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For the real money shot, hire a pro

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VANCOUVER — Photographer Russ Heintl is known for his aerial work on five films and 11 glossy picture books, including the popular *Over Canada: An Aerial Adventure*. But these days, he says, he's busy in the helicopter taking bird's-eye photos of sumptuous real estate.

In the past three months, the Vancouver Island-based photographer has shot about a dozen houses priced from \$7-million to \$28-million, all in British Columbia.

"Business is going crazy," Mr. Heintl says of his real-estate photography work. The market is becoming very sophisticated, he adds, and his clients expect a high level of professionalism. "It's got to be as slick as a Lexus commercial."

The days of lacklustre photos snapped by realtors may be numbered. Despite digital cameras, a growing number of real-estate agents are hiring professional photographers to showcase properties online, according to Ann Bosley, a Toronto real-estate broker and president of the Canadian Real Estate Association.

Blurry photos of dark rooms, open-lidded toilets and fridge doors littered with kids' drawings and ladybug magnets just don't cut it.

"More and more, our clients are picture- rather than word-oriented," Ms. Bosley says, adding that real-estate websites now accommodate many digital images.

Professional shots make sense even for low-end properties, according to Richard Silver, a real-estate agent who sells homes at all price levels in the Toronto area.

Since Mr. Silver began using professional photography two years ago, his sales have gone up by about 25 per cent, he says. "I don't even put out a listing without the professional photos."

Lauretta Stewart, another Toronto real-estate agent, says she switched to professional photography two years ago after using a small condo unit as a marketing experiment.

Drawn by the professional photos online, "the buyer made a special trip from Guelph to see it," Ms. Stewart says.

One of her clients, Peter Ballon, whose house she sold earlier this month, says the professional photos helped his family prepare their home for showings.

"We noticed by looking at the photos what looked good and what didn't," he says, "and where there was a little more clutter."

Annette McMillan, a Calgary real-estate agent, says expert photos are as important as staging the home.

"Even if the property doesn't have good curb appeal, the pictures of the interior will get buyers in the door."

Many agents don't know their way around a camera, she says, and some don't bother to post photos online. "But it's like a dating service," Ms. McMillan says. "If there's no photo, it's not going to work."

Professional photography can be affordable, according to Mr. Silver. He buys photo packages in bulk from Obeo, a real-estate marketing service, at a cost of \$100 for 15 to 20 shots plus

a virtual tour and online mapping of the neighbourhood.

Ms. Stewart pays a similar price for services from Advirtours. "It's a no-brainer," she says.

But others aren't impressed with cut-rate photo services. "I think you get what you pay for," says Sylvia Therrien, a real-estate agent who sells multi-million-dollar properties on Vancouver Island.

"There's a big difference between the \$100 packages and professional photography," she says.

Alan Gough, a photographer based in West Vancouver, says he charges between \$300 and \$400 for a two- to three-hour real-estate shoot. Mr. Heintz gets about \$1,000 a day plus helicopter charter fees for his aerial work, he says.

Most real-estate agents absorb the fees as part of their marketing costs.

The technical skills of professional photography are light years away from the point-and-shoot approach, says Mr. Gough. "You have to be a Photoshop guru."

For room interiors, for example, he takes two exposures from the same location - one to capture the interior details and another that shows the view through a window. Then he cuts and pastes the images for optimal lighting.

Another technique, he says, is to use a wide-angle lens to make rooms look roomier.

Ms. Therrien of Vancouver Island recently hired photographer Erin Brûlé to shoot a \$17.5-million estate in the prestigious Uplands district of Victoria.

Ms. Brûlé says she visited the property four times to get the right shots of the interior and exterior.

In her photos of the property at Luxurywaterfront.ca, chrome bathroom fixtures glint in the sun and chairs in the garden are arranged as if the owner is about to sit and admire the view.

The idea is to make prospective buyers envision it as their own home, Ms. Brûlé says, "and not just a piece of property."

At the opposite end of the spectrum, ill-conceived photos still proliferate on many real-estate websites. But instead of being the norm, they are now objects of derision by bloggers such as Saskatchewan real-estate agent Norm Fisher, who posts his Unbelievably Bad Real Estate Photo Hall of Fame at Teamfisher.com.

Real-estate agents have no excuse for using poor-quality photos of the properties they are paid to market, says Ms. Stewart. "I'm surprised that the sellers let them get away with it."

Tricks of the trade

Can't afford a professional photographer? Borrow these tricks of the trade from Photographyforrealestate.net:

Remember that the photo's purpose is to sell real estate. Focus more on the architecture and room spaces than on furniture and decor.

Simplify images. Exclude everything that detracts from the home's attractiveness, such as towels hanging from the oven door.

View the front exterior as the key shot. Spend extra time on it, since this is the image often required by Multiple Listing Service rules.

Render interiors light and bright. Since light interiors are more attractive to buyers than dark ones, use an external flash unit or a long exposure shot on a tripod to make a room look bright.

Keep the verticals vertical. All vertical lines, such as wall corners, should be shown parallel to the sides of the image, otherwise they distract the viewer's attention. If the use of a wide-angle lens creates distortion, restore verticals with digital photo-editing.

Stick to horizontal shots. Most real-estate websites are designed to work best with landscape-mode images; a mixture of horizontal and vertical formats can be distracting.

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