertops in?' "

TV notoriety can be a positive or a negative, depending on viewer perception. "From a PR/marketing standpoint, *My First Place* made more people recognize me as a professional," DiVito says. "Past clients called and said, 'We saw you!' It reaffirmed that their agent was a high-class, high falutin' REALTOR® on TV."

On the flip side, Copeland says, people who only know you as a TV personality may think you're out of their league. "The big drawback," he says, "is some people's perception that if you're on TV, you're too big or important to talk with them. I've had people contact me and say, 'I was afraid to call you because you're on TV and you're probably too busy.' " But he underscores television's capacity to create "an amazing, unexpected referral stream." Hundreds of old friends and colleagues have recommended him to people who are moving to Nashville and ask him to recommend agents for people in other cities.

In a profession that depends on visibility and referrals, an appearance on a popular real estate TV show can bring solid rewards, Copeland says. But he warns agents who actively seek a place in the spotlight that the hours are long, the production process can be boring, and they should prepare themselves to be the supporting player, not the star.

"Any agent who has visions of grandeur about being the diva is sorely mistaken. The producers want to see the buyers and sellers shine, and want you to complement what they do. Remember that *you* are Mary Wilson in the Supremes," he says. "The client is Diana Ross."

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