



How Interactive Overlays Boost Virtual Tour Engagement

A picture is worth 1,000 words. A virtual tour is worth 1,000 pictures.

So picture this. A prospective senior living buyer goes online, searching for images and video of nearby communities. Which communities Google promotes, and what that prospective buyer can do on those websites, depends on the operator's understanding of two facets: how Google drives search returns, and the degree to which that return is interactive.

“Many operators don't know what Google considers to be a complete listing, part of which is adding high definition photos, panoramas and videos,” says William Brennan, president of Connects 360, which produces Google-centric, interactive virtual tours for senior housing. “We took Google Street View inside. We're the Google inside people.”

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When combined with an interactive menu navigation system, known as an “overlay,” those visual elements — the photos, panoramas and videos — create a unique buyer-centric search experience. Yes, the prospect can explore the senior living community virtually, which is what they want: a 2015 Google survey found that listings with photos and a virtual tour are twice as likely to generate consumer interest than those without.

The overlay allows the sales and marketing team to go even farther, giving each user targeted sales prompts, by placing calls-to-action on each panoramic photo or video.

That two-part creation — the Google-centric virtual tour combined with the overlay — gives operators deeper engagement on their websites and direct connections between prospects and sales team tasks, all at cost-effective prices. This is how it works.

The Google-centric listing and virtual tour

When a prospect searches for a community in Google, a listing appears. Assuming the operator has completed the listing, that prospect will see all pertinent information regarding the community, including the website link, community hours, address and contact information. The community's reviews will show up in this listing, as will the visuals.

Because the rest of that information is standardized, the visuals become a major distinguishing factor in the prospect's search experience.

Considering Google's ubiquity, many people are familiar with the features Google Maps and Google Street View, which allows them to explore neighborhoods block-by-block, 360 degrees. A Google-centric virtual tour in senior living works the same way. The prospect enters the senior living community virtually and can scroll from room to room, space to space, to simulate the experience of moving through the community or campus.

Brennan is known as a pioneer in digital marketing, helping business owners in the early 1990s explore what were then cutting edge ideas, such as having your own website to attract and engage with new customers. He feels the same today about interactive, inexpensive marketing tools as he did 30 years ago about simply having a web presence. The key to success, Brennan says, is knowing that Google SEO is boosted by the quality of the visuals:

- High-definition photos
- 360-degree panoramic photos
- Video

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The interactive overlay: your virtual tour guide

While those three categories of visuals — high-def photos, 360s, video — combined with the completed listing create a compelling tour, the key ingredient for the sales team is the interactive menu navigation system: the overlay. This is the tool that enhances everything the prospect does on the operator's website.

To put it another way, while many operators have a website that provides a virtual tour, the overlay provides a virtual tour guide.

“The overlay has, on the left-hand side, a menu: the customer’s logo at the top, and then going down the side, you might see ‘entrance,’ ‘dining room,’ ‘living room’ and examples of bedrooms,” Brennan says. Instead of simply enabling a virtual tour, the operator with the overlay empowers the prospect to click on any of those room tags to find a specific area of the community.

These clicks are aligned with sales teams tasks via what Connects 360 calls an “infopanel”: blocks of text that empower the user to gain information and explanations about whichever room they are currently in, or to trigger additional calls-to-action.

“In a matter of seconds, the user can bounce around the virtual tour by using the overlay to see the parts inside the facility that interest them, and then there are links to places on their website,” Brennan says. “Users can schedule a tour or call or watch more media. If the senior living tour has a video, we embed that video inside that overlay to make that video more effective than it being on its own.”

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All of this works to create newfound sales and marketing efficiencies, with better qualified in-person tours.

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